

Larry Eigner

1927-1996

EDITOR'S NOTE: *It saddens me greatly to report that on January 30, 1996, Larry Eigner was hospitalized with a severe case of pneumonia and died February 3. The videoconference conducted to help compile this essay was the last public interview he did. Therefore, I am truly honored to not only have had the opportunity to meet such an extraordinary poet "virtually enough" (as he wrote recently), but also to know that he was able to be a part of this series. I would like to extend very special thanks to Larry's brother and sister-in-law, Richard and Beverly Eigner, and to Larry's good friend Jack Foley for their enthusiasm and support. This essay would not have been possible without their assistance.*

The various pieces that follow are comprised of Larry Eigner's prose, poetry, and interviews. Primary sections include "Rambling in Life: another fragment another piece," an autobiographical essay written by Larry Eigner, dated from February 28, 1986 and published in areas lights heights: writings 1954-1989; Jack Foley's interview with Larry Eigner, for KPFA-FM, recorded March 9, 1994 and broadcast August 8, 1994; transcript from the film "Getting It Together: A Film on Larry Eigner, Poet (1973)," transcribed by Jack Foley and published in Poetry USA, Issue no. 24, 1992; and a videoconference I conducted with Larry Eigner, Richard and Beverly Eigner, and Jack Foley on December 29, 1995. Together these pieces give insight into the life of a poet unbound by structure or convention.

RAMBLING (IN) LIFE

another fragment another piece

This being a universe of happening and coincidence ranging from immediate to ultimate and huge to minute, I was born in August, the elder of my two brothers two Julys later, on the same day of the month, and so when I was thirteen in 1940 and had a Bar Mitzvah which I was hard up to doing as I felt out of control and wild as ever—in the sun-parlor facing the small audience, my first one, in the living room—the Bible passage I somehow got through was Isaiah chapter 40, not the whole chapter but maybe the first ten or twelve verses, the first third of it, first half of the portion (I wasn't given, shown, the pre-

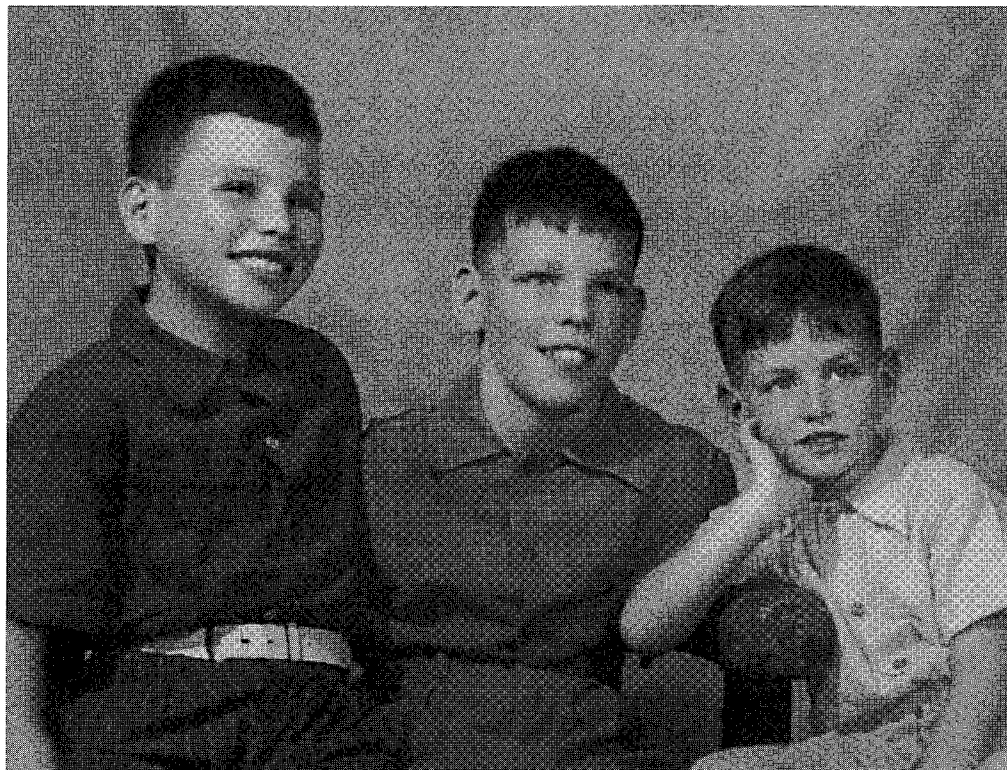


Larry Eigner

ceding section of the reading, from Deuteronomy, at all, come to think of it forty-five and a half years afterwards):¹ the beginning of Handel's *Messiah* anyhow: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people . . . Make plain in the desert / A highway for our God. // Every valley shall be lifted up."² As powerful and singing a page as there is. I now wonder when I first heard the Handel—very likely not before FM radio came

¹The Haftorah (conclusion), Isaiah 40:1-26, the Sedrah (portion), Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11.

²Isaiah 40:1-4.



Larry (center) with his brothers, Richard (left) and Joe, about 1940

to Boston when I was past twenty-six or so. Nobody suggested any of the Bible as an actual model of writing to emulate or match, say, and the Bible was a remote thing from age or (sectarian) religion or something, anyway not to be rivaled, Henry W. Longfellow, whom my mother read to me, was the person to match or outdo by equaling a good part of his output before I grew up, my own idea, and during my teens I kept trying to rhyme as I had rhymed before, from the age of five or six to eleven, when I went to stay at the Massachusetts Hospital School (MHS) in Canton near Great Blue Hill south of Boston, for the sixth, seventh and eighth grades, till I was graduated from the eighth grade at the top of my class it seems and came back home to Swampscott on the north shore of Massachusetts Bay. It has borders with Marblehead and Salem, where my mother's parents lived (first I knew directly opposite the House of the Seven Gables a little ways back from the sea wall overlooking the beach at the end of Turner Street, then a couple of blocks inland on the same street in a build-

ing with a corner store just at the intersection) and where she grew up (for many or few years on the site of the Salem Post Office or Telephone Exchange, parked in front of which, in 1951 or '52, I got the mostly tetrameter poem "Parts of Salem") after being carried stateside at about age one from a village in Lithuania near Bialystok not far from the Polish borderline

—now there's really a somewhat eastern place name, Slonim—

as well as Lynn, which has shoe factories and a GE plant and where my Eigner grandmother lived (widowed when I was four). Most of one or both summer vacations I must've spent at the school. Time has never passed slowly, I'm nosy in all directions, curious, what with enough things beyond sight and/or hearing, out of reach, so, willy-nilly and indiscriminate as I am, I've never known boredom. Nor idleness, not till recently anyway, as I was always trying to make out, in physiotherapy and at other times. Helping others help me. And, my left arm and leg pretty

wild till I had cryosurgery about six weeks into my thirty-sixth year, I had to keep my attention away from myself to sit still, yet not too far away either. Egotism and altruism, how do they go together in, by now, billions of people (and when? in the phrase I once heard Martin Luther King say he got from Hillel, 2000 years back)!? In a while after I was there MHS was extended to include high school, with two or three new buildings, so it went from Grade 1 to Grade 12. At graduation in '41 I got a copy of *Bartlett's Quotations*, and what with the *Reader's Digest* too, already known, with its "Quotable Quotes" column, I went through high school, the town sending a (substitute) teacher to my house and then in my senior year three or four teachers, keeping an eye out for colorful phrases, lines, when I read a play or book called great, while going on and waiting for something great to happen at the end. And I took to geometry especially, even while I took all the subjects as attentively as I could and enjoyed that, and went looking for a rule, certainty, safety, as to how to begin a paragraph, say, and where to end it and begin the next, should there be a next. Or I did put off more rhyming, just about, till I got through high school. I thought to make a part of a living sometime in the future. Holiday-greeting-card verse. I brought off a sonnet or two. Conventional- and open-minded at once, because extroverted, I tried to think of reason(s) why Shakespeare should be of greater import, more relevant, than a ballgame. As I was told. A man should think for himself. I wanted to see. I'd like to be able to walk alone for instance. I couldn't rhyme really, not frequently at any rate, quatrain on quatrain, couplet after couplet—anything has to be easy enough to do, feasible. At one point while I was in high school a local poet (I heard she was a poet, did I actually meet her once?) wrote or told me only a "master" would attempt blank verse, you had to rhyme. There was a block. And I of course believed it, it came from a veteran, an adult. I was too over-eager in schoolwork if not simply reading to learn much at all, tried too hard to get things "under my belt," as my thought was, my aim—in general I was out to learn as much as I could about everything, so that in an emergency in case he didn't know I could advise a companion how to fix a flat tire for example. Summers I was "good to myself" and every day waited for the baseball game to come on the

radio—and you wanted the Red Sox to win today and win tomorrow whether they did or didn't today. In some way I can't now remember, baseball records, first-time-ever feats, in their variety or number, yes, provided enjoyable "arithmetic."

I added, subtracted, multiplied and even did some long division in my head—there was no other place to, I guess, though I've used a notebook and pencil off and on, since whenever, likely, anyway, at first in bed—visualizing the numbers that changed as I worked on them, or it might have been just relying on memory, and while I did visualize words all right when it came to spelling them, and at Boston's Children's Hospital where I was found to have a high IQ or somewhere else it was said I had a "photographic memory"—maybe you're surprised when you forget to the extent you depend on your memory. My father, who grew up in Haverhill next to Lawrence, Jack Kerouac's home town, hailed from Boston, my grandmother and grandfather perfect strangers till they got to this country, she from Galicia and he from Austria, its Hungarian part, as I heard my mother say when Anselm Hollo on his way with Bob Hogg to or (back to Buffalo?) from Charles Olson in Gloucester came by our place and they got to talking. I'm the oldest of three brothers. From a forceps injury at birth (August 7, 1927) I have cerebral palsy, CP. The doctor, Richard Williams, Mother says, apologized for not measuring her right. If he had, she's said, I would have been delivered in the

Remember

sabbath days to
keep time still
how multiple clothe
the past it's
not bare but
it takes time
to look eat
and prepare darkness
among the stars

(From *Anything on Its Side*)

how apparent, cloudy
big ideals
the worth
something then
what the
madness
and blood
the warmth of families
is earth held home
someone far away
a stretch
within walls
sky rain sun
by the sea
cossacks
down the steps
silence
this side

(From *Things Stirring Together or Far Away*)

Caesarean way. The doctor told my folks they could sue him for malpractice, but considering the thing an accident or something they didn't, anyhow they let it go. Reading, the beach and everything else was like vacation compared to physiotherapy, which was tough, scholarship was something to look forward to. Either my mother was too small or I was too big. Today, February 28, 1986, the Prime Minister of Sweden was shot dead coming out of a Stockholm movie theatre with his wife. The self is some head you can't go around, back, nor in front of. How far might it go? What do questions mean? Curiosity too led me to try reading the billboards on the way to Boston and the physiotherapy clinic at Children's Hospital three times a week, before I was eleven, beside my mother behind the wheel of our Model T. "An Apple

a Day Keeps the Doctor Away" was like one of the Ten Commandments, something as significant or whatever, or the 23rd Psalm, as was "Look for the Silver Lining" and all the other songs and maybe whatever was on the billboards. It was the Depression, whoever knew about it, and there were a number of cheerful songs. And what my mother read me of Eugene Field, and Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*, besides Longfellow and Poe. Hitler taking over Danzig (G'dansk now), on the radio by the bed shortwave crackle seashell echo hollowing land and rough water across to the sunny network here. For some months I was an in-patient on about the top floor of Children's Hospital to get exercising the afternoons one room we took steps past having a small desk or two with a blackboard, and mornings in the

Imagine that was the
last Rom
eanov Hvns help

us King
John/Charles

the story goes

as Grampa dodged
the draft, no kosher
mess or whatnot

my uncle
born in the woods

apprenticed to a
cabinet-
maker

who used no nails I
recall

Bleeding Trouble Rasputin etc etc

the wife
hit with ideas

Ceas ar

No uncle
would take the throne

(From *Things Stirring Together or Far Away*)

ward there were the soap opera programs fifteen minutes apiece by which one was on it was pretty easy to tell the time, mystifying enough for one thing the same two companies one of them mostly but different brands of sponsoring suds which was better and a couple times Mussolini in Abyss in i a³ Ethiopia and talk in the waiting room about Shanghai and gunboat in China. Thirteen and a half, five or six months before graduating eighth grade, two cortex operations deep then deeper, exercises after or between them, the second especially taking hours, whichever started with an awful dream going faster and faster and more and more of the thinning humming louder edge of crack-

ling effervescent checkerboard squares, black and red alternate with some chorus "Thou art our Monarch" many times and three or four clunk scrapings, maybe the surgery did a little good, no one could quite tell, my first hardons from the jacket illustration on Mark Twain's *Prince and Pauper* a while before reading it—into mid or late teens I smelled ether apparently in the air off and on and gagged more and more, there was this girl up the street too. Main idea to control, to live, mind over matter. I recall an FM station or two before "Educational Radio," come to think now, and there was Toscanini on NBC, but that hardly got to me at all, while Saturdays during World War II and maybe before as well as after it I listened to the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, mesmerized by the gentleman announcer and the quiz and opera

³Abyssinia.

characters and all, looking up to and trying to appreciate "Grand Opera" to get beyond or grow to see the good in the spectacular singing etc. I used to try to see through factory walls, just about, to see how machines, say toy guns, worked and how shoes were made, and how rooms in a house I'd be taken into fit together, and it figures if TV had had an earlier advent or if I had stopped creeping indoors and out and got up on wheels earlier than I did my curiosity wouldn't have got so exacerbated as it did. About when I was eighteen or nineteen my brother got a record player with 78s of a few pieces like Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique Symphony*, Strauss's *Til Eulenspiegel*, Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony* and *Peter and the Wolf*, and maybe a couple of others. They were enough all right. I enjoyed them.

