

Introduction

ROBERT CREELEY WAS BORN in Arlington, Massachusetts, in 1926, and grew up in rural West Acton. His father's side of the family was well established in the state, but Creeley was raised in closer proximity to his mother's people, who came from Maine. When he was four, his father died of pneumonia. This was followed closely by the removal of Creeley's left eye, injured by shattered glass a few years before, and by the straitened circumstance of the Great Depression. His mother, a nurse, kept care of the family—Creeley had an older sister—and his mother's character, his mother's habits, necessarily left a strong imprint on his own. ("My cheekbones resonate/with her emphasis," he writes in "Mother's Voice" [000].) Influential also were the losses and uncertainties, the drop in status, which left their mark in patterns of thought, attitude, and behavior. The trajectory of Creeley's adult life, his travels, employments, friendships, households, and loves, is but one trace of a deeper restlessness also recorded in his work—or so it is tempting to think given Creeley's enduring fascination with contingency and his frequent return, in writing and conversation, to the biographical facts cited above. Yet the import of a fact is never a fact. Life itself is, like writing, an act of interpretation. "Whatever is presumed of a life that designs it as a fixture of social intent, or form of family, or the effect of an overwhelming event, has little bearing here, even if one might in comfortable hindsight say that it all followed."¹

Disjunction, indeed, played an important role for Creeley—his refusals were often as important as what he embraced. A year after entering Harvard, he joined the American Field Service to drive an ambulance in Burma, and although he returned to Harvard after the war ended (becoming part of the editorial group around the *Wake*), he would leave for good in 1947, only a few credits shy of his degree. By this time Creeley was married, and soon after he was living in isolation near Littleton, New Hampshire. There, his commitment to writing deepened, inspired in large part by poets who had fallen or were falling out of favor—Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound. In these affections, and in his drift away from conventional success, he made the perfect collaborator for Charles Olson, with whom Creeley began a monumental correspondence

(the first twelve months of their letters fill five volumes). Fifteen years Creeley's senior, Olson too was a devoted reader of Crane, Williams, and Pound, and like Creeley he had dropped out of Harvard before completing his degree (in Olson's case, a graduate degree). Out of their exchanges came Olson's influential essay "Projective Verse" (1950), which incorporated Creeley's dictum "form is never more than an extension of content." For Olson, Creeley was "the Figure of Outward"—outward in the same sense that a letter goes out, folded in its envelope, to share language and make connection across a gap in time and space.

Communication and connection are dominant motifs in Creeley's life, always existing, however, in dynamic relation to refusal, disjunction, interiority, and separation. Moving with his family to southern France in 1951, and then a year after to Majorca (where his marriage would disintegrate, an event chronicled in his novel *The Island* [1963]), Creeley became, paradoxically, more and more connected to other writers. In 1953, he and his wife, Ann MacKinnon, founded the Divers Press, publishing books of poetry and prose by himself, Olson, Paul Blackburn, Robert Duncan, Larry Eigner, Irving Layton, and others. That same year he began editing the *Black Mountain Review*, founded to advertise Black Mountain College, an experimental school in North Carolina where Olson was now rector and Creeley himself would soon be teaching.² Visits to New York and San Francisco fueled this editorial work, establishing Creeley's place in a network of writers given vivid representation in *The New American Poetry* (1960), a landmark anthology that featured work by poets associated with the Black Mountain, San Francisco, Beat, and New York School communities of writers and artists. Creeley, if anyone, was held in high esteem by all these groups, which, by the end of the 1960s, had emerged as a counter-cultural force; his earliest poems—collected in *For Love* (1962)—impressed readers far beyond his own circle with their lyricism, intensity, and craft, and made Creeley the most imitated love poet of his day.

The evolutions of Creeley's later practice exemplify the dynamic character of his writing overall: even at those moments when he seems most decisively to set aside or move beyond qualities or concerns of his earlier work, readers can discover points of continuity, so that even his radical shifts become part of a larger pattern of coherence and variation. The un-

revised notebook writing of *Pieces* (1969)—deliberately minor and even antipoetic—appeared to many to abandon the self-exposure, sentiment, and skill of his previous *Words* (1967), but connects easily in retrospect to the reassertion of autobiography and feeling in *A Day Book* (1972). Moreover, by taking up in a new way the jazz-inspired improvisation of *For Love*, *Pieces* produced an altered relationship to the physical act of writing, such that Creeley's natural tendency toward compression found welcome release in narrative force; the fluidity and grace of his late long poems gives ample evidence of that. But *Pieces* is no simple transition work. An important influence on the language poets—an avant-garde group that took shape in the 1970s—it gives formal evidence of a more general openness to change that brought Creeley into increasing dialogue with younger poets arriving on the scene and made him such a passionate supporter of their work. Edward Dorn, Joanne Kyger, Tom Raworth, Tom Clark, Ted Berrigan, Robert Grenier, Anselm Hollo, John Taggart, Barrett Watten, Rosmarie Waldrop, Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, John Yau, Forrest Gander, Peter Gizzi, Lisa Jarnot—these and many more were sources of information, inspiration, friendship, as important to the ongoing story of his work as Olson, Blackburn, Duncan, Denise Levertov, and Allen Ginsberg.

Creeley's openness is also, in part, a sign of restlessness. Much of his adult life was spent in New Mexico, Bolinas, and Buffalo—Buffalo especially, where Creeley taught for thirty-seven years—but even while centered in these locations he would travel extensively, and sometimes for extended intervals. His New Mexico period (1956–69) was broken by two years in Guatemala (1959–61) and a shorter spell in British Columbia (1962–63); the early years of his teaching in Buffalo (1966–2003) overlapped with his last years in New Mexico and the entirety of his time in Bolinas, an artists' enclave on the California coast (1970–76). In 1984, he established a residence in Waldoboro, Maine, where his sister lived; fellowships allowed for long stays in Berlin (1983) and Helsinki (1988–89); in 2003, he departed from Buffalo for Providence, Rhode Island. But the problem with a summary like this one is, it smoothes away the wrinkles that gave the years their character—the quick escapes, the reading tours, the short-term jobs, the displacements even within a fixed location.