There was Norman Corwin's "On a Note of Triumph" celebrating Hitler's end and the war's. My father wasn't up to playing anything at all much, playing cards or records or anything. You'd ask him to play a record and he'd dive into the phonograph sitting atop the record cabinet in our bedroom at the back of the house, in its south and east corner with the kitchen and back hall and stairs beyond the closet, with his hands and fumble with the knobs or something. I couldn't see what. Up the stairs my left and right Grmpa counting *eins/zwei/drei/vier* . . . I got a "walker" with its four swivel wheels and a seat in the back end of the frame, had it at the Hospital School, useful on clear enough paths and fields as well as floors and paved walks, despite a drawback or two, and when I returned home, within three or four years anyway, I got a wheelchair to replace it, metal sides and footboards with folding-up fabric seat, one of the first such wheel-

chairs to be manufactured; besides which I had, from about the year I got back, a big straight-backed wood-and-wicker carriage to go around the neighborhood in—though none too speedily or easily, as my feet didn't reach to the ground in it and so I could only push on the right wheel (my left hand useless), and keep a fairly straight line, avoid going in a circle, by pulling back on the wheel, without the chair going backwards, scrunching, turning the wheel in one spot, making a small rut or hole, dotting the ground or street with a line of them, as much as I pushed forwards. Still must've gone down to the beach sometimes, though every so often mother remarked too bad I'd got so heavy she couldn't any longer take me, pushing the old small sagging straw carriage the shortcut five minutes through the woods or the other way up the hill and along the sea road—while I said I had been there enough for all times, had a lot of it in memory—as her sister was there too, besides their mother and father, less often, who after a bit I heard was, with his chicken store, a black marketeer, profiteer. Biology walks around with all of us every day. You'd ask him (my father) to get a station on the bedside table radio, and he'd go and switch rapidly back and forth across the dial and ask, as if you could see through him, *Is this it, is this it, is this it?* In France during World War I, in a drill, he got his gas mask on wrong, and after recovering from that or from flu or both stayed on at the hospital as a bookkeeper. My mother has a good nose, whereas he couldn't smell a thing, maybe since the winter day he fell into a pond and pretty much froze. My mother did bookkeeping in a Boston Italian bank. He went to Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, graduated

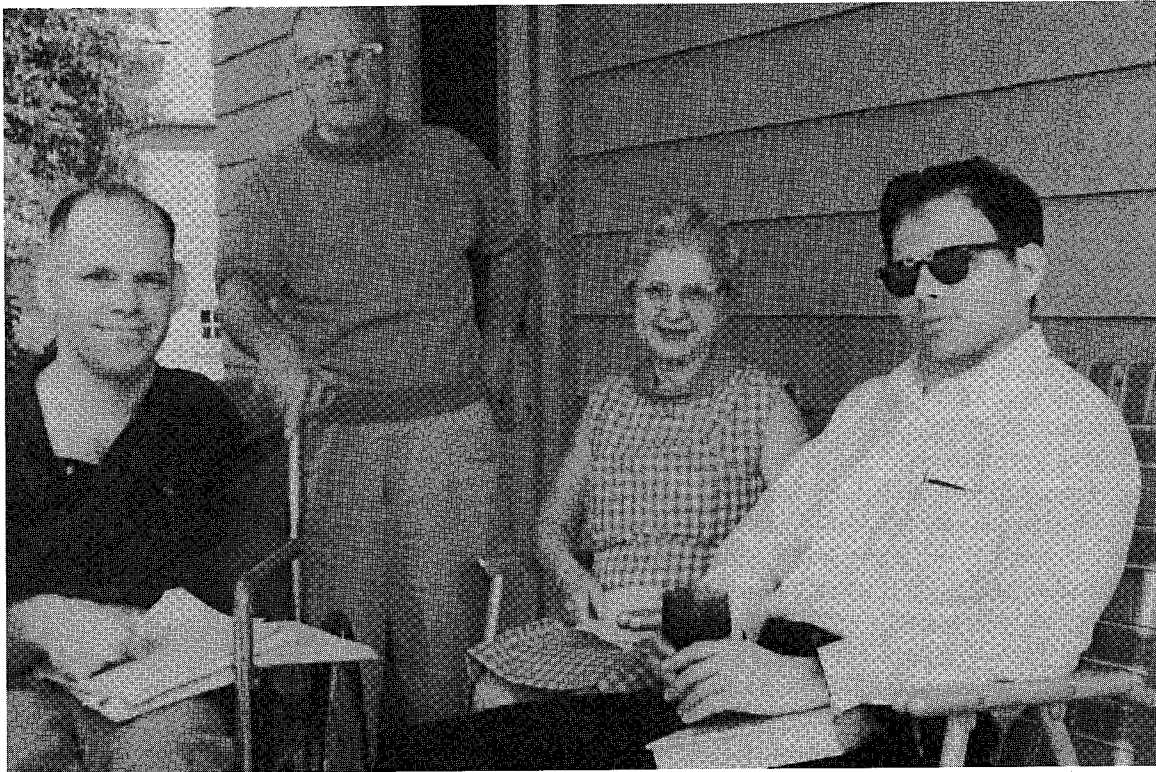
How much you believe in

whatever

God

so many people

(From *From the Sustaining Air*)



23 Bates Road, Swampscott, Massachusetts, 1959: (from left) Larry, his parents, Israel and Bessie Eigner, and his brother Richard

in 1916, and then learned, majored in, accounting at Tuck School, the business school there. Must have been after he got out of the army he went to Northeastern U in Boston at night and took a law degree. Maybe after he got married in 1924 on the Fourth of July along with one of his brothers. He tried to make out as a lawyer for some while but then got his job with the IRS. He drove the car without accident, cautiously inching out of the driveway while on the other hand shooting or rather forgetfully riding past roads we were to turn off on—this was one of the things exasperating mother, that she could never take in stride (I heard he once backed his father's Pierce-Arrow into a plate glass window, intent on going forwards, though), went to the golf course with his bag of clubs I don't know how many times and one morning went fishing. He sat in the low deep living room easy upholstery-armed chair much of the time. "Go ask your father, he went to college," but somewhere else, blocked out somehow, anyhow later as I remember, he always started as if in the first

grade and couldn't ever get far towards what I didn't know without running out of steam, babytalk talking to a neighborhood kid, exaggerated pronouncing anyway. Before we learned to read we'd ask and ask till he got to reading us the funnies, comics, Sundays, even though at some point there was Mayor La Guardia on the radio reading some of them from New York, but in a minute or two he'd stop, forgetting, and we'd have to nag him all over again. One afternoon in his late seventies or so on the front porch glassed in by then after an hour or two he got a thermometer affixed upside down. How near did my brother and I come to death laughing? In '69 or '70 I read that only in man are difficult births sometimes, so far as is known, this being due to his outsized braincase. A price exacted for the human brain sort of. While since Caesar or before his time it's been avoidable on occasion. The quicker the delivery the less brain damage from low oxygen supply, and CP too or for that matter stillbirth comes from a long enough delivery period. Nothing was said about stroke, though,

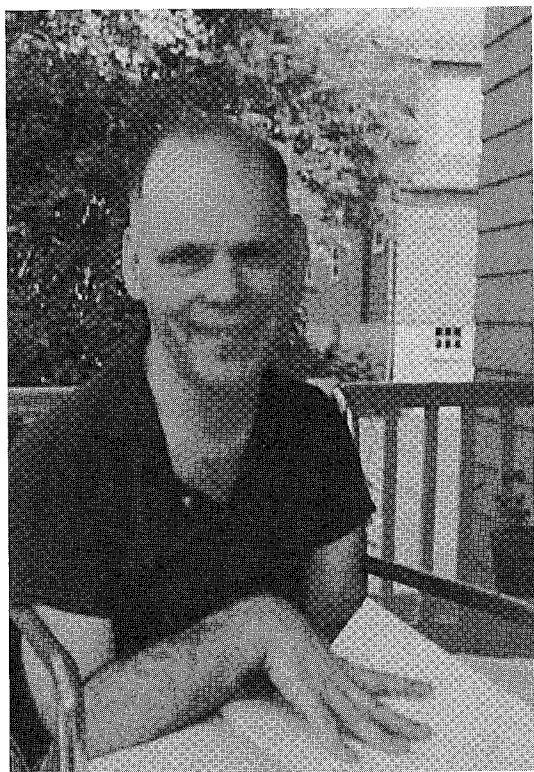
anything
has to be easy enough
to get done

(From *Anything on Its Side*)

on this radio program about a Johannesburg doctor trying out a decompression belt on expectant women patients to in effect give them fourteen more pounds of push and unexpectedly finding the babies when nine months old had eighteen-month-old IQs, a radio program in 1964 or so, the night before my nephew was born in St. Louis on Hallowe'en. "O wld to God the giftie gie us / To see ourselves as others see us," mother quoted (Robert Burns) pretty often. Circumcision delayed till I was three weeks old instead of eight or nine days for some reason. The doctor said I needed bacon so usually we had it when we had eggs, though never of course pork. Mother had it in life or death matters any of the old injunctions were off, I think she got it from her mother. Sure were impressive those stories of people refusing to eat pork whatever happened, being faithful. Salami, baloney, ham, eggs. Usually my father burnt the toast, it smoked and then it had to be scraped. He was the second of eight kids, one of them died very young. Grandpa was a baker and then financed and maybe otherwise built three apartment houses besides quite a few two- and three-family buildings, lost a lot in the '29 crash. We had one of the two-family, two-story places, and my zany aunt who kept saying aggravating astoundingly stupid and callous/selfish things my mother kept repeating as monumental had another next door. My eldest uncle came around sometimes and did repairs as on the other properties in paint-stained overalls or looked at things and sent the carpenter or plumber or phoned one or the other to come. Mother had an older sister and two older brothers, the older one who was eighteen when he and "Zaidee" (Grandpa) emigrated and who spoke with an accent had in Lithuania been apprenticed to a cabinetmaker and the younger one was an electrician. My

brother [Richard] went to Dartmouth and when he came home on his Xmas vacation brought cummings's *Collected Poems* but there was also the modern anthology and wasn't that a (senior year) high school book too, before, in two volumes, British and American, instead of one big one? He recited two or three poems now and again so now I looked at cummings seriously or singly enough to see for one thing punctuation can be actually part of a piece. One Saturday night before New Year's, besides, it happened he got Cid Corman on the radio and called me over to hear, there was W. B. Yeats's "Fisherman," maybe it was CC's first program end ("This Is Poetry," WMEX Boston). Maybe his sign-on.

I finished up the last correspondence course from the University of Chicago Home Study Department three to four months before. I took seven, yes, somehow not all in pairs, two by two, but three a year and the last just by itself, my mother typing up my reports or anyway theme papers. In the Versification course one time I asked the instructor what "free verse" was, or what was there to it really if anything, something I was puzzled over for some years, and he called it meretricious, there was nothing to it. I felt an obligation to support or advance poetry, a constructive or good thing in the world, and wrote Corman at the radio station, for one thing anyway, about his nondeclamatory way of speaking lines, objecting to or disagreeing with it. More or less. Take up swords. How many games? Corman proposed I take to and I guess try emulating, besides cummings, Williams and Pound—anyway, in the next year I started writing again. He had Creeley on one program and then substituting for him one or more Saturday nights, so I got to have a correspondence with and try to read Creeley, who recommended D. H. Lawrence, Dostoevsky's



August 1964

Notes from the Underground, Robert Graves's *White Goddess*, and things I didn't get around to too, and there was a blind guy for a stretch subbing on the program, with whom I exchanged letters and visited once in Watertown west of Cambridge and Boston with my parents, past them up the Charles River, Al Gazagian; also a fellow listener up in Friendship, Maine, A. McFarland, we still write each other sometimes. First night this FM station that carried the Boston Symphony broadcast there was *Hamlet*, three and a half hours or something, and from then I got to Shakespeare, while some Shakespeare plays you had before in school.

Big ideas from Tin Pan Alley (pop songs, Torch Songs). And Keats too sometimes and some Shelley, besides Shakespeare, I took it in stride enough when the plays came on the radio more naturally. Skimpy stage directions, I never had much imagination, and I figured G. B. Shaw was easy to read like a novel, because of such long directions, for quite a while too long. Shaw's celebrated as well. It was bad, wrong, to be homesick, and easy

not to be, so I wasn't, but mother, considering I was, came to the hospital twice each weekend, with a few exceptions I think, and brought me cookies, apple pie maybe and chocolate cake. Thin skin it seemed going with being a cripple no good either, just the same, or not right. "Sticks and stones may break my bones / but names will never hurt me." The school south of Boston besides, Sundays I think. Or else Saturdays. Brothers at Harvard different times and then one or two years together, the two in an upstairs apartment, there was an elevator there, I can barely remember, and we went there twice or maybe once a week, Saturday afternoons, Sundays. She typed up the theme papers to send to Chicago, one at least I had in the composition course, quite an argument we had about one word's spelling, and she'd've been glad, it looked like, to pay for all 400 courses in the catalogue, or a lot of them, you got credits and if you came to Chicago for some while you could have a degree, but anyway I quit, after seven courses. I figured I might as well read on my own. Once I finished with school, anyway after therapy and the doctor, I was her responsibility and just about anything I told her about or said was idealistic and impractical, foolishly not making sense, or self-centered. I was it turned out way behind, I guess something like my father, I was stubborn and demanding and forgot things done for me. "Don't worry." "Have I ever let you down? Trust me." She was worried. I was. Gloom anyway inside me before we started for physiotherapy outpatient. Rainy enough, thunder, lightning, sunshine, blowy at the clothes reel out the bedroom window, dark; sheet hanging to dry hurled around the back porch corner post above the steps, dirty clouds move fast, the railing was pulled away at last once and the reel was moved to the back end of the porch bolted then to that post. Mother kept trying to get my father to have the garage moved over and round to face the street from the shoulder of the driveway. Writing first and foremost was to be understood, had to be clear, while then I figured immediacy and force take priority, too bad but you can't be both or all three too often, not long before I read Olson's "Projective Verse" essay in the 1950 mag *Poetry New York*. In a year or two she thought she couldn't understand poetry and I was the poetry expert. Still sort of my scoutmaster. Like OK, so far, so good; Forward, March. 🍪

Occasionally

Well, they're used to it
in those days we
didn't have floors
like now, no
electricity no telephone
radio no vacuum
cleaner But don't you think it's too bad
that college isn't nearer home?
You could get bread for five cents
I came here no faucets
a pump in the yard

Grandma raised a family
one room over there
The Two Old Men
born in one bed

What are you talking about

Eskimoes, even they who remember
slightly better times?
while they live
they barely balanced their land

No consequence
Remember now

ALL I CAN ADD IS
from where the war is
and more hardship

you'd be surprised
said grandmother
after seventy years
after a hundred years

(From *From the Sustaining Air*)

REMBRANDT LIFE TAKES

to see
dark the
invisible

Take it

every atom of me
belongs to you
across distances
one space

time's
long enough you
remember

you thought it was
as it is

(From *From the Sustaining Air*)

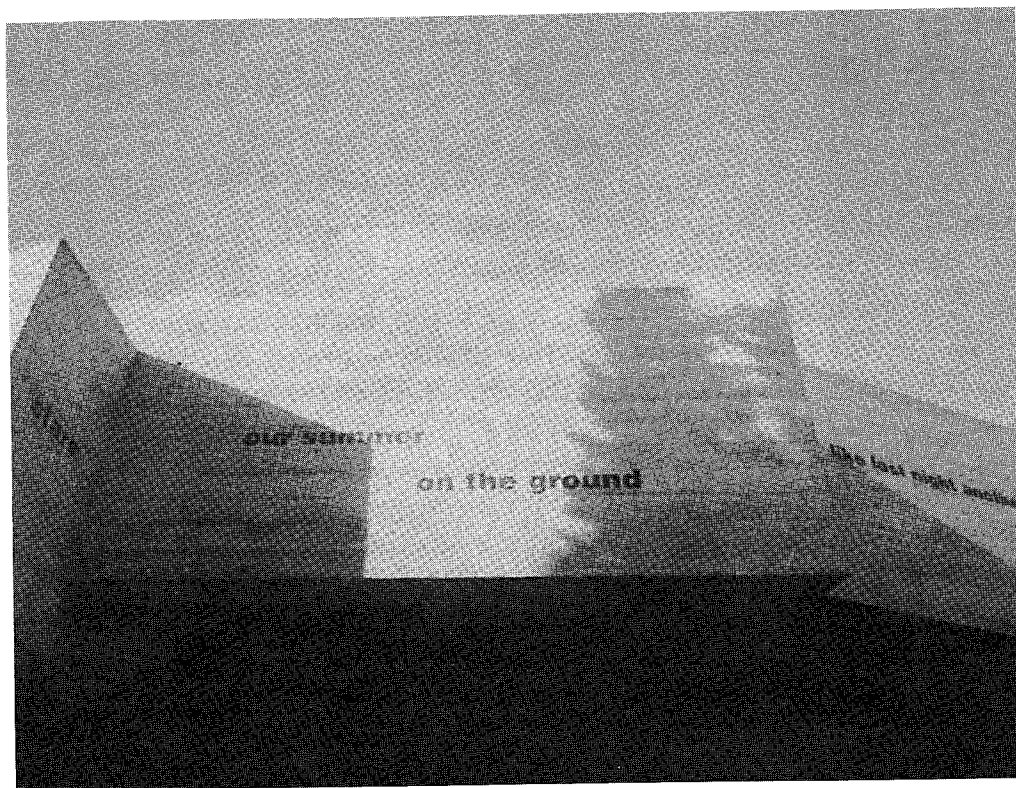
a photograph of a dam
or a morgue
or hospital
or anything
on its side

(From *Anything on Its Side*)

s t a t e m e n t o n w o r d s

Amid increasingly palpable news rather than rumor of scarcities (to be hugely euphemistic about it), abundant moments in various places persist and keep on in high or ultra high frequency, and a poem can be assay(s) of things come upon, can be a stretch of thinking.

(From *The World and Its Streets, Places*)



During the summer of 1993 the University Art Museum of the University of California at Berkeley paid tribute to Larry Eigner by exhibiting his poem "Again dawn" on the building's facade while the interior of the museum was undergoing renovations

Again dawn

the sky dropped
 its invisible whiteness

we saw pass out
 nowhere

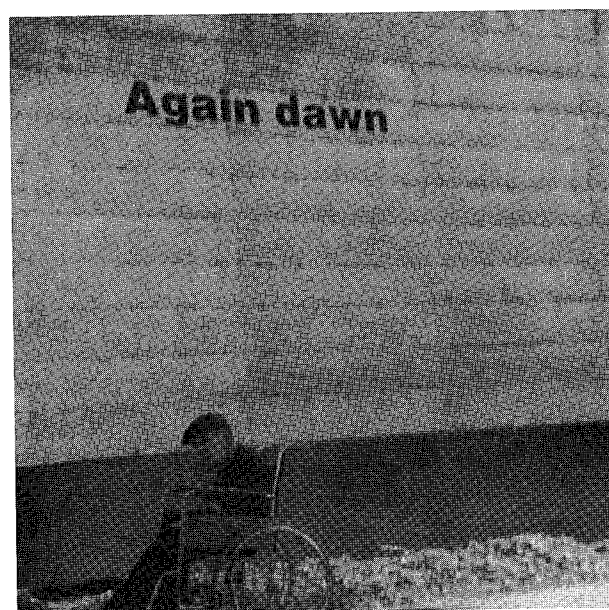
empty the blue

stars

our summer
 on the ground

like last night another
 time

in fragments



Larry Eigner in front of the museum's main entrance

OMNIPRESENT TO SOME EXTENT

Jack Foley's Radio Interview with Larry Eigner
Recorded for KPFA-FM's Poetry Program, March 9, 1994

JACK: This is Jack Foley with the Poetry Program. My guest tonight is Larry Eigner. Many of you probably saw the wonderful poem beginning "Again dawn. . . ." which was recently exhibited on the outside walls of the University Art Museum in Berkeley. That poem was originally published in 1967, in Larry Eigner's book *another time in fragments*. . . .

Larry's the author of a great many books. His first, *From the Sustaining Air*, was edited and published by Robert Creeley in 1953. There was a second expanded edition published in 1967 by Toad Press, and then a reprint of the original edition by the Coincidence Press in 1988. Other books include *On My Eyes*, 1960, edited by Denise Levertov; *another time in fragments*, 1967; *Flat and Round*, 1969; *Selected Poems*, 1972, edited by Samuel Charters and Andrea Wyatt; *Things Stirring Together or Far Away*, 1974; *Anything on Its Side*, 1974, republished in its entirety by Leslie Scalapino in her *O One / An Anthology*, 1988; *The World and Its Streets, Places*, 1977; *Country / Harbor / Quiet / Act / Around*, 1978, which was selected prose, edited by Barrett Watten; *Earth Birds*, 1981; and *Waters, Places, A Time*, edited by Robert Grenier, it won the San Francisco State Poetry Award in 1983; *areas lights heights: selected writings 1954-1989*, edited by Benjamin Friedlander, appeared from Roof Books in 1989, and Black Sparrow Press will be bringing out a new book, also edited by Robert Grenier, *Windows / Walls / Yard / Ways*. Ron Silliman's large 1986 anthology of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, *In the American Tree*, was dedicated to Larry Eigner. . . .

* * *

JACK: . . . [Referring to Larry's poem "Again dawn"] That was from 1967.

LARRY: Yeah.

JACK: A long time ago. I love that book, though. The book that that comes from takes its title

from that last line, "another / time / in fragments." You liked it, too. A lot of people suddenly discovered a lot of your poems from that book.

LARRY: Yeah. When I forget what a line meant I'm disappointed, I guess. You know, my mother said, "To communicate, you must be clear, first of all" though I soon realized that immediacy and force take priority.

JACK: You've said that it bothers you if you forget what a line means long after you've written it. Your mother said that clarity was the thing. She kept at you to be clear.

LARRY: And I wanted to be clear but immediacy and force have to take priority, I soon realized. Footnotes are distracting but when someone reads in public he can preface with a few words. Like, for an example, you could say "All toes enough stepped," but if it were "All toes enough stepped on" it would be clearer. But without the "on" it seems to work better. So you play it by ear, "slow or fast past mind insist." That's most of the poem. There are a couple more words that I forget.

JACK: You were born near Swampscott, Massachusetts, which is where you grew up. Right? And you came here, to California, pretty late. You were born in 1927, and you came here in '78. So you were fifty-one.

LARRY: Fifty-one. Yep.

JACK: And that was right after your father had died.

LARRY: Yeah. In March.

JACK: Was that part of the reason?

LARRY: Yeah. Well, my brother Richard wanted me to move near him, and my mother finally agreed after my father's death. My mother was



Larry Eigner and Jack Foley reading in Petaluma, California, summer 1988

always afraid I'd be a burden on anybody else but her. And too much of a burden.

JACK: Your mother wanted you to be independent and to help adults help you.

LARRY: She would worry about me. I was always trying to help people help me. I'd go haywire every time they'd try to exercise me.

JACK: When you say you went haywire over the exercises, you mentioned in one of your books that you didn't like being physically exercised so much when you were a child.

LARRY: It was the hardest part of my life. Everything else was like vacation. But I was also doing schoolwork and Hebrew classes until I was about twelve years old. I remember a few words from back then.

JACK: Well, you still read a little Hebrew.