Creeley's travels while living in Finland give a good indication of his wanderlust overall: Brussels, Liège, Prague, Olomouc, Brno, Berlin, Rostock, Jena, Paris, Budapest, Debrecen, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Trento, Rome, Milan, Turin, Genoa, Bologna, Messina, Salerno, Oslo, Warsaw, Poznan, Kraków, St. Petersburg, Riga, Umeå, Uppsala, Stockholm—a list that excludes his return trips for readings in the United States. It is not surprising, then, that Creeley's poetry should be marked through and through by the places he has known, and also, on occasion, by the placelessness of modern travel. The best evidence of this is *Hello* (1978), the record of a trip across eight countries in nine weeks (New Zealand, Australia, Singapore, the Philippine, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea). Written at a moment of self-conscious transition—Creeley's second marriage, to Bobbie Louise Hawkins, was coming to an end; "So There" (000–000), commemorates his first meeting with Penelope Highton, with whom he would spend the final three decades of his life—*Hello* finds relief from personal crisis in a world slipping by at ferocious speed. Creeley is prescient in these poems in his attention to what we would now call "globalization," refusing to turn away from what is near at hand—hotels in particular—to seek out some imagined or expected "spirit of place." Vivid, accurate, concise: Creeley's ability here and elsewhere to evoke a scene in only a few words is formidable, especially when the scene in question is familiar.³ Charles Olson once defined history as "the practice of space in time," and Creeley's descriptions are often historical in just this sense, a *situated* knowledge that instinctively links memory to inhabitation—a correlation made explicit in his final sequence, "Caves" (000–000), written after a visit to the Dordogne.

But Creeley's poetry is not always or even primarily autobiographical. Though a record of his life, its primary material is not *fact* but *language*. Poetry's claim on our attention derives precisely from this emphasis, which for a poet, can be a source of freedom from fact, or, as in Creeley's case, the basis for a new understanding of fact's import. As Creeley often noted, composition has its own logic, following a course that shapes as much as it is shaped by what a writer makes of experience: "If at times I have said that I enjoy what I write, I mean that writing is for me the most viable and open condition of possibility in the world. Things have happened there, as they have happened nowhere else—and I am not speaking of 'make-be-

lieve,' which, be it said, is 'as real as real can be.' In poems I have both discovered and borne testament to my life in ways no other possibility has given me."⁴ The results of this discovery and testament now fill two large volumes of his *Collected Poems*, seventeen individual collections falling into four general phases of activity: an initial proposition of terms, procedures, and possibilities (*The Charm* [1967], *For Love* [1962], and *Words* [1967]); a decade of sustained experiment (*Pieces* [1969] through *Hello* [1978]); fifteen years of determined composition, of reasserting and, in some cases, of rethinking what came before (*Later* [1979] through *Echoes* [1994]); and a glorious summation (beginning with *Life & Death* [1999]), in which the writing becomes wise without abandoning humor, and magisterial without losing its improvisational movement or sense of play. Across this stretch of time Creeley also wrote numerous essays, a book of short stories, a novel, several experiments in prose, and thousands of letters. But it is his poetry above all that one returns to, that one cherishes, that one wishes to keep close at hand.

Particularity, commonality, language, and person: these are the principal terms of Robert Creeley's art, a sixty-year inquiry into the nature of experience. Like Dante before him, to whom the first poem in this book pays homage, he believed in an eloquence particular to time and place, a poetry shaped from the common language, in accordance with the needs of the work at hand. "I believe in a poem determined by the language of which it is made," he once wrote, and also, "I want to *know* something—I want to know how and why and what it is, to be *human*."⁵ What binds these two assertions together is Creeley's recognition that the sources of poetry are always shared, yet remain singular. A life lived in history, a function of relationships beyond any one person's control, is nevertheless *one's* own life. Words likewise live in history—this was Dante's insight—and that is why they do not simply tell a story, but become a part of it.

It is an old idea, that poets uphold the dignity of language. Creeley's contribution to this ethic of craft is his notion that the dignity of language is not, finally, distinguishable from our own. "The English teacher all that time ago who said, 'You must learn to speak correctly,' was only wrong in forgetting to say why—for these words which depend upon us for their

very existence fail as our usage derides or excludes them. They are no more right or wrong than we are, yet suffer our presumption forever.”⁶

By what presumption, then, did Robert Creeley become a poet? By what expectation of fulfillment or success did he take hold of the sources—language and person—from which his work would ever after draw its strength? For even a casual reading of his early poems—collected in *For Love* and its companion volume, *The Charm*⁷—reveals a confidence in speech that is thrilling, even when the usage seems to deride or exclude our understanding. In “And” (000), for example, an improbable conjunction sends the poet hurtling across space, across time, into a grave that may well be (how know for certain?) a grave meaning. For if the form of a poem extends its content, as Creeley’s memorable dictum declares, then how explain the breakneck speed of *this* extension? Yet the speed brings pleasure, whatever its meaning; one wants to read the poem again and again, even in the absence of understanding.

That a poem may elude understanding while communicating pleasure is a secret of modernism—and Creeley was a modernist in his earliest inspiration. Opacity was never his aim, but a willingness to risk opacity for what one *might* say, or for the pleasure of saying what one *can* say, this presumption, implicit in his work from the very beginning, became explicit in his writing of the 1960s. Not that opacity was the only possible result. More important to Creeley’s ongoing development than his clusters of opaque language were works on the order of “A Piece” (000) and “The Farm” (000), which are simple to the point of apparent negligibility. Of these poems in particular he once wrote, “They began to gain for me the possibility of *scribbling*, of writing for the immediacy of the pleasure and without having to pay attention to some final code of significance.”⁸ In *Pieces* and *A Day Book*, this “scribbling” begins to take precedence; yet out of Creeley’s obedience to pleasure—to the fact that writing begins, *as* writing, in the physical act of making words—came, paradoxically, his most extended meditations on significance, “The Finger” (000–000) and “Numbers” (000–000). In the former we read, “Whatever is said/in the world, or forgotten,/ or not said, makes a form. // The Choice is simply, / *I will*”; in the latter, “There is no trick to reality – / a mind/makes it, any/mind.”

Presumption, then, gives way to permission, making possible the fluid

line and narrative freedom of Creeley's long poems of the 1970s and after. The best of these, beginning with "For My Mother: Genevieve Jules Creeley" (000-000), are frankly autobiographical. Some, like "Oh Max" (000-000), luxuriate in memory; others ("Out Here" [000-000]) attend to the vividness of a present moment; still others bear witness to the sheer fact of living, to time made manifest as aging, alteration, absence ("Later" [000-000]). The apotheosis of this aspect of Creeley's writing is "Histoire de Florida" (000-000), an affirmation of *what is* and of the mortal mind's ability to meet it. A poem, also, about art, one that adds to Wallace Stevens's three demands (*It Must Be Abstract; It Must Change; It Must Give Pleasure*) Creeley's humble, historicizing fourth: "It must be anecdotal."

As a young man, Creeley developed a knack for short, syntactically dense poems loosened only by their verbal dexterity and wry, occasionally black humor. These are the poems that made his reputation, raw delineations of conflicted relationships, in which the entire lyric tradition seems to contract into the bare fact of situation, speaker, perception. Naysayers found fault with this poetry's persistent elision, enjambment, and compression, but those very qualities—with their intimations of struggle, immediacy, intensity—were integral to his work's overall success. Like pop songs that become unforgettable not despite but because of their flirtation with noise, the poems in *For Love* and later *Words* are dramas of articulation performed on the brink of shamed silence, euphoric nonsense, blind rage.

Insistently vernacular, conscious of literary tradition, Creeley in his earliest poems is at once culturally specific and generalizing, presenting his amorous and domestic situations as the particular manifestations of a common experience. This is clearest in those poems (like "Stomping with Catullus" [000-000]) that modernize old forms or formulations to the point of parody. Yet the joke, if there is one, is on the present, for when Creeley writes (in "Heroes" [000]), "That was the Cumaean Sibyl speaking./ This is Robert Creeley, and Virgil/is dead now two thousand years," we see that the differentiation of present from past, of the poem at hand from poetry as such, is precisely the problem with which these works are concerned. "What am I to myself/that must be remembered,/insisted upon/so often?" he asks in "The Rain" (000). As the form of the question sug-

gests, the quest for singularity inevitably leads inward, even as the quest for a shared reality returns the poet to the world.

In *Words*, the inward turn transforms Creeley's poetics of experience in surprising ways. Already in "The Hill" (000) he had realized that patterns of behavior learned in the world, patterns of mind modeled on objects in the world, can outlive their use and become, even as dead forms, determinative. In "The Pattern" (000), we learn that these dead forms have their afterlife in language. But words for Creeley can do much more than turn "a tongue/rotten with what // it tastes" ("Words" [000]). In language, he shows, the I too abides—just as, in the world, language abides as a disposition of the I. Both object and agent of knowledge, the I guards a distinction between language and world, perception and reality, that Creeley, reaching a point of crisis, will find increasingly difficult to maintain. Caught up in this difficulty, his language of experience becomes an experience of language, one in which the very possibility of experience—of a self secure in its acts, perceptions, memories, and place in the world—seems to be at issue.

The poems of these years (the first two-thirds of the 1960s) are stripped of specificity, even music, as if to lay bare the basic structures of thought, but the intimations of crisis they impart are palpable. In some, the crisis is given a personal cast, but in many the I is abstract, the phenomenological subject of a philosophical problem. Thus, in "Some Place" (000), perception's power seems to sap the world of solidity; in "The Window" (000), perception's own solidity makes the world too heavy to bear. The formulations vary; what persists is the problem of coming to terms with what these investigations permit the poet to think, feel, and write.

But *Words*, radicalizes Creeley's earlier work in another way as well. Where the poems in *The Charm* and *For Love* occasionally shock with their freely expressed hostility ("The Changes" [000]) and even brutality ("The Warning" [000]), those raw moments are nothing when compared to the concentrated fury of "Anger" (000–000) or the violence of "The Hole" (000–000). The former is especially disturbing, not least for the way the poet's detached stance and disjunct narration mirror the consciousness of the man he describes. Scrupulous in its description, naked in what it reveals, the poem rivals Dickinson in its unflinching examination of the

inner life—a comparison that may seem improper given the specific object of wrath. (“The Hole” is even more focused on violence against women.) But to whom, then, should one compare this writing? Creeley’s principal inspirations at that point of his career—Pound, Williams, Lawrence, Crane, Zukofsky, Olson, Ginsberg—hardly account for his willingness to expose such a masculine pathology to light.

In “Chasing the Bird” (000), an early poem, Creeley had written, “My mind/to me a mangle is.” A quarter century later, in “Desultory Days” (000–000), he would make the same point while affirming his kinship to Dickinson: “the existential/terror of New England/countrywoman, Ms. // Dickinson . . ./moves me. My mind // to me a nightmare is.” This nightmare—which gripped Creeley early on, demanding a proper expression—will recede as he grows older; but it never disappears entirely. In “Pure” (000), he tries to take responsibility for its reoccurrence. In “Conversion to Her” (000–000), he tries to will away its ill effects. But when he sees this nightmare anew in his own face (“Self-Portrait” [000]), or finds it spread before him in the street (“The Drunks of Helsinki” [000–000]), he never hesitates or recoils from putting the fact in words.

The philosophical querying of the 1960s is carried forward in Creeley’s subsequent writing—in “Thinking (‘I’ve thought of myself’)” (000–000), “Old story (‘Like kid on float’)” (000), and “To think . . .” (000), among other poems—but the primacy of the physical act of writing asserted in *Pieces* will fix even his more abstract poems in a particular here and now, alleviating the earlier sense of epistemological crisis. In “As real as thinking . . .” (000–000), for example, Creeley moves forward word by word, “into a present,/a presence”—an incremental progress that again makes the world seem a place of habitation. In “Massachusetts” (000–000), this word-by-word progression accomplishes something more: it makes the world into a place the poet might share with others. This desire for a common world helps to explain the increasing appeal of the word “echo,” which in the 1970s became frequent in his work—it signifies an answer produced by the very fact of speech. The content of this speech is often of secondary importance; when Creeley writes, at the end of “Thinking (‘Had not’)” (000–000), “He wants to sit down/on a chair/he holds in the

air/by putting it there,” he indirectly evokes the French philosopher Blaise Pascal, who kept a chair by his bed as a solid reminder, in the midst of waking nightmares, that the floor had not yet opened up beneath his pillow. For Creeley, the concrete detail, iterated in language, becomes a kind of reassurance.

More concrete still is *Hello*, the record of a State Department-sponsored trip across the Pacific. Subtitled “A Journal, February 29–May 3, 1976,” *Hello* adopts an innovative structure that locates each poem in a specific time and place. Already in *Pieces*, Creeley had experimented with unique forms of organization (Fig. 1). There, the emphasis fell on establishing a coherent set of relationships between part and whole—between “piece” and poem, poem and group of poems. In *Hello*, the emphasis is instead on grounding, on the relationship each “piece” maintains to an actual world. Thus, at the end of each day’s writing, Creeley gives a date of composition; a place name precedes all the entries written at each particular locale (Fig. 2). Only occasionally do these framing specifics present essential information. More often, what matters most is *the fact* of location, as in “There” (000), which gestures toward a place that the poem declines to name, or “Hong Kong Window” (000–000), which despite its name record an experience of *dislocation* (the “egocentric/abstraction” of a highrise hotel view).⁹ This oblique relationship to chronology and geography, to facts and even autobiography, is typical of Creeley’s work of the period. *Pieces* was diaristic in method—a sequence of jottings set in chronological order—and *A Day Book* was often diaristic in content, but even in *Hello*, which is manifestly a diary, Creeley is less interested with *documenting* his life than in *attending* to it. There are certainly poems from these years that leave a detailed record of his experience, but the majority of them are concerned with the *experience of experience*: with what it means to think, love, look, talk, or listen.