LARRY: A few other words I picked up . . . Anyway, I was always trying to help adults help me. I was unable to keep up with other kids.

JACK: Wait. Let's backtrack a bit. The reason you got the cerebral palsy was itself a birth accident. Right? The doctor mismeasured your mother.

LARRY: I should've been delivered by Caesarean but the doctor measured her wrong. The doctor said afterward that she could sue him, but she said, "What's the use in doing that?"

JACK: I guess the answer to that is money, but your parents seem to have had enough money.

LARRY: My grandfather got to be a millionaire and then I guess he lost a great deal of it during the 1929 crash. I never knew how much exactly.

JACK: You mention your grandfather a lot in some of the prose you wrote.

LARRY: My father's father died when I was four. But my other grandfather I remember better—

the grandfather on my mother's side. They were from Lithuania.

* * *

LARRY: The best I can do for people is to share poetry and other good things. I was still ego-altruistic because I was trying to help people help me. Now especially I wonder what to say to kids about the future. I once started a piece of prose, "Optimism itself, like the sun on the floor, or rug"—actually it was the floor of a hospital where I was an in-patient for a while. I went to a clinic in Boston, Children's Hospital, two or three times a week. My mother brought me in there for physical therapy. Nowadays I wonder about the future, how people are gonna get along, especially kids. The best thing I can think to tell kids is that the long run is always made up of the short ranges. I only realized that fully last year, although maybe in 1971 or so I wrote a little four-line poem, four stanzas, "The forest / trees / together / how?" How does the forest go together with the trees? Early this year I realized after listening to Paul Ehrlich—he sounded over-optimistic—I realized then, if a picture is big enough, has enough detail to it, if you try to look at the whole thing it's just as much of a specialty as anything else. If it's big and/or complicated enough, you don't get enough of the detail so you can appreciate the present.

JACK: One of the things you've said, actually, which is kind of interesting and like that: "A poem," you said, "can't be too long, anything like an equatorial superduper highway girdling the thick rotund earth, but is all right and can extend itself an additional bit if you're sufficiently willing to stop anywhere" (from *Waters / Places / A Time*). And you made that as a discovery, that you could just stop a poem.

LARRY: Well even Robert Frost (I wish I could rhyme like that), even he said no surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader. A poem extends itself like you're walking down the street. And you extend the walk sometimes, unexpectedly.

JACK: You say in one of your essays, "If you're willing enough to stop anywhere, anytime, hindsight says, the poem can be like walking down a street and noticing things, extending itself without obscurity or too much effort."

There is a poem here I want to put on the radio because I think most people familiar with your work will never have heard this poem or come across it. It was written, you said, in 1951 or 1952 and then published in the *Dartmouth Quarterly* in February 1954 and it's a very different poem from the kinds of poems that you usually write now or have written since. It's called "A Wintered Road."

A Wintered Road

Rain and the cold had made the street
Clear, metallic; like a plate's
Stems, animals, and incident
Held abstract in one element—

Except this was all around,
Out the window, hedge, fence, ground,
Rough reality within
The supernatural discipline.

Maples stood unassuming then,
Frozen water budding them,
Bud piled on bud each opening
Awake to this fierce whitening.

Tall grass, weighed over, matted, lined,
Was tangled in a quick design
And a stringent thatch of frost
Which let no spore, no seed be lost.

Only the houses and telephone poles
Were ample, wooden, free, almost
Their spring, fall, summer selves.
Slack wires
Spaced windless air with their firm
layer

And outdoor cripples, elbow-oared
In the road lurched slowly homeward,
towards
Where they could witness this alone
And ring up neighbors on the phone.

LARRY: I never know whether a poem is good or bad, but I think that's less powerful than something by Dr. Williams.

JACK: I think that sounds a lot like some of Hart Crane. And it's kind of interesting the way in which you're using language here. Because Hart Crane would write like that sometimes.

LARRY: Early Hart Crane.

JACK: Hart Crane was an early influence on you. "Praise for an Urn." Poems like that.

LARRY: Yeah. I remember that one.

JACK: And he would rhyme something like this. These are off rhymes, an interesting one "opening" "whitening." I think it's an interesting poem. And you were maybe what, twenty-five, twenty-four?

* * *

JACK: Your mother began reading Longfellow to you. Is that right?

LARRY: Yeah. "Life is brave and life is earnest." Right now I don't know what isn't a powerful poem. My mother read me Eugene Field, as well, "Winken, Blinken and Nod." That's pretty much like Edward Lear.

JACK: Did your mother like your poetry?

LARRY: She thought it wasn't clear enough. Then when I got to be pretty successful, she said I'm the poetry expert and she kind of became resigned to my not being clear.

JACK: You complain sometimes about not being able to understand some of the poetry you read.

LARRY: Writing is like playing one game at a time and doing your best at it. Reading is like trying to compare all the games you ever saw and then watch one of them, trying to figure out which one it is. And there are a lot of things in poems now, . . . I feel conscientious to read them. I try to be constructive and write people back, but I don't understand it.

JACK: Actually, you said something about yourself. You said, "I'm scatterbrained, for whatever reason. I can't keep much in my head for long, can't really understand much, and can't follow ideas of any abstruseness or complexity, and when I do see what people mean, am like that considering caterpillar in the face of a few differing viewpoints, baffled and all. There are quite a few poems/poets I definitely like, so I'm not utterly indecisive after all." And then you say, when you're talking about

J. H. Prynne, "His comments seem penetrating, but I wouldn't know exactly, being so fragmented myself that I can't take a survey (can't see much into the verse of Prynne himself, for instance)." Fragmented. That word comes back.

Is that maybe why most of your books have been edited by other people?

LARRY: Maybe most of them. I forget.

Letter for Duncan

just because I forget
to perch different ways
the fish
go monotonous

the
sudden hulks of the trees
in a glorious summer

you don't realize
how mature you get
at 21

but you look back

wherever a summer
continue 70 seasons

this one
has been so various

was the spring hot?

every habit

to read

nothing you've done you have

older

the fish
can't bother screaming

flap by hook

the working pain

jaws by trying a head bodies

you'll always go to sleep
more times than you'll wake

(From *another time in fragments*)

* * *

the bird / of wire like a nest

the bird
of wire like a nest

is all through the air

still, minutely
simple

dead in its way, the material
take in the eyes, time

we can waste on a piece of music
while hours may tick by

you remember from childhood

a bird
depending on the weather

flight was a brief
impenetrable keen breast

doubling lives

sleep peace in various light

the lark a little further beyond
the countryside

(From *another time in fragments*)

* * *

LARRY: What you read about being willing enough to stop anywhere—along about 1970, I got to write being willing enough, not too ambitious, so then I got clearer, like the stuff in *Anything on Its Side*—more understandable to myself and the reader.

Here's a poem I did after 1970.

so the fine green arm

of the phone truck

the line-men are birds, they

might ride to the trees

that
cross-piece now is precise

it takes two

the fresh pole there
for days

plenty of oil share
what

bright yellow

over the tires

up north and east

can make a sound

when did we turn the lights

them carried too

O it is, huh

and nothing can bring it back

(From *The World and Its Streets, Places*)

I seem to remember this as having to do with people leaving their motors running . . . Before that I was kind of on to environmentalism. I felt bad about the waste of gas and oil. I forget if it was real pollution by that time or not. . . . Before I wrote this I wrote quite a few ecological poems. The third one is in *Anything on Its Side*, published in 1974.

JACK: You always refer to your books by the dates. You say "my 1974 book."

LARRY: That's right. . . .

JACK: There are a lot of trees and birds in these poems. And "air" is another word that shows up a lot in your work.

* * *

JACK: Your poems have a lot of subtlety and they're a little bit like, people have noticed this before, haiku. . . .

I want to read a statement you made, it's a little long, but I think it's a very good and important statement and it's something that's an interesting one. And maybe also to talk about your poetry in translation. There's a very interesting French translation of one of your poems here:

. . . I'm cautious, and come onto things by under-statement. Wary of exaggeration. Sotto voce has resulted in the suppression of words. Don't like to begin with a big B, as if I was at the Beginning of all speech, or anything; which may also have something to do with why usually I've had an aversion more or less to going back to the left margin after beginning a poem, but otherwise than in hindsight I just tried to do the best I could, the simplest and most immediate thing being punctuation,¹ once words were forceful enough—a matter of getting the distances between words, and usage of marks to conform as well as might be to what there was to say, as spoken, then these typographical devices entering themselves into the discovery and the initiation of attention. As with any other detail, after dispensing with a routine duplication device—e.g. a period as well as a capital letter—a new thing immediately (neither period nor capital results in sentence splice, a poem without very explicit rests, if that's what seems good), then, the availability of the device for vital use in some other connection that may crop up, possibly. Oaks from small acorns. Forests of possibility. But they can't reach the stratosphere or leave the ground. In the stratosphere

¹From a confrontation, first, with work by e. e. cummings, then by Williams and others."

you get very stark claustrophobia. Now that I've met up with a good number of things and people I'm less able to keep open and give everyone the benefit of the doubt than I used to, which was the only way I found of getting along, just about, and it still is practically my only way—kind of a bootstrap affair.

(A limitation is, that though I seem to do all right al fresco, later when my nose is out of it two inches away the stuff is more doubtful and apt to go flat. Many lines flush with one another can go more permanently flat, on the other hand, and bill boards seem heavy).

Parodying Socrates a little, you might say I know enough to feel naive.

("Method from Happenstance,"
from *areas lights heights: writings 1954-1989*)

"I know enough to feel naive." I like that very much and it makes you a little bit like le Douanier Rousseau. I want to also read a mistranslation into French of a poem of yours. But it's an interesting mistranslation. Joseph Guglielmi translated many of Larry Eigner's poems into French. This is the sixth poem in Guglielmi's *L'éveil* (1977):

vent
léger
à dos d'oiseau;
sa forme
dans le contour
des branches

LARRY: I translated Guglielmi, not the other way around. I tightened it up.

JACK: Oh, *you* translated it. Oh, I see. It's even more interesting that way.

This is Larry Eigner's translation of Guglielmi's poem:

wind
light
bird back
branches

A literal translation would be: "light wind at the back of a bird; its form in the contour of the branches." In the English both "light" and "back" are ambiguous; they are not in the French.

Both poems were published in *Moving Letters* #11. You left out a lot. You translated only certain key words. And it's interesting that way too. I thought it was a translation back of you.

I want to read the first poem in your first book, your second book really, but your first as Larry Eigner, and it is called "B."

B

Is it serious, or funny?
Merely?

Miasma of art
The

more the merrier is my view

seeing the levels of the world

and how easily emptied space

is

Here they made the perfect pots
on the beastly floors
the spoons and knives randomly dealt

and tread on the pine-cones
bare-footed
to cut wood

and here, the women went undone
till noon, plaiting

Once this happened
and the cooks brought food to their seniors in wigs
in dressed-stone mansions;

I am omnipresent to some extent,
but how should I direct my attention

sufficiently to what I desire, to
stop, to
what is charging on the roadbed, what
going away, the

fire-gong, people and buses

and even in my room, as
I know

the waving sun
the

constant ephemerals

(From *From the Sustaining Air*)

"... the constant ephemerals." I don't know how ephemerals can be constant, but I love that phrase. The sun doesn't wave, it rises and sets. But that's all right. It's a waving sun in this poem.

LARRY: I don't know either, but it reminds me of Gertrude Stein's eternal present.

JACK: "I am omnipresent to some extent," you say. I love that line. But the first thing you say to the world is "Is it serious, or funny? / Merely? / Miasma of art." And it's kind of funny sometimes and sometimes it isn't. I think "I am omnipresent to some extent" is kind of funny. At least in some contexts. It sounds like Walt Whitman suddenly taking himself up short, "I am omnipresent, to some extent." . . . Larry is very much a poet's poet. And I think that's clear from some of the poets who have been associated with Larry. Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, Robert Grenier, and Ron Silliman. Quite prominent poets. And Robert Duncan was a fan of Larry's as well.

Cid Corman once said,

The random quality is often due to the brevity of the poet's attentions, acute and wandering. Finding every distraction a focal point and in the alert mind mingling ideas, facts, as wires, hinges, bolts, and sometimes just flashes. Glimpses and glances, queer connections of the most familiar.

Larry, I want to ask you one other thing. You mention, in one of the quotations from your book *areas lights heights*, you say that at one time you were a workaholic, and you believed in a work ethic, but you say no longer—"every hour or two is a new day around the world, but by now I opine you can have overkill in anything, for example there's no shortage of any kind of writing that I can see. Nor is Work any longer a very great good—life or living is its purpose. Career or profession seems obsolete in enough ways by now, and now I think of a return to amateurism." Do you regard yourself as an amateur?

LARRY: An amateur is a lover of a subject. What's the use unless you really feel like it? Spontaneity. What's the use of keeping up with a specialty for a whole lifetime? Once a poet always a poet. But I don't agree with that.

JACK: Do you think of yourself as a poet still?

LARRY: Nobody's a poet when he's asleep, and so forth. I was going to read one more poem.

the pastorate
 symphony
the snow is
 white white
 in the yard
 sunshine
 the wind sheep
what do the clouds graze
 in safety as
 a child feels
 heedless
 of indoors
positioned slow like the aerial
half blown down
 by the freak blizzard
what this place may be
 unreally cold and wet
 when the music was conceived

(From *The World and Its Streets, Places*)

JACK: Thank you, Larry. 🍷

This interview was broadcast on KPFA-FM August 8, 1994, the day after Larry Eigner's sixty-seventh birthday.

"The Bible Told Me So" or "... said by Mother"

It's hard to say what unrealities may not enter the real, and there's as much in the spectrum from real to unreal as, say, between here or the zenith and the antipodes. Reality isn't likely to be all black and white—gray—or black or white. Man's bootstraps, his imagination, is quite a part of reality, or when that element fails, is unattained, or has no points of application, a stonier reality closes in, like death. Often enough it's a question that never can be answered with absolute precision, how much imagination can penetrate a reality already present, and how much it has to for there to be a notable interaction or change. To be alive is to be chemically active—no ideas in a dead man's head—and the more points of interaction perceptions have with things in spaces other than that occupied by the head, or nowadays maybe the more they interact with such things, the faster they do, the greater correspondence, correlation, cross-reference, then the truer they'll be.

Don Quixote, an imaginary figure, finds stimulus to cover a considerable range in as many books, an uncertain number (within a chosen area), as he reads, trying to live by them as people before and since Cervantes' time have tried to live more or less by the Bible or Koran—extensions of their experience anyway in any books of tradition. A Confirmation, very often, a stabilizing activity. Or how much of a peg should a text be, how hard can the Bible be hammered without detracting greatly from reality, and thereby truth (reality inclusive of imaginative perceptions), itself? Then by now we have what seems a good deal of anarchy, for instance the Theatre of the Absurd (I hardly pick up much spirit for a fast whirl from a page anyhow), which *Don Quixote* already is, pretty much, random and disjointed enough, and for one thing piling the learned Moor, Cid Hamete, purported author of the "history" (Cervantes says he got another Moor to translate it for him)—cited in various spots—on top of everything else. Or to say one thing or another is overdone becomes a fine point, in view of Cervantes' whole, the combination he makes;

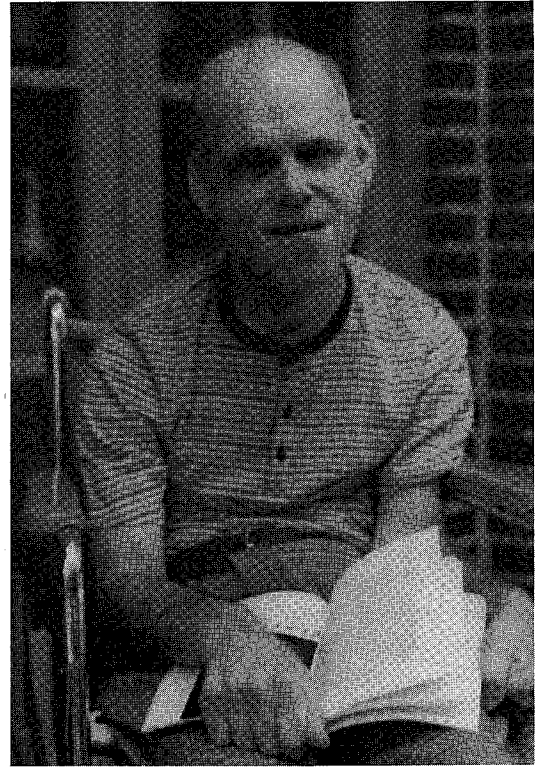
but he's only less fragmentary than a present-day kaleidoscope, perhaps, in being slower. This as regards plot, the sequence of things that happen. Maybe a more human, less grueling pace—in some senses. Thematically there's this traveling back and forth between the ideal, absurd and fantastic, and the beginning of reality (everyday—the communal view—as distinct from where men start from, individually, in childhood). And how much literary or traditional basis is there for the Theatre of the Absurd (B. Brecht deriving from Shakespeare, as well as John Gay and musical theatre et al.)? The Book of Nature, which has been opened more and more since Dante and Giotto and Leonardo, has gotten very weighty by now, bigger than the Library of Congress. How pure would it be nice to have escapism and the hermetic be? Lucky that biologically we're still the same, at least that we sleep at night and so other things—it's a consideration. Don Quixote considered the knights of old to have been fairly similar to himself at that, with the same bodily needs; although it was or "is a point of honor . . . to go for a month at a time without eating." Some peg is needed, based on likeness, it seems, before you can have extension, which would require difference. (Don Quixote gained wisdom in applying his texts and/or personal experience, in the process of course developing his own commentary. Though too much interaction between imagination and a given reality breaks down the body, and too little results in bad falls, catastrophes, likely as not disastrous. Such is life.)

You also have the illiterate, the layman, like Sancho Panza, or the naturalist (Thoreau, W. H. Hudson) or backwoodsman. Well, friends and peers. An oral tradition is at the least adequate to some things. It's unknown, too, if there were any long-time hermits before there were any books.

—Larry Eigner

(From *areas lights heights: writings 1954–1989*)

GETTING IT TOGETHER

*A Film on Larry Eigner, Poet (1973)**Film made by Leonard Henny and Jan Boon**Poetry by Larry Eigner**Read by Allen Ginsberg**[and Larry Eigner—Eigner's note]**Text by Michael F. Podulke**With commentary by Larry Eigner (1989)**Transcript by Jack Foley***ALLEN GINSBERG:**

loneliness, existence

 this is the fine flower and
 the bodies in a ring
 the geometry

 some substance given the stuff of
 the earth, imitable

air

the graces in a car

June 1978

gun

and exhaust the word is familiar now and the curves
 perfect as straight lines

Barefoot to match

the atmosphere, a

plain for the distance, the

slung horizon

(another time in fragments #19)

NARRATOR: This film is about Larry Eigner, a poet living in Swampscott, Massachusetts, almost completely paralyzed by injuries received at birth. He cannot walk¹ and can only just speak and use his hands. He gets his poetry down on paper by dictating it to his mother and his brother [Joe,] who are able to understand him. In recent years he has mastered one-fingered typing, a technique which unfortunately cannot keep pace with the speed of his thinking or poetic invention. Larry is getting it together on pure will power.

¹Walk unless someone holds him or he holds onto a bar or railing, one hand is useless and his speech isn't good. He remembers he made up bad rhymes as a child and had his mother write them down. His brother J was seven and he was thirteen years old when he began typing in earnest (with one finger) while he did a few strokes on a toy typewriter before.—Eigner's note.

²*Obvious maybe but not too good a guess.—Eigner's note.*

*B i r t h d a y*³

41

EIGNER: I was thinking that your way there was kids and marriage, and so forth, you know . . . idealism, all right. I wanted . . .⁴

⁴*Nervous distracted and bewildered, Ei . . . was thinking (again) that a "normal" life isn't really an ideal goal to aim for, dancing for example—but anyhow, for instance, no one maybe was ever out to do ballet inside of a wheelchair, after all.—Eigner's note.*

QUESTION: How do you write a poem?

EIGNER: I used to try very hard, I used to go around all the time thinking of the . . . trying to write poetry. . . . But, ah, I forget how it was . . . you know, it was often by the skin of my teeth like that . . . you know, oh "what's the [bellyache?]." Comes in awkward. I did satisfy the inawkward thing and I tried to get most of it anyway, nagging, hoping sort of, like, you know, hoping against hope, maybe, you know, egotistical, and anyway, like I used to try and walk, you know, hoping in a sense a lie, turned out what seemed to me pretty awkward but I know I did it to the best I could, and all.

GINSBERG:

live
 , bird which
 sings
 above
 and underneath

 or two birds, may
 all

 go subtly

 we are

 in the air

 feet

 on the ground

 the air goes
 thin then
 budding relieve
 the branches like
 fresh children

 leaves
 die, fitful
 mass of voices, curled, in
 continuous air

(another time in fragments #72)

GINSBERG, FOLLOWED BY EIGNER:

eyes, eyes
the hurt
is not the blind

staring
birds sing

day or night

how
the trees grow

branches

rounds of the sky**

[Eigner's typescript: Mrch 23 69 #297]

****JACK FOLEY'S NOTE:** The text of this poem, both in Eigner's typescript and as read by Ginsberg, differs from the subtitles in the film. The subtitles read: "eyes, eyes the hurt is not the blind staring birds sing day and night how the trees grow birches lining the sky."

GINSBERG:

The wandering mosquito

into my face
among the masses

When does he go to sleep
I forget he's irregular

Is there any sleep, at all, for him,
before death?

he wanders miles and miles and
becomes aware of the window
where the moon is

in a short time

the peg-board

and it's raining outside

94 humid

he hasn't hurt me yet

I have to open the window

his head is a constant drop of blood

(another time in fragments #56)

GINSBERG:

I ride I
don't believe in planes
what purpose there is

various principles

tremendous craft

until my end
the surface gets easy

infinite air circuits
merging

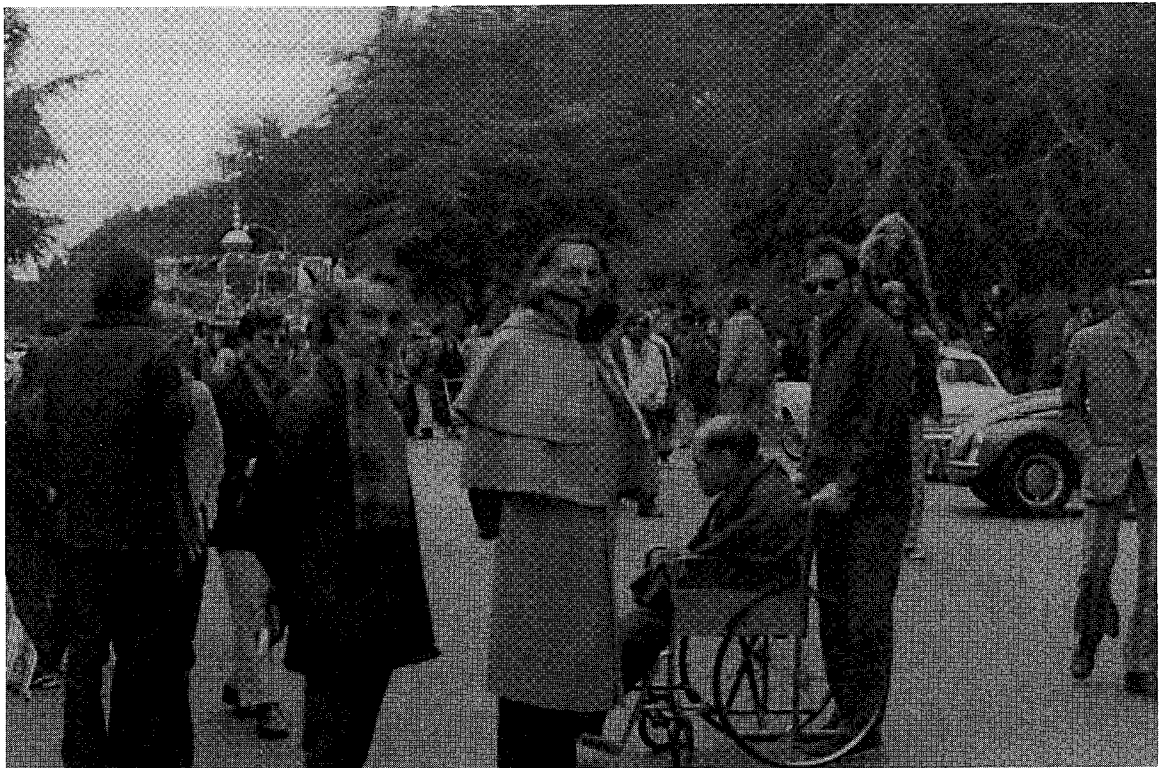
clouds like our wing

out the lined window

maximum length every

light spreads

[Eigner's typescript: June 30 . . . July 2 '70 #405]



At Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, during the "Summer of Love," 1968, with Robert Duncan (standing left of Larry) and Larry's brother Richard (standing behind Larry)

EIGNER: I've got some, maybe just a descriptive poem. This is it. "Whitman's Cry at Starvation in a Land of Plenty." Maybe I'd rather have it down here, Frank.