At the end of the 1970s, Creeley embarked on a long, robust period of composition, fifteen years of assimilating, reasserting, and reconsidering the gains of his previous decades: the self-assurance and vehemence of his early work, which came to a point of crisis in *Words*; and the self-questioning and experiment of *Pieces* through *Hello*. A few of these per-

mutations have already been mentioned: the narrative freedom of Creeley's later writing, his attempt to move beyond crisis toward care, and his desire for grounding in an actual, shareable world. Two other points of continuity also bear notice: his continued interest in music, and the poem's abiding status as thing.

Creeley's intense interest in music dates from his Harvard years, when he became friends with musicians and began visiting jazz clubs. Isolated later in New Hampshire, he learned what he could from recordings. "This is what I was doing from 1946 to 1950. I was frankly doing almost nothing else but sitting around listening to records, which my first wife would be pleased to testify to. I listened to records. I was *fascinated* by them."¹⁰ From music he learned that getting something said, however freely, involves an articulation of time, and, like the jazz musicians who inspired him, he moved with ease between improvisation and constraint. In subsequent years he would often work with performers and composers. Highlights from these projects include Steve Swallow's 1979 album *Home* (ECM), featuring vocals by Sheila Jordan, and Steve Lacy's *Futurities* (Hat Art, 1985), which presented twenty settings with vocals by Irene Aebi. Creeley's work with visual artists is even more extensive, encompassing all phases of his activity. John Altoon, Joe Brainard, John Chamberlain, Francesco Clemente, Jim Dine, Elsa Dorfman, Max Gimblett, Bobbie Louise Hawkins, Robert Indiana, Alex Katz, R. B. Kitaj, Arthur Okamura, Artchic Rand, Susan Rothenberg, James Surls—these are only some of the artists involved.¹¹ His essays on art take up many of the same figures, but also Arakawa and Madeline Gins, Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, Franz Kline, Brice Marden, and Frank Stella, among others. In one of these essays, on the painter René Laubiès, Creeley says of art's object status, "A picture is first a picture, the application of paint or ink or whatever to a given surface—which act shall effect a thing in itself significant, an autonomy."¹² A decade later a similar view of writing would give rise to his fascination with "scribbling" in *Pieces*.

Music—heard and made—reverberates in Creeley's work from the very beginning, in ways that are both explicit ("Jack's Blues" [000]) and implicit, even obscure ("The Whip" [000], which Creeley describes as "trying to use a rhythmic base much as jazz of the time would."¹³ The

THE BOY

Push yourself in on others
hard enough, they beat you
with sticks and whips—the birth
of love. E.g., affection aroused,
it moves to be close, touch, and
feel the warm livingness of an-
other, any other, sucked, stroked,
the club itself possibly a symbol of
the obvious. My mother had hair,
and when I grew older, so did
I, all over my face, which I wanted
to be there, and grew a beard henceforth.

- - -

3 IN 1

for Charlotte

The bird
flies
out the
window. She
flies.

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The bird flies
out the
window. She
flies.

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FIGURE 1. Two-page spread from Robert Creeley's *Pieces* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969) showing the poem "3 in 1" (see 0007). Note the triple dots separating "3 in 1" from "The Boy" and "They," and the single dots that separate the poem's three component "pieces" (there is also a single dot after "They," marking that poem as one "piece" in a larger grouping). In *Collected Poems* the triple dots become wide spaces. (Courtesy of Penelope Creeley.)

The bird
flies. She
flies.

- - -

THEY

What could
they give me I
hadn't myself
discovered—

The *world*,—that
I'd fallen upon
in some
distracted drunkenness—

Or that the rules
were *wrong*, an
observation they
as well as I
knew now—

They were imagination
also. If they
would be as the
mind could see them,
then it all was
true and the
mind followed and
I also.

*



FIGURE 2. Two-page spread from Robert Creeley's *Hello: A Journal, February 29–May 3, 1976* (New York: New Directions, 1978) showing the last six quatrains of “So There,” written in Auckland, New Zealand (see Fig. 5 and 000–000). Note the date at the end of the poem (March 26); the new place name (Sydney, Australia) on the next page; the new date (March 27) between “Now” and “Yah,” which were both written in Sydney; and the single dot before the stanza beginning “Funny what your head.” The multiple forms of demarcation make it possible to read “Funny what your head” as (1) a poem in its own right, (2) part of the poem “Yah,” (3) part of the sequence dated March 28, and (4) part of the sequence written in Sydney. (Courtesy of New Directions and Penelope Creeley.)

SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

NOW

Hard to believe
it's all one

whatever
this world

of space & time,
this place,

body,
white.

insults,
fumbling at the mirror.

3/97

YAH

Sure I fell in love—
"with a very lovely person."
You'd love her too.
"She's lovely."

Funny what your head
does, waking up

increasing importance of the written word does not conflict with this attention to sound. "It still makes sense/to know the song after all," he wrote in the 1950s ("The Song" [000]), and in the sixties he made clear that this was so by announcing his new emphasis on "scribbling" with "A Piece," a poem composed from the very words a bandleader might use to introduce a new number. What does change over time is the range of sounds and kinds of music Creeley's writing can accommodate.

One inspiration for this changing shape of song is Louis Zukofsky, whose "Songs of Degrees" ("Hear, her/Clear/Mirror,/Care/His error," etc.) Creeley himself first published in the *Black Mountain Review*. Unlike Zukofsky, however, who famously viewed the poem as having an "upper limit" of music and "lower limit" of speech, Creeley used music to *re-invigorate* speech. In letting his sounds articulate new relations among words, he never put so much pressure on syntax that the poem ceased to be recognizable as an act of communication. "Ice Cream" (in *Pieces*, a book dedicated to Zukofsky) is a good example of this (000-000). The portion beginning "Letter to General/Eisenhower" might seem on first reading a mere babble of sounds; but however improvisational the composition may have been, Creeley's concise arrangement of plosives ("Better // be/right. // Better batter/bigger pancakes") makes perfect sense as a send-up of military communiqués. Attending to sound, then, becomes a way to construct new paths for meaning in language. (Here Creeley may have also absorbed the additional influence of John Cage, whose work he once described as a matter of "perceptions and their arousal.")¹⁴ Later examples of this more inclusive use of sound include "The Place" (000-000), which sings the very process of thinking, and "Après Anders" (000-000), a series of improvisations on the work of German poet Richard Anders. But no poem of Creeley's makes clearer this link between song and speech than "Gnomic Verses" (000-000), an extended sequence from *Echoes* that gives oracular utterance without solemnity by keeping faith with the childhood pleasures of singsong rhythm and rhyme.

In parallel with this ongoing deployment of music, Creeley reasserted the importance of the poem's thingness. He had long been fascinated with the clear articulation of basic forms (witness "A Picture" [000]), but his protracted study of elemental units in *Pieces* and *A Day Book* gave this ar-

tication a new compactness, as in *Thirty Things* (1974), a series of short poems with the precisely defined shape and solidity one associates with sculpture. Words for Creeley can be “voluptuous/as the flesh,” and “Tangible” (“Love” [000]), even obdurate. The obstruction described in “Wall” (000–000) is an actual wall (“faded, chipped . . . //fixed with icicles/like teeth”), but also language, which the mind can animate after the fashion of Shakespeare’s Bottom, who gives voice to the character Wall in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Closer still to sculpture is “Eight Plus” (000–000), written for the artist James Surls, who engraved eight of the twenty-four poems (along with iconic images) on the polished surfaces of eight granite bollards in Los Angeles. “What’s still here settles/at the edges of this/simple place” describes the poem and also the page or stone that supports it, a solid shape of language given solid place in the world (Fig. 3).

Creeley’s collaboration with Surls helps to identify another kind of thingness important to his work: the poem’s material existence as a text that can and does take shape in more than one medium. Written by hand (Fig. 4), preserved as a sound file (Fig. 5), or printed in a book (Figs. 1, 2, 6, 7), to give but three examples, the poem is a thing endlessly adaptable to new purposes, new forms of presentation, new contexts. In some cases, these changes of purpose, form, or context also change the meaning—or at least our understanding—of the text proper. Consider the poem “En Famille” (000–000), written in response to photographs of couples, families, and groups of close friends taken by his longtime friend Elsa Dorfman. The poem was first published alongside twenty-two of these photographs,¹⁵ arranged in such a way that one discovers the image that inspired a particular set of lines by turning the page. Thus, before coming upon a picture of Creeley with his wife and two children (Fig. 8) we read about “the twisting face I want to be my own,” and before coming upon a picture of two seated women (Fig. 9) we read, “Tell me your happiness is simply true. / Tell me I can still learn to be like you”—two different acts of identification that the images permit us to distinguish and that the plain text blends together. But it is not simply that the images amplify our understanding; they also change it. In the text that includes Dorfman’s photographs, Creeley’s poem becomes a search among particular groups of people for a way back into the “nurturing relation” cast off in desperation many years before; the

speaker's absence from these groups, all but one, is palpable. In the plain text, the particular families become a single crowd and the speaker's observing distance shrinks, swallowed up in the generality of the poem's pronouns. What he seeks is not a way back *in*—his sympathy and interest seem to have already won that—but an understanding of the “humanness” he and the others hold in common. In this reading of the poem, the speaker becomes—*notwithstanding* his echo of Wordsworth in the opening line (“*I wandered lonely as a cloud . . . /I’d seemingly lost the crowd/I’d come with*”)—as all-embracing as Whitman, an association that the French title also suggests by recalling such poems as “Our Old Feuillage,” where Whitman sees “diverse families . . . branching forth into numberless branches” and declares, “out of a thousand diverse contributions one identity.”

Any writer who lives long enough to produce a substantial body of work will find, eventually, that iteration and reiteration are no longer so easily distinguished; that part of the pleasure of writing comes from the exercise of well-tested talents, or from the smallest of variations on a favorite theme. This pleasure must have been especially compelling for Creeley, for whom the very nature of poetry involved a zeroing in on those points where particularity gives access to the common and commonalities take particular shape. His reuse of titles (exemplified in this collection by three poems each named “Echo” and “Thinking”) gives one instance of this testing and retesting of premises, insights, and possibilities. Other poems test the very apparatus of communication, much as one tests a microphone by counting *one, two, three*. “The euphemistic/I speaks always, always// wanting a you to be *here*,” Creeley has it in one poem (“You will never be here” [000]). In poetry, *here* is always the poem at hand, its “always” a witness to the permanence of desire.

Inevitably, some readers found fault with this perpetual testing, or at least found perplexing the total shape and overall value of what it produced. Deepening this perplexity was Creeley’s embrace of what he earlier resisted (such as undisguised autobiography), and his purposeful resistance to what he earlier embraced (such as undisguised anger and crisis). There was, to be sure, ample evidence all through this later work of Creeley’s continued inventiveness, intelligence, and clarity of feeling.



FIGURE 3. Hannah Creeley touching one of the inlaid granite slabs forming the 1991 Robert Creeley–James Surls collaboration *Once There Was a Forest* (for the poem, see 000). The photograph is by Robert Creeley. (Courtesy of Penelope Creeley.)

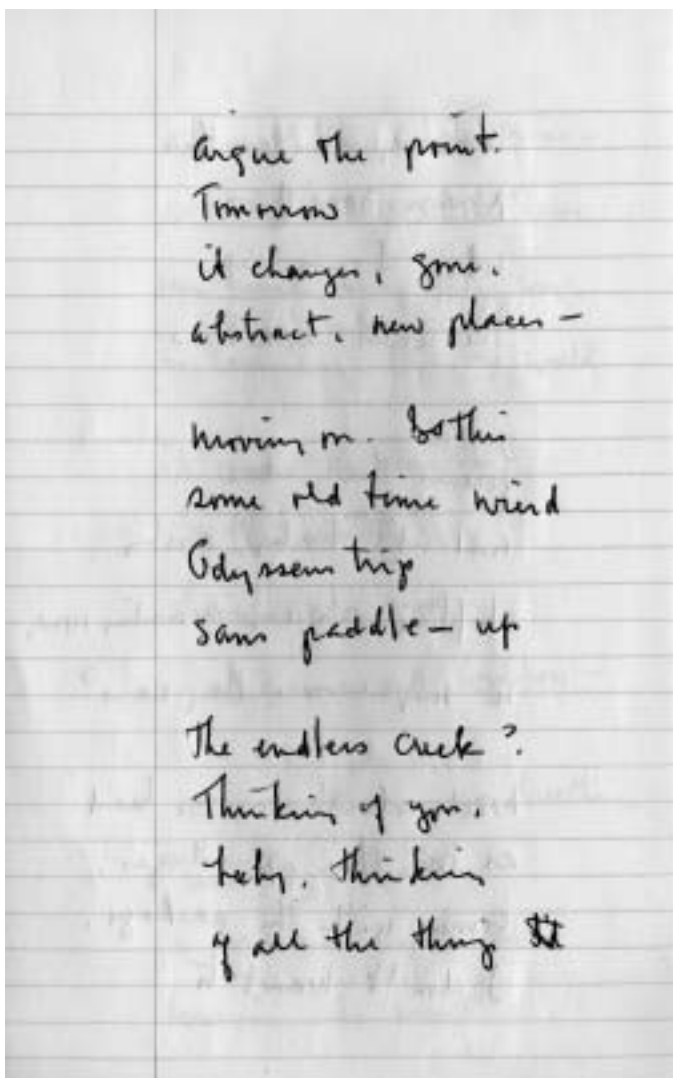


FIGURE 4. The final six quatrains of "So There" in Creeley's notebook (see also Fig. 2 and 000-000). (Courtesy of Penelope Creeley and the Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries.)