Whitman's cry at starvation
in a land of plenty

prison camps the mean
South

six ways
of saying it
the big problem is

consumption and conservation and population

population consumption conservation

conservation population consumption

population conservation consumption

or what about
bringing others in

conservation consumption population

consumption population conservation

I could have watched for a week
the able horsemen
with no nonsense

put the sick with the strong

eighty thousand to a hundred thousand
of the wounded and sick
critical cases

I generally watched all night

was with many from the
border states

bedded down
in the openwork of
branches and stars

must not and
should not be
written perhaps

marrow of the tragedy
one vast central hospital
with fighting on the flanges in
the flesh—

how much of importance is
buried in the grave
in eternal darkness

[Eigner's dating: April 7f 66 # k L]

I didn't do that too bad, did I?

GINSBERG:

Listening to the wind
 how it may change
 a bird opens to fly
 the other side of the world
 is pulled down

the car pool burning

(*Things Stirring Together or Far Away*, p. 80)

[Eigner's dating: Feb 17f 68 #172]

QUESTION: Larry, how would you effect your idea that the world one day wouldn't go hungry? You've written about a hunger strike.

EIGNER: I think of it as . . . I thought of it as a weekly fast or a frequent enough fast to get people to realize that living like Thoreau . . . sort of a regular . . . ME! Like "I had a great few years." And also to be aware of limitations, the possibility, the likelihood, whatever it is, of bad harvests, and also the limitations there ought to be because if you use too much fertilizer and grow too much food it's bad, you know, too much nitrogen in the water and the air, and all sorts of things go together, it kind of goes together, the awareness of limitations and one kind of brain, just fear, a lot of fear, and when people all [?] it's because of fear so I have this idea of a fund drive in conjunction with the fast. Sounds like The March of Dimes. Have food, budget, money . . .⁵

⁵*Food-budget money saved in fasting go towards supplying people without enough or an equal share of food or whatever with more.—Eigner's note.*

COMMENT: This is less like a form of resistance or recalcitrance ["resistance or recalcitrance" is the phrase in the subtitle but the man seems actually to be saying, "political recalcitrance"] than it is a form of prayer almost, abstinence as a form of prayer almost.

EIGNER: Yeah, getting things together. Yeah, yeah, abstinence wouldn't be good unless you could also have giving along with it . . . yeah . . . because just restraint by itself would be . . . pretty much get people down.⁶

⁶*bring fear and hostility.—Eigner's note.*

GINSBERG:

clouds move
 shadows move some

smokes invisible

here to there

roofs top

fire escapes

the bottoms drawn up

[Eigner's dating: July 12 70 #411]

JACK FOLEY'S NOTE: This transcript—like, evidently, the subtitles in the film—is only an approximation, though I listened as carefully as I could to the soundtrack and tried as hard as I could to make out the subtitles. Ginsberg's reading—and sometimes Eigner's reading—departs slightly from Eigner's text; the subtitles are at times a condensation of what is said rather than what is actually said; there are some words in the subtitles which are not heard on the soundtrack (e.g., the question, "How do you write a poem?"). These are inevitable difficulties in the shift from the oral/aural to the written. As Larry puts it at the end of *another time in fragments*:

there is everything to speak of
but the words are words

JF 7/26/89 🍏

an original
 eye
a reverent
 eye
 wild
discipline
 eye
 eye
what you
 see you
 settle
 on
 moves
do something
feel
 a
 victory
or mountain
 what
 you can't
 go through
 nor replace
 a road
 a like
 curve

CEZANNE A
CATHOLIC

UP
OLD
HILLS

(From *Anything on Its Side*)

A Note Detailing Tags

It must've been a couple or about three years after I started trying poems again from listening to Cid Corman's radio program and corresponding with him and Creeley et al. that I began labeling em so I could in short shrift record what I submitted where, but since I might best or could only pencil in a notebook lying in bed (nor cd I take a sheet out of book or binder to type on, insert it afterwards) I just figured to keep the labels as brief as I could for as long as possible, hence once I'd numbered verse pieces 1 through 99 I used tags, a, al through a9, b b1 . . . y9 then la . . . 9z and then ab, ac and so on. I reserved AA, BB etc. for prose and had wariness, presence of mind not to go in for z7 for instance wch in penciling cd easily be the same as 27, but didn't think to avoid 2i through 9i, z1 through z9 and others. (I cdn't say when I first typed a record on a loose sheet—early on, it seems—nor since when I've done this regularly, sometimes penciling there, too. Not too bad an idea to have as much as possible in sight at once, no matter how reliable memory is, in a small space or on one page.) Also about as soon as an editor took anything I reused its tag, though never more than once or twice, seldom perhaps without adding an apostrophe, and later when I'd been 5½ yrs putting more than one poem on a page (at first for a while copying a poem once or maybe sometimes twice over again below the initial typescript in triplicate or often as otherwise quadruplicate), for instance I had four different poems (ih/ih'/ij/ij') on one page, three on another (iw/w/iw') and, like, jm/jm'/j"/j'm on another, sort of thing I carried on for at least 15 months ('65-'66), maybe any time space allowed, also I see now I repeated de within a month somehow or other and ab in 5 days (the four poems in early '62 and late '61 all

writ I guess on the 6th floor of Massachusetts General Hospital but of course typed up at home). Kind of lucky I began dating things as a regular thing in October '59 after Don Allen sought for dates to things he took for *The New American Poetry* when he asked me to show him stuff and I did; before that I considered luck might more than likely run out, I might be jinxed and get writer's block if I dated, it'd be overconfidence, counting chickens before they hatched, laying claim to lasting fame, though one or two things I did date and besides I remember what I wrote in the Summers of '53 and '54 and (so too) "After 2 Years" in July, August, September or October of '56. En through ez or so are from '64, the f's and early e's from '63. From lack of recall and in some haste I on one occasion used xyz for instance and 101, 105-8 and 5L2 through 5L9 for things at some time after I wrote them, guessing at their chronological position or maybe to indicate I cdn't determine it. Some, like "Letter for Duncan," I never got to label, thinking their whereabouts would stay in my head. A few such aren't dated either, at least one of em likely anyway from before 10/59, likely as not.

Whew! So a good bit before June 15 '66, when I exploited kv, the system had in large part become chaotic. A week or so later I flew to San Francisco to stay with my brother for two months, and he got me to start all over again with #1 (June 25th), and with a few repeats (#913a, 913b, 913c and 913d could form a group or series, 984' I guess I was thinking might well be so-so by comparison with 984 directly above it) I last month (May '89) reached 1650.

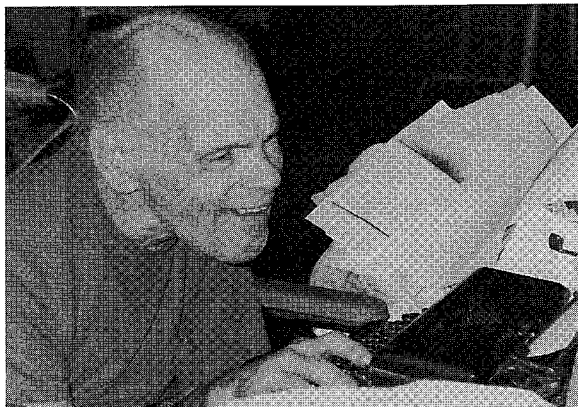
—Larry Eigner

(From *areas lights heights: writings 1954-1989*)

"VIRTUALLY ENOUGH"

Videoconference with Larry Eigner &

Richard and Beverly Eigner, Jack Foley, and Shelly Andrews, December 29, 1995



[It should perhaps be noted that, at this point in his life, Larry was somewhat weakened and less forthcoming than he was at other times, though he was still able to communicate.]

—Jack Foley

SHELLY: What are your earliest memories?

LARRY: Pine Street when I was four years old. I was taking a nap in the front parlor near a railroad crossing. A plane went by often and the noise bothered me.

RICHARD: We lived at two addresses, Pine Street for about two years, whereas Larry spent approximately fifty years of his life at 23 Bates Road, Swampscott. That's the principal address. That was a tract of land. It was land on which a house was built. Most of it was undeveloped. Over the years, the lots in that tract of land were sold off almost exclusively to Italians. We were completely surrounded at 23 Bates Road by houses most of which had been built by Italian immigrants. Up to when he was eleven years old, Larry went to Boston for physiotherapy sessions three times a week. Then he went to the Massachusetts Hospital School for sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. It was a statewide,

partly public, partly private school. Larry graduated top of his class.

SHELLY: What was it like going away to a school for these years?

LARRY: At first I was thin-skinned, sensitive. Then I got to have thick skin. I became pretty popular. I think they liked me.

RICHARD: That school was a very rough place. Some of the children were pushed around on wheeled carts. Others were being treated for tuberculosis. He returned to Swampscott after the Massachusetts school and had a substitute teacher come into our home to school him. She was very interested in literature.

LARRY: First Mrs. Blodgett, and then a math teacher as well, who was principal of the high school.

RICHARD: This arrangement was worked out with the public school system. Larry also spent summers at Robin Hood's Barn, in Vermont, a summer camp for handicapped children which was run by two New England ladies. They dressed up as characters, and the staff played parts like Maid Marian. It was my mother's campaign to have Larry educated as much as he was. At that time, it was thought that children like Larry could not be educated. That was followed by correspondence courses in versification from the University of Chicago, which I think was suggested by this Mrs. Blodgett.

* * *

SHELLY: What do you remember about your Bar Mitzvah in 1940?

LARRY: It was in my front parlor at Bates Road, I had stagefright and was scared of giggling.

JACK: Larry giggles when he gets nervous.

Curiosity

LARRY: Curiosity keeps me going. I might have less of it now, but I had enough of it earlier.

JACK: "Curiosity" is a big word for Larry. He uses it a lot. Anything anybody said he took very seriously.

LARRY: I was both conventional and the opposite.

JACK: Were you "subversive"?

LARRY: I don't know what you mean. My mother read things out of the paper she thought I might get a kick out of and I tried to reciprocate. Mother would tell me to go to my room if I wanted to say them out loud.

RICHARD: When did you begin to write poems?

LARRY: Very early. I used to be in bed. My mother would come and take down the poem.

RICHARD: Or Father would. I remember being in the same bedroom with you and sometime in the course of the night you would wake saying, "I've got a poem." They used to rhyme in those days. Some of them were sonnets.

LARRY: I don't remember this.

JACK: I have an early poem of Larry's that reads like Hart Crane. It's called "A Wintered Road" [see page 33].

RICHARD: I remember a sonnet called "The Disciplinarian," the last lines of which were "ephemeral and worthy to be erased / if ever wind was sung or sunset traced."

LARRY: My eighth grade graduating class at the hospital school had a print shop. They published a book. The first book listed in my list of poems is this book, *Poems* (1941). It's not in any of my regular books. I was fourteen years old. Juvenilia.

* * *

LARRY: I never get bored. And this poem is a good example of my lack of boredom.

the strange the familiar
headlights eyes

we loved riding
the back of the truck

the sleigh on its course
coming down the hill
spilling so many ways

we could never jump

a flying start

it was
always
supertime

the bells at
sunset
there

the horses

every night the power
sleeps wakes up
in the morning

(From *Anything on Its Side*)

RICHARD: My mother's father used to sell vegetables from an open truck. It used to be horse-drawn. He was the much more plebian member, he was all-earth, and one of his activities was giving the grandchildren what he called a "back ride." He'd back up the truck on a quiet street at what seemed like a rapid rate. The house was situated in an area where houses were being built. And there were a lot of vacant lots. You walked through a woodsy path and came to a beach. We could hear the ocean from the house.

JACK: You'll notice that Larry's extremely careful about line spacing.

* * *

JACK: Your father was technophobic, I gather. He couldn't work the radio.

RICHARD: According to my mother my father was technophobic. In fact, according to my mother, we all are. My mother was the stronger parent.



Larry Eigner with his brothers, Joe (left) and Richard, and parents Bessie and Israel Eigner, early 1950s

* * *

LARRY: After my two brothers moved away, usually you could hear a pin drop. My father, very absentminded, and my mother thought by turns I was either impractical or idealistic or self-centered. I was to be seen and not heard. So you could hear a pin drop and I got stagefright. But otherwise I had plenty of time to concentrate on typing, keeping up with the mail, writing two or three poems a week—I type often enough and/or fast enough with just my right index finger, my thumb on the spacebar, lifting it and coming down with every stroke on a key, so I hardly need to look at the keyboard.¹

¹This paragraph was excerpted from a letter from Larry Eigner, dated January 3, 1996.

Influences

SHELLY: How did your correspondence with Cid Corman begin? You were listening to his radio program and you wrote him a letter?

LARRY: My brother was listening to the radio and called me over. Cid Corman was reading Yeats. I wrote a letter to Cid Corman objecting to the way in which Corman was reading Yeats. I felt that Yeats should be more declamatory. Corman responded and this began our correspondence. I also discovered Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Robert Creeley through Cid Corman. Charles Olson, too. Creeley substituted for Corman on the radio station. Hart Crane was another influence. I discovered him on my own, somehow.

JACK: Creeley used to read Hart Crane. One of Creeley's first poems in *For Love* is about Hart Crane.

LARRY: Another influence was e. e. cummings.

RICHARD: That was the beginning of the emphasis on spatialization.

SHELLY: Are there other poets who've influenced you?

RICHARD: Robert Kelly, Jonathan Williams. Williams was a publisher and poet.

LARRY: My 1960 book. Denise Levertov wrote the preface. *On My Eyes*.

JACK: She wrote in the preface that she can't tell if a Larry Eigner poem is good or bad. She also happened to be the editor of the book.

* * *

BEVERLY: Larry, would you like to tell about visits to the house by William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson?

RICHARD: We visited Charles Olson in Gloucester. He was at least 6'5" and a Viking. He was a postman in Boston. Lived in a fisherman's part of town on a promontory, up a rickety flight of stairs, and Olson came down and carried

Larry up the stairs to his den, in which he had, among other things, the works of Alfred North Whitehead. Olson saw that Larry was reading Whitehead and said, "Stonecutting all the way."

BEVERLY: That was August of '64.

LARRY: Before you got married.

JACK: Larry's major influences are William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, and Charles Olson. Larry's also read lots of other people and lots of Language poetry, but it isn't fundamentally an influence. The former are poets he goes back to. Larry told me once that he was a little afraid sometimes that the Language poets would find out that he didn't understand their work. And I told this to Lyn Hejinian, who is a Language poet. She said to tell Larry that the Language poets started seminars and readings in order to understand each other's work.

Robert Duncan is another poet who was interested in Larry. I don't know if you have *another time in fragments*, but there's a wonderful statement by Duncan about Larry's work as a development of Williams's line:

. . . his phrasings are not broken off in an abrupt juncture but hover, having a margin of their own . . .

RICHARD: When did you first meet Duncan face to face?

LARRY: The summer of '68.

* * *

SHELLY: Could you talk about your correspondence courses at the University of Chicago?

RICHARD: Larry started taking the University of Chicago correspondence classes right after high school. They used to come in the mail every other week. They taught very traditional verse forms. Our mother loved poetry, especially when it was in recognizable meter, even if it wasn't rhyming.

SHELLY: Did these versification courses help you with what you've written since?

LARRY: No.

RICHARD: I disagree.

SHELLY: Was that reason to drop out?

LARRY: I bet my folks would've paid for all 400 courses.

Clarity

LARRY: I once made an effort to write long poems. When I stopped that, around 1970, I was willing to stop at any word. When I got that way, I think my stuff became clearer.

JACK: It's hard to find exact examples of this. We tried. But he feels that that was a very important moment for him. It's like walking down the street and being able to stop at any time. He's talking about openness and tentativeness.

LARRY: Five words . . . ten words.

JACK: One of the questions that arises from Larry's work is "What do these words have to do with one another?" They're all there on a page, and that means that you tend to experience them with some degree of unity. And then you have to make the connections between the words. And you can stop at any place. He's not committed to, say, fourteen lines, as in a sonnet.

RICHARD: He makes the reader work.

LARRY: That's like Language poetry, right?

JACK: What Larry's hearing when Richard says that are certain statements made by Language poets which have been used to justify Language poetry. And Larry hears that because he's familiar with those statements. Ron Silliman dedicated his book *In the American Tree* to Larry. Larry is thought of as a sort of father figure to Language poets.

LARRY: I'd rather be clear and communicative. Immediacy and force take precedence.

RICHARD: There's some subversion there, of clarity.

JACK: Subversive. It's a funny word because in the '50s to be subversive was a negative thing. Now it's positive. Every third woman writer has been called subversive, "of the dominant paradigm," or whatever.

LARRY: After that I read Olson's projective verse. Energy goes all the way across from the writer to the reader. Before that I thought of the idea of immediacy. Immediacy and force.

JACK: Olson sort of made me leave graduate school. This goes along with a story I tell. I won't tell the whole story. But at a certain point in the story I go over to a library shelf and take down Olson's *Maximus IV, V, VI*. They had a profound effect on me. And when I told Larry that I went to the library and took *Maximus IV, V, VI* off the shelf, he said "Uh oh." I didn't have to say any more.

Allen Ginsberg

BEVERLY: [To Larry] Wasn't the summer of 1968 when you met Allen Ginsberg?

JACK: Ginsberg did the narration for a film about Larry.

RICHARD: Ginsberg at one time visited Bates Road, not alone, but with his entourage, which was quite a bit for my mother to take, her having grown up in Salem, Massachusetts, influenced by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow . . . then to be visited by Ginsberg and entourage.

LARRY: My mother was apprehensive about meeting or welcoming in the house Ginsberg because he's gay—maybe what to say to him. I didn't think of who might be with him. I guess she didn't either. He had slipped on the ice on his farm in New York, so he was on crutches and sat down on the floor to play his portable organ. Gregory Corso came with him.²

RICHARD: But she let them in the house and was very considerate to them.

LARRY: This was two years before 1968.

Jack Foley

SHELLY: Jack, when did you first meet Larry?

JACK: In 1986. I was doing a poetry series in Berkeley. I'd admired Larry's work for many years but I hadn't met him. And I was given

his phone number, not his address, his phone number, to ask him to do a reading, so I called him. And the first thing Larry did was to clear his throat. Something like *Aaaa-UUUUh-ha*. And I thought to myself, what am I going to do? I knew he was disabled but didn't realize the disability extended to his speech. And it was sink or swim. I didn't know this but there was someone else on the line listening in case I needed help. I decided to understand Larry. And so I understood him.

I had him do a reading at the series and it worked out very well. In fact, Larry liked the idea so well he said, "Here's my two bucks, I'll come every week." So I brought Larry for three years to the series every week. So he was there for all the people who came. Also, we've done a lot of readings together.

We wanted to do a radio show for a long time, but we were unable to figure out quite how to do it. Then we figured a way. We had a microphone above Larry. And we actually videotaped it as well.

Oh, hey, do you know about this? One of Larry's poems, from *another time in fragments*, the title poem, was exhibited on the walls of the University Art Museum.

BEVERLY: The director at the University Art Museum in Berkeley put one of Larry's poems on the exterior walls of the art museum.

JACK: It appeared for about six months. They should have left it on permanently. They were doing a renovation on the inside and space was available on the outside walls. "Again dawn" is also in Larry's *Selected Poems*.

It was wonderful. Usually when you read a poem you have to look down. There you had to look up.

SHELLY: Did they get the spacing right?

JACK: Yes. More or less. They had to redo the spacing, but they went over it with Larry.

Serendipity

SHELLY: Do you set certain times aside for your writing, Larry?

LARRY: No. I can't concentrate on the keyboard enough so other people work for me.

²From Larry Eigner's letter, dated January 3, 1996.

It's very difficult for me now. I make a lot of mistakes.

JACK: Also, he condenses words, so that "could" for example will be "cld." And if you're making a lot of typos *and* condensing at the same time, it becomes pretty impenetrable. Larry even has difficulty making it out later. But people help and he memorizes. He has his poems in his head before they're committed to the type-writer.

LARRY: Partly anyway. Reading or listening is harder because you have to get at what they really mean.

JACK: He has more difficulty reading other people, it's harder because he has to get at what they really mean. For him writing is easier. And he's uncertain of the meaning of lots of texts. Especially since a lot of the texts that he reads are Language poetry. And these are difficult texts and he's uncertain about what these texts mean.

LARRY: I understand some things, but there might be something I'm missing. And I worry about that.

RICHARD: Are you onto any new direction? Are you going to be changing your style?

LARRY: Serendipity.

JACK: "Serendipity" is another big word for Larry. I mean, what happens is, I'll come over and he'll say "I got a poem on Friday." It's the same thing that used to happen when he was a kid. It's just "I got a poem." Something comes to him.

SHELLY: I was going to ask how you maintain a fresh perspective, Larry, but serendipity seems to answer that.

JACK: For Larry, it would be hard to maintain a *jaded* perspective.

* * *

JACK: Larry sort of regards himself as semi-retired, but he has for many books, for many years. But there was a point in his life where he felt that at one time he was working very

hard all the time, and then there is a point where that doesn't happen anymore and the work ethic doesn't have as much of a sway upon him. That was something that happened in his life. When did that happen exactly? Was that after the operation? Larry had an operation on his left side. At one time his left side was wild.

LARRY: A few years ago. After I got to Berkeley.

JACK: Larry used to tell me that his whole left side was wild, which means *this* used to happen all the time [he waves his arm upward]. And the way he controlled it was *not* to think about it. But if he forgot it totally, it would go wild. But if he thought about it too much, it would go wild. So he had to maintain a balance between not thinking about it but thinking about it just enough to control it. And that kind of thing changed after the operation. His left side is no longer wild. But some of that seems to have affected his attitude about his poetry. He was less pushy about getting the poems out. Not that Larry's ever been pushy. And now words like *serendipity* become very important to him.

RICHARD: Do you have to control the poems in the same way you control your left side? Do you have to think about it in some middle ground?

LARRY: No.

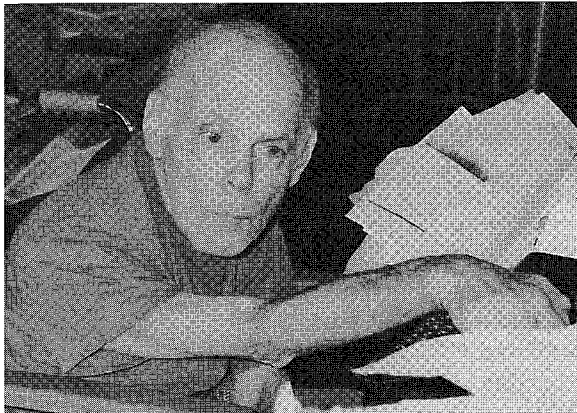
JACK: The poems have a feeling of control about them. But I think for different reasons. And sometimes one finds things in them that Larry's forgotten he's put in. Ambiguities. Larry will sometimes not see the ambiguities in the poems which he may have seen at the time he wrote them. I have a friend, Jake Berry, a very powerful experimental poet whose poems are much more obscure than Larry's, but in some shorter poems, the word he used to describe them was the word "flash." And these words were in a space like Larry's, having nothing to do with one another, rather short and intense. And he saw them in a flash. And I think some of Larry's poems come to him kind of like that. In a flash.

Larry rarely edits his own books. Individual poems are worked on by Larry, but the books

often are edited by someone else. And the order is determined by someone else. Larry approves of it, he looks at it.

* * *

SHELLY: What are some of the themes that you find yourself returning to time and again?



LARRY: Hindsight. I see different things in each poem. "Only the imagination is real."³ I don't know.

JACK: He's not reflective about his poetry in that sense. It just happens, he says. Imagination is a big deal to him, though. Music is something that keeps coming back in your poetry.

SHELLY: Mostly classical?

LARRY: That's right.

JACK: Classical music primarily. Larry doesn't listen to jazz. Also, he will collage passages from other writers. There's a poem he wrote about Whitman that is mostly Whitman. "Whitman's Cry at Starvation" [see page 45]. The last lines to that. Anyway, that's a technique of Larry's too. He takes quotations from other writers and works them into the fabric of his verse. He

sometimes acknowledges them and sometimes not.

* * *

SHELLY: Larry, can you recall one of your happiest memories?

LARRY: Quite a few, I guess. Reading Shakespeare.

RICHARD: Do you remember when you went to Maine and lived out on the promontory? Do you remember Robin Hood's Barn?

LARRY: Yeah. That was good.

RICHARD: What about Massachusetts Hospital School?