I'd like to say and do.
Old fashioned time
it takes to be
anywhere, at all.

Morning m. Mr. Ocean,
Mr. Sky's
got the biggest blue eyes
in creation -

here comes the sun!
which we can,
let's do it, let's
have fun!

[AUCKLAND]

3/26/76

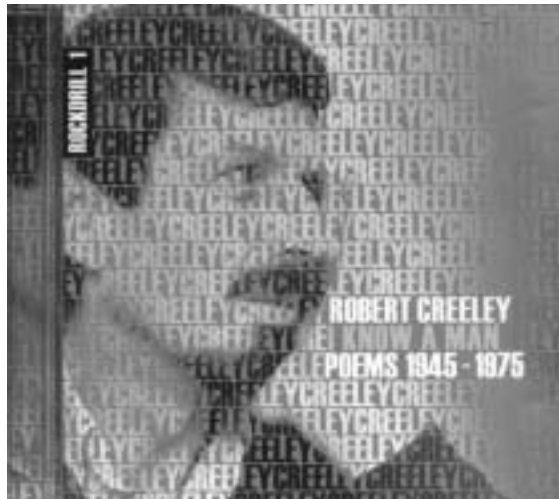
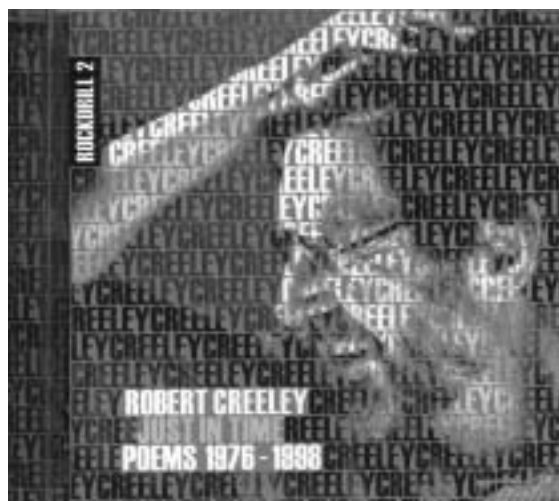


FIGURE 5. CD covers from Robert Creeley's reading of his poetry (produced by Optic Nerve for Birkbeck College, University of London). (Courtesy of Birkbeck College.)



- 1 So There 2 Myself 3 This World 4 The Moon 5 I Love You 6 Four Years Later
 7 Thanks 8 First Rain 9 The Edge 10 Song (Love has no other friends)
 11 Tom - for Willy 12 Mother's Voice 13 Buffalo Evening 14 On Max 15 Home
 16 Massachusetts May 17 Fathers 18 Memory Gardens 19 Copper
 20 Mother's Photograph 21 Valentine 22 Book 23 The Doctor
 24 Stairway to Heaven 25 In 26 Ever Since Hitler... 27 Thinking 28 Whatever
 29 Detroit Window 30 Spring Light 31 My New Mexico 32 East Street Again
 33 A Note 34 The House 35 Edges 36 History in Florida 37 Creek 38 Goodbye
 39 Four Days in Vermont 40 Edges
 Running Total 75/73

ROBERT CREELEY
 JUST IN TIME
 POEMS 1976 - 1998

OPTIC NERVE

Birkbeck





FIGURE 6. Facing pages from *St. Martin's* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1971), which collected fifteen poems by Robert Creeley and eight monoprints by Bobbie Louise Hawkins (then Bobbie Creeley). The text reproduced above shows the conclusion to “The Act of Love” (see 000–000), a poem dedicated to Bobbie, alongside a monoprint by Bobbie Louise Hawkins. (Courtesy of Bobbie Louise Hawkins and Penelope Creeley.)





FIGURE 7. Facing pages from *The Dogs of Auckland* (Auckland, New Zealand: The Holloway Press, 1998), with drawing by Max Grimblett and section 3 of Creeley's poem (see 000–000). (Courtesy of the Holloway Press, Max Grimblett, and Penelope Creeley.)

(for Joe)

1

Sally's initials. From the frame and panes of the fresh white
painted windows in the door, to the dock, toward Base, with its
white posts and mooring lines of bars, but looking, nothing else
would ever look like that, just a small patch, below the garden,
winter cotton, strap-pines, dark red green palm pulled right, a lemon
tree thick with fruit. And houses, backyards, neighbors surrounding, in
all the sloping, flattened valley with trees stuck in like a kid's pinners,
palms, Norfolk pine, unstable ones I can't name, a church spire, brownish
red at the edge of the far hill, also another prominent tall small stone,
one of which catch the late sun and glow there near the head of Potomac Road.
The Yellow Bus straps up the street, where What? comes into James Road,
off Butler to Bayfield, where we are. I am writing this, sitting at the table,
and love you more and more. When you hadn't yet got here, I sat to each morning
to leave "New Zealand" (I thought) as if it were a book simply, I talked to everyone.
Now we go to bed as all, Eric Will and Harold, in the rental house, then sit,
in side by side, reading. Then off with the light and to sleep, to wake show up
to one another, sometimes your bottom raked right against my belly or
mine lodged snug in your hip, sweat dresses, hair burnt, till the morning comes.



FIGURE 8. Photograph of William, Penelope, Robert, and Hannah Creeley chosen for *En Famille: A Poem*, Robert Creeley; photographs by Elsa Dorfman (New York: Granary Books, 1999). The image follows the section of the poem beginning “Turning inside as if in a dream” (see 000). (© 2007 Elsa Dorfman. All rights reserved elsadorfman.com.)



FIGURE 9. Photograph of Ruth and Marion Sittler chosen for *En Famille*. The image follows the section of the poem beginning “I like the way both look out at me” (see 000). (© 2007 Elsa Dorfman. All rights reserved elsadorfman.com.)

But the pleasure of this “evidence” was rooted in an experience of the work as a whole—a work more difficult to grasp or judge than the discrete projects or discrete poems of the years before. In the end, Creeley’s most memorable writing from the late seventies through the early nineties is as altered by excerpt as the texts he contributed to his collaborations. *Later* (1979), *Mirrors* (1983), *Memory Gardens* (1986), *Windows* (1990), and *Echoes* (1994) are, in this respect, an ongoing collaboration with time.