LARRY: After a while.

JACK: He hated physical therapy.

LARRY: Miss Trainer would get me up on rollerskates.

JACK: Her name was Miss *Trainer*? It sounds like an allegory.

RICHARD: Rollerskates?!

LARRY: I would feel guilty if I didn't work hard.

RICHARD: I guess that wasn't a happy moment then.

LARRY: I used to kick her in the shins . . . with the rollerskates.

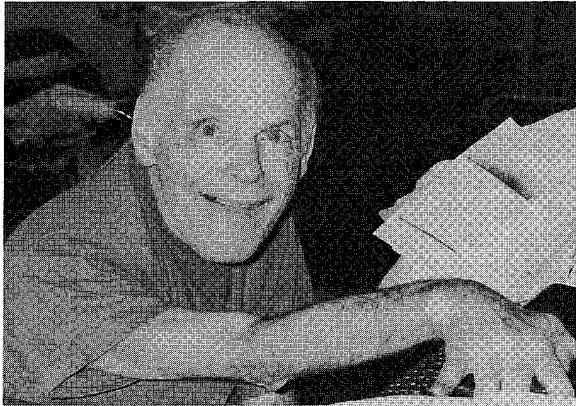
BEVERLY: I thought it was a happy moment when you moved to Berkeley.

JACK: Incidentally, moving to Berkeley over his mother's objections. She felt that Larry would be too much of a burden and that he shouldn't do it.

RICHARD: My mother felt that Larry was her responsibility. She died in January 1993.

BEVERLY: After the death of Larry's father in 1978, Richard and I moved Larry from Massa-

³This is a quotation from William Carlos Williams's poem, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," in *Pictures from Brueghel*.



chusetts to Berkeley and he has been living on McGee Street since then.

JACK: I should add that Richard and Beverly have done an enormous amount for Larry, in setting up the kind of house for him. They added a ramp for him.

Cerebral Palsy

SHELLY: What has been the biggest drawback about having cerebral palsy? Difficulties communicating? Being dependent on others?

LARRY: I don't know. Being jerky in my movements.

JACK: Larry likes to talk and at the poetry series he would talk to people. We would have arguments and one time the argument was about e. e. cummings. Well, Larry and I both love cummings but a lot of people reject cummings—they read him at sixteen and when they reject their sixteen-year-old selves they reject him. Also they don't get the Greek puns. The argument was getting pretty heated. And in the middle of it Larry said, it was amazing, "anyone lived in a pretty how town / (with up so floating many bells down)." Which is a couplet. The conversation suddenly stopped. I knew he was quoting a poem. But it's the most complicated sentence I've ever heard Larry say.

* * *

LARRY: Dependent as I am, all of my life, with little self-confidence/reliance (although for instance, I even pick up pencils off the floor)

being apt to make unexpected wrong moves, I expect people to make fewer mistakes or get things wrong than I do. And with me, ego/altruism is a pretty thin coin. It's two sides close together, it sure seems to figure.⁴

* * *

JACK: Larry believes his cerebral palsy causes him to have a limited attention span. So when you or I are reading a book, and dislike it, we blame the author. Larry's not sure. It might not be the book. It might be him. It puts him in a relationship to a text that is different than other people's.

LARRY: I *think* I'm not getting something when I really am.

JACK: We will sometimes read something and talk about it. And Larry will tell me he doesn't understand it when it's clear to me that he does. But again that's part of the cerebral palsy, his uncertainty.

RICHARD: I think Larry has accepted the world as framed by his condition. I don't think he's capable of comparing what life would be like without cerebral palsy.

JACK: Remember he's had it since birth.

RICHARD: Although it was a disability, my mother was determined that he would not remain in the category of "uneducable."

JACK: He was on the floor until he got his wheelchair.

RICHARD: And it was a long time before he got his wheelchair.

LARRY: My goodness.

BEVERLY: They used a wheelbarrow, didn't they?

RICHARD: The Massachusetts school was a very primitive place and they did use wheelbarrows. Tuberculosis of the bone. There were all kinds

⁴From Larry Eigner's letter, dated January 3, 1996.

of disorders. One got the impression there was no other place for them to be.

BEVERLY: Larry's education would not have happened without his mother's philosophy.

JACK: His mother really pushed him. She deserves an enormous amount of credit.

RICHARD: My mother came with an immigrant family to Salem, Massachusetts. They lived very close to the landing from which the clipper ships sailed. She was the star pupil according to her account, which I believe, in Salem High School. And she completely absorbed the Puritan ethic and the work ethic and the high valuation of literary culture. My mother, and my father too, really connected with literary culture.

* * *

SHELLY: Larry, what are you working on now?

LARRY: I'm going back to the old stuff. New versions of the old stuff.

JACK: The last poet I saw him reading was W. H. Auden. It's funny, too, because there's an odd Olson connection. Auden edited the *Portable Greek Reader*, which Olson admired tremendously, and Olson actually recommended Auden as a poet.

LARRY: Corman and other people are against him.

JACK: So was William Carlos Williams.

RICHARD: Do you want to say something about Corman? He might just be your longest standing literary friend.

LARRY: Corman and Creeley. I've kept up with Corman all these years.

JACK: You correspond actively with Corman still.

RICHARD: Corman lived for many years in Japan. He published the magazine *Origin*.

JACK: He still lives in Japan. Larry has through his whole creative career been associated with

the Black Mountain poets, which would be *Origin* magazine and *The Black Mountain Review* essentially, and Olson, Corman, Creeley, and others mentioned. All those people were perhaps more famous than Larry because they were able to push their careers more than Larry's been able to do. But all of them love his work.

RICHARD: You were published in *Poetry* magazine quite a bit in the 1960s. One editor in particular.

LARRY: Henry Rago.

RICHARD: He was the editor for several years.

JACK: Larry's poetry has an appeal that crosses over schools. Language poets and others. Duncan hated the Language poets, but he loved Larry's poetry. He manages to cross over a lot of different ways of writing, of thinking about poetry.

RICHARD: Can you say something about the Beat poets?

JACK: Have you heard the Kit Robinson story? Kit Robinson, because he'd seen Larry's work in *The New American Poetry*, thought he was an incredible hipster. He thought he was a Beat poet. When he met him he was quite surprised. They thought you were a street poet and a hipster, Larry.

LARRY: Colloquial way of writing.

* * *

SHELLY: Do you have a philosophy you'd like to share with your readers?

JACK: Larry is very concerned about what to say to the young. He's also very concerned about ecology.

LARRY: Without short term, there'll be no long run. We have to be concerned about these things.

JACK: Who would you tell young people to read?

LARRY: My favorites. Hart Crane—he's magic. William Carlos Williams. Ezra Pound. Maybe Wallace Stevens.

JACK: Larry was reading Olson. Olson writes long poems using space. Larry writes short poems using space in a very similar way. You can see connections between the way they use space. All of this ultimately goes back to Mallarmé, "Un Coup De Dés," which is the great ancestor of this "field" verse.

* * *

SHELLY: Do you have any closing remarks, Larry?

LARRY: Since I've been at Berkeley I've had two hearing tests. I think there's a correlation between palsy and some kind of trouble hearing.

RICHARD: Here's your chance at final words.

JACK: But you have to be able to stop anywhere.

LARRY: Thank you. 🍷

from the sustaining air
 fresh air
 There is the clarity of a shore
 And shadow, mostly, brilliance
 summer
 the billow of August
 When, wandering, I look from my page
 I say nothing
 when asked
 I am, finally, an incompetent, after all

(From *From the Sustaining Air*)

Manna What is?
 Virtual bread?
 Daily? Angel food?
 it takes some imagination
 -some-to turn
 crowds into company
 and so much too
 that I can't try

[150 copies of this poem were made. 100 were distributed at foodbanks in Berkeley, California, and Charleston, Illinois. tel-let, Bread and Poetry, 2, November 1995.]

Readiness / Enough / Depends on

Mankind is so numerous by now, and enough of us are more active than ever, hopeless or just hyperactive, people are getting farther and farther from being able to get together enough to stop global warming and its consequences, doomsday or just about, for instance, yet the long run is made of many short terms, never could there be next week without tomorrow, and the momentary is maybe about as meaningful as what lasts for some generations. The more you do the less you see, too, the narrower is your tunnel of vision (vision is itself the more blurred the more you're in motion), as well as vice versa, and while doing anything you're more or less specializing, even when you try to see a whole it may be like the biosphere it's so big and/or complicated you can't get enough detail to be realistic about it. So, all in all, enough is enough. It's great enough to keep your head in the air while your feet are on the ground.

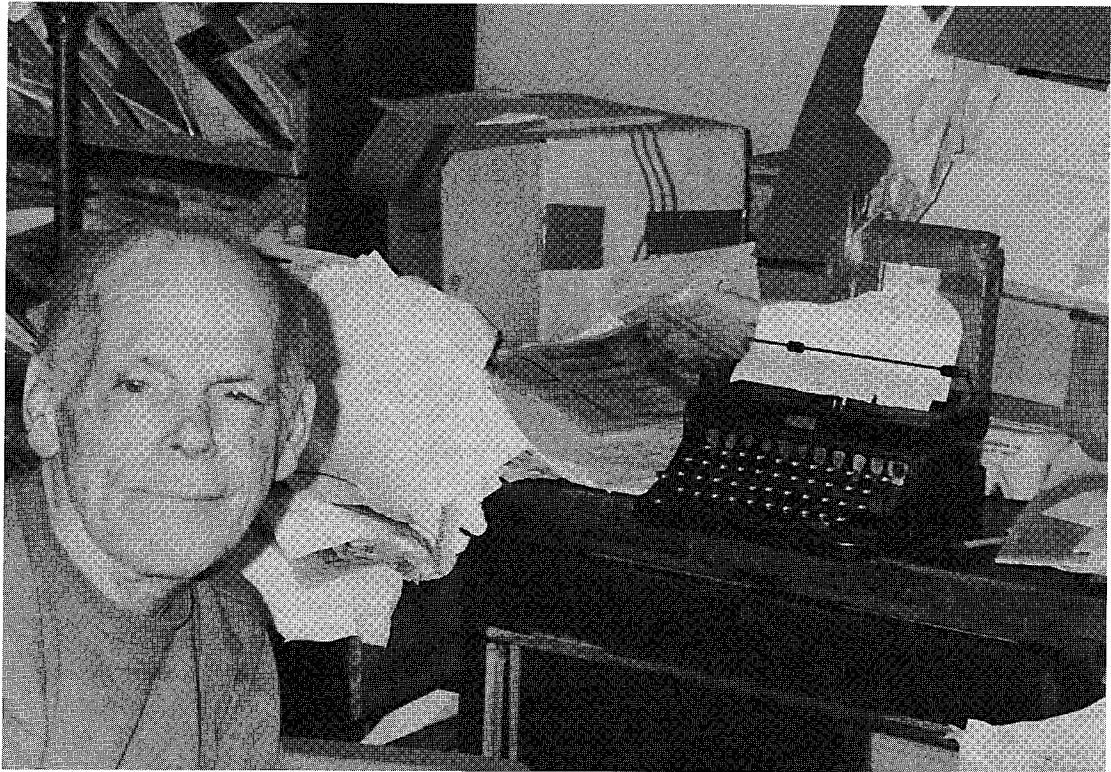
—Larry Eigner, February 1995

P.S. And, after all, it seems a good many people, more than a few, have done about all they could about the environment, for instance, before and after Rachel Carson.

In late March '95 came some news of biological evidence of global warming in addition to the physical evidence, i.e., El Niño every year lately instead of just every three years or so, increase in malaria from more mosquitos due to more rainfall.

Late March '95

(Statement forthcoming in *Poetry USA*, 1996)



Larry Eigner, 1996

Eulogy

In his own deftly-chosen words my brother was "palsied from a hard birth." The severity of his injuries set the frame and shaped the course of his life. The qualities which set him apart from other victims of misfortune were quite different from conventionally "good" qualities. Rather, they were a strong will; a determination to be a giving as well as a receiving person but on his own terms; the insight, coupled with a healthy irreverence, which enabled him to perceive the ironies of life; an ear for hearing and an eye and mind for seeing the sounds, sights, and patterns of his world.

My brother was able, by an alchemy as wonderful as would be the transformation of lead into gold, to transmute the spasticity which framed his earthly existence into the binding forces which became the fields and fires of his poetry. I choose to believe in his realization that he had created out of the materials of the human spirit a current which flowed into the river of humane culture which is deathless and immortal.

—Richard Eigner, February 6, 1996

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