Time alters the shape of Creeley’s poetry in another, more obvious way: by introducing new concerns (“Age” [000–000]), or by bringing new perspectives to bear on the old ones—a notable example of this being his changing regard for family, a site of conflict early on, but increasingly a haven (as two widely separated poems about fatherhood, “A Variation” [000] and “Time” [000–000], help to demonstrate). In family, moreover, Creeley finds a new emphasis and new address in his treatment of love, the subject that brought him his first fame as a writer. The brief, intense lyrics of Creeley’s youth—painful, fractious, tender, rhetorical—give way, by and large, to less conflicted expressions of feeling, these sometimes offered in longer poems that situate love within a broader range of experiential concerns. Addressing lovers, as before (as in “Oh Love” [000] and “Old Song” [000]), but also old friends (“Oh Max” [000–000]) and family at large (“I Love You” [000]), Creeley’s swelling “company of love” (000 [“For Love”]) makes palpable the difference between a young man’s singular attachments and the varied commitments of age.

Life & Death (1999) inaugurates a final phase, a deepening assurance on Creeley’s part that what *can* be said *must* be said and *will* be understood that continues through *If I were writing this* (2003) and the posthumous *On Earth* (2006). Taken together, these three books offer a glorious conclusion to Creeley’s life in poetry, a succession of poems that are graceful, eloquent, and wise. The distinction of these late works is partly owing to their technical mastery, which is all the more impressive because it is so different in kind from the mastery of Creeley’s youth. His best-known poems of the 1950s had relied on enjambment for their effect, using line breaks in a manner learned from William Carlos Williams (where the impact is nonetheless very different) to make a music of hesitations, a pro-

sodic deployment of syntax that became Creeley's most identifiable trait. This halting idiom never disappears entirely (one can hear it, for example, in "Stairway to Heaven" [000] or the opening section of "Pictures" [000]), but by the start of the 1980s Creeley's increasing reliance on improvisation had begun to give more prominence to fluidity, to a syntax of accretion. In his subsequent writing, momentum becomes at least as significant as hesitation (this is especially clear in "Helsinki Window" [000-000], which experiments with a new approach to enjambment), so that even those poems with extremely short lines (like "H's" [000] or "Dutch Boy" [000-000]) are verbally propulsive, though visually disjunct.¹⁶ These gradual shifts in style are brought to a beautiful realization in Creeley's final decade, in short poems of surpassing clarity and ease ("As If" [000], "Bye and Bye" [000]), or long poems that luxuriate in fluency ("The Dogs of Auckland" [000-000]), spontaneity ("Clemente's Images" [000-000]), and force ("Histoire de Florida" [000-000]).

It is fitting that this artistic fullness should come in a confrontation with diminishing physical powers, for Creeley's acceptance of *what is*—which entered his poetry as a method of writing in *Pieces* and became a method of apprehending the world in *Hello*—developed in his last years into an ethic of understanding, one that achieves its fullest significance in the face of falling health (a subject first taken up in the 1980s). "You've left a lot out/Being in doubt/you left/it out," Creeley writes in "Histoire de Florida" (000), but overcoming doubt to leave in is precisely his strength in these late poems, a feat of imagination to which Creeley pays homage in his last essay, "Reflections on Whitman in Age." There Creeley reveals that elevation is not a matter of *what* one says, but of one's ability to think and say it: "Age wants no one to leave. Things close down in age, like stores, like lights going off, like a world disappearing in a vacancy one had no thought might happen. It's no fun, no victory, no reward, no direction. One sits and waits, usually for the doctor. So one goes inside oneself, as it were, looks out from that 'height' with only imagination to give prospect."¹⁷ Thus, at the "height" of his final years Creeley articulates a darkening vision in which the prospect of life is not some future reward, but an ever-disappearing present sustained only by the acts of mind that apprehend it. As he writes retrospectively in "The Way," an emphatically secular decla-

ration of belief, “Only knowing was measure of what one could/make hold together for that moment’s recognition,/or else the world washed over like a flood/of meager useless truths, of hostile incoherence” (000).

Many of the poems from Creeley’s last decade are self-consciously last writings: summations (“Credo” [000–000]), goodbyes (“Goodbye” [000–000]), and scoutings of the final horizon (“Emptiness” [000–000]). Others express with brute humor (“Supper” [000]) or tender acceptance (“When I think . . .” [000–000]) an old man’s perspective on what life requires or required. One might call this requirement the human condition, were it not the common fate of all living creatures—a fact that Creeley acknowledges in “The Dogs of Auckland” (000–000), as charming and complete a celebration of life as he ever wrote. But no less important than this celebration of the given is Creeley’s adherence to the possible, to the *if* in “If I were writing this . . .” (000–000), the poem as inquiry, imagining, hypothesis, project. This, surely, was the meaning of Projective Verse, of a form extending content into areas of thought and feeling that poetry preserves and makes available to others. This, surely, was the essence of Creeley’s gift, a gift *for* poetry and *to* us, his readers:

In testament
to a willingness

to *live*, I,
Robert Creeley,

being of sound body
and mind, admit

to other preoccupations—
with the future, with

the past. But now—
but now the wonder of life is

that *it is* at all,
this sticky sentimental

warm enclosure,
feels place in the physical

with others,
lets mind wander

to wondering thought,
then lets go of itself,
finds a home
on earth. ("Later" [000-000])

The present selection of Creeley's poetry is an abridgement of the two volumes of his *Collected Poems*, with all of the work set in the order established for those two volumes. The size of the book is about equal to that of Creeley's own selection from 1991, but within that space I have accommodated work from four subsequent volumes: *Echoes*, *Life & Death*, *If I were writing this*, and *On Earth*. Moreover, at Creeley's own request, I have rethought the selections from his earlier volumes so as to provide a rereading of the work from the vantage point of its completion. My aim throughout has been to trace the entire sixty-year arc of Creeley's accomplishment by focusing on those poems that touch most forcefully on his deepest commitments. To this end, I have given more or less equal attention to the four phases identified near the start of this introduction. (Because the last phase produced less work than the others, I have given it slightly less space.) The emphasis throughout is on poems, and this has meant forgoing a representation of Creeley's experiments in organization (of the sort one finds in *Pieces* and *Hello*); the decision to follow the text established for *Collected Poems* has also meant forgoing a representation of his many collaborations with visual artists. The richness and variety of Creeley's work supports a number of different approaches to abridgement. I hope that my preface at least sheds light on those other approaches, and that readers for whom this book serves as an introduction will be inspired to seek out Creeley's other volumes.

The texts of Creeley's poems have been unusually stable over time; what changes from edition to edition is by and large not the wording, punctuation, or lineation, but the context and appearance—what contemporary textual scholars sometimes call the bibliographic "code," the typeface, page design, presence of illustrations, and relationships to surrounding text, aspects of a poem's presentation that are often but not always beyond a poet's control.¹⁸ Creeley was extremely sensitive to such

matters of presentation, and he took pleasure in the variations of impact and meaning that a poem's translation to a new context could offer. This I learned at first hand when I helped him proofread his 1993 edition of Charles Olson's *Selected Poems*. Although Creeley was a great admirer of George F. Butterick's editions of Olson's work, he believed that every edition must be suited to its own conditions of reception. To this end, he approved a new page size and new typeface for Olson's poetry, wanting a fresh presentation to represent the need for a fresh reading. Moreover, as if to emphasize the essential mutability of all texts, Olson's in particular, he adopted one of the textual variants offered by Butterick at the end of *The Maximus Poems*, changing "Erojan" to "Eroian" in his book's penultimate poem.¹⁹ Creeley brought the same attention to detail and the same perspective on the editor's task to his own *Selected Poems* in 1991. That edition incorporated scarcely any revisions in the ordinary sense—the bibliographic code was of course entirely new—but the few changes Creeley did make were at once carefully considered and specifically oriented toward the distinctive needs of his abridgement. Two of these changes are pertinent to my own selection and I have carried them over here. Following Creeley's lead, I have used first lines within quotation marks as titles for untitled excerpts from *Pieces*, *A Day Book*, and *Hello*, and like Creeley I have dropped the identifying tags giving places and dates of composition for "Later" and "Oh Max" (those are now cited in the notes). In addition to these two modifications of the text as given in *Collected Poems*, I have also followed Creeley's example in giving book titles in the table of contents but not in the text proper, allowing the reader an easy identification of the provenance of particular poems while emphasizing the new connections between poems produced by abridgement. I depart from Creeley's practice, however, in using the title *A Day Book*. That 1972 volume, no longer in print, was a mixed genre work divided in two sections: "A Day Book," written in prose; and "In London," a sequence of poems. The prose portion now appears in Creeley's *Collected Prose*; the poetry portion, titled *In London*, appears in volume one of his *Collected Poems*.

The notes at the back are sparing by design. They include translations

of foreign words and occasional comments by Creeley from his essays, interviews, and letters, and from recordings of his readings.

When I first began work on this book, I fully expected to place the end result in Creeley's hands. I looked forward to that moment, and to all the moments of conversation there would be in between. Since his death in March 2005, I have had occasion to mourn his absence for many reasons—of which the most trivial, surely, is absence of guidance. But that absence has left me all the more humbled by his trust. I hope the present selection rewards that trust.

In preparing the final manuscript, I relied heavily on the advice, knowledge, and resources of a number of friends and colleagues, in particular Carla Billitteri, Penelope Creeley, Kevin Davies, Monica Fauble, and Kaplan Page Harris. Peter Culley and Peter Gizzi contributed their expertise regarding choice of poems; Joshua Clover, Alan Gilbert, Burt Hatlen, Bob Perelman, and Barrett Watten offered sound advice on the introduction; Michael Davidson, Ken Norris, Arlo Quint, and Marjorie Perloff gave crucial readings of the manuscript as a whole. My thanks are also due to Laura Cerruti for her help in all stages of production, and to Rachel Berchten, Charles Bernstein, Anselm Berrigan, Tom Clark, Chris Funkhouser, Robert Grenier, Jack Kimball; Joel Kuszai, Joanne Kyger, Jonathan Mayhew, Tom Raworth, Robin Schulze, and Rod Smith for their answers to specific queries or their help in thinking through general issues pertinent to the editing.

BENJAMIN FRIEDLANDER
BANGOR, MAINE
OCTOBER 2006

NOTES

1. Robert Creeley, "Autobiography" (1989), in Tom Clark, *Robert Creeley and the Genius of the American Common Place* (New York: New Directions, 1993), 126. A new edition of Creeley's *Collected Essays* is currently in preparation, so all quotations from his critical prose are identified by essay title as well as page reference to the currently available text.
2. The journal's contributors would include, in addition to those published by Divers Press, Edward Dorn, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Denise Levertov, Kenneth Rexroth, William Carlos Williams, and Louis Zukofsky.
3. See, for example, in "The Birds" (000–000), written during Creeley's Bolinas years, and the differently domestic "Buffalo Evening" (000).
4. Robert Creeley, "I'm Given to Write Poems" (1967), in *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 504.
5. Robert Creeley, "A Note" (1960) and "Ecce Homo" (1977), in *Collected Essays*, 477 and 405.
6. Robert Creeley, *Selected Poems* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), xxi.
7. *For Love* collected the majority of Creeley's poems of the 1950s, drawing on four previous volumes; *The Charm* gathers all the remaining work from 1945 through to the early sixties.
8. Robert Creeley, "Contexts of Poetry" (1968), in *Collected Essays*, 535.
9. "Cebu" (000–000) takes up the same problem as "Hong Kong Window," but from the vantage point of the ground—and here the specifics of location *do* matter.
10. Robert Creeley, *Contexts of Poetry: Interviews 1961–1971* (Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), 49.
11. For a beautifully illustrated account of this activity, see *In Company: Robert Creeley's Collaborations*, ed. Amy Cappellazzo and Elizabeth Licata (Niagara Falls: Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University, 1999).
12. Robert Creeley, "René Laubiès: An Introduction" (1954), in *Collected Essays*, 379.
13. Robert Creeley, "Form" (1987), in *Collected Essays*, 591.
14. Robert Creeley, "Mehr Licht . . ." (1968), in *Collected Essays*, 401.
15. A reproduction of this original version is available for view at the website of the publisher, Granary Books: www.granarybooks.com/books/dorfman/dorfman2.htm. (last accessed March 30, 2007)

16. The importance of momentum is even more pronounced when we shift our attention away from the prosody of individual poems to the experience of reading Creeley's later books entire.
17. Robert Creeley, "Reflections on Whitman in Age" (2005), in *On Earth: Last Poems and an Essay* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 83.
18. The distinction between a poem's language and the presentation of that language in a book—between linguistic and bibliographic codes—is developed into a theory of textual editing by Jerome J. McGann in *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). For a fine demonstration of the relevance of this theory for readers of twentieth-century texts, see George Bornstein, *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
19. The change I cite draws on George F. Butterick's "Alternate and Questionable Readings in Volume Three," in *The Maximus Poems*, by Charles Olson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), n.p. See also Creeley's note on his editing of the text in Charles Olson, *Selected Poems* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), xx.