

INTERVIEW WITH LARRY SIEMS

An email exchange with John Matthias, December 2007—February 2008

(Larry Siems was a Notre Dame undergraduate between 1977 and 1981. A writer and human rights activist, he has published poems in a number of journals including *Ironwood*, the *Agni Review*, and *Southern Poetry Review*, and his writings on immigration, cross-cultural, and human rights issues include the book *Between the Lines: Letters from Undocumented Mexican and Central American Immigrants and Their Families and Friends* [Ecco Press/University of Arizona Press]. He is presently Director of the Freedom to Write and international programs of PEN American Center in New York.)

You and I were out of touch for a long time. When we began corresponding, you told me you had never been back to Notre Dame. What was the local literary scene like in the late 1970s? I knew you best as a young poet of great promise. For years I included your Rimbaud translations in a course pack for translation workshop classes. What was your focus as an undergraduate? With whom did you work? Who were some of your fellow students, and have you kept up with any of them?

Terrifying words to any middle-aged person: “I knew you best as a young anything of great promise”...but be that as it may: The scene, as I remember it, was perfect: small but fervent, challenging but supportive, brainy, Catholic, clandestine, appreciative of both experiment and tradition—it felt a little like a bunch of us had been given the keys to a lab, shown all the equipment, and let loose to use it when and how we pleased. And that was ironic, in a way. I’d come to Notre Dame with vague ideas of majoring in physics; I was aiming for astrophysics or astronomy, I think. But by my sophomore year it was pretty clear math wasn’t a language I was going to be able to speak with any real fluency, let alone generate any new ideas in; it was painfully obvious no one was going to offer me the keys to the physics lab any time soon. At the same time, I was falling in love with literature; it satisfied the same core fascination with structure, form, space, time and I didn’t have to do problem sets every night. But I kind of missed the problem sets, which in a way is what workshop assignments turned out to be—a chance to try to generate new ideas based on established models and forms. And the more I wrote, the more I wanted to read, and to learn the tradition; at one point I remember wanting to read the Iliad in Greek, and I ended up doing a second major in Classical Greek. It was just an

explosion of consciousness, and poetry was the bomb. In literature classes I studied the physics of the thing, unlocked the equations, studied the impact, and in workshops we'd sit around building our own little grenades.

You, of course, were my main guide and mentor. I knew Ernest Sandeen, and also Sonia Gernes a little, but it was in your workshops that this all happened for me. I think as we keep talking you'll see what an impact you had. As for classmates, I remember Anthony Walton especially as outstanding, and many others who were serious writers and good, rigorous readers. I think because I arrived kind of late on the scene—not so much physically as psychically; it took me long time to recognize writing as something central to my identity—the literary scene was quite separate from my social scene, but that suited me...

Dare I ask about your “social scene?” You told me at the time of your Rimbaud translations that the problem with previous versions was that they were all made by dusty academics who didn't live the way Rimbaud had lived. But I doubt that you practiced “a studied and systematic derangement of the senses”; at least I hope not! I believe John Santos was at ND while you were here, but that you met him only recently. Did you work with Richard Burns at all, the British poet NDR readers will know from poems and reviews in the journal? I remember that when he visited for a reading the year before he was Visiting Professor he critiqued your longish poem based on Shakespeare's Winter's Tale. Along with your Rimbaud versions, that's the poem I remember best, though I don't have a copy. It had certain things in common with W.H. Auden's The Sea and the Mirror, which is based on The Tempest. Also, the Sophomore Literary Festival in those days was still a big deal and had its own social network. Were you involved with that?

There wasn't much studied and systematic about anything I did, not even the attempts at derangement of the senses, and in any case life at Notre Dame in the late 70s, even at its most extreme, couldn't have been what Rimbaud had in mind. But I do think I had a sense of the experience he must have been having around the time of the *Illuminations*—the feeling that every time you started to write, something strange, creepy, beautiful, or obscene would happen.

You're right, I didn't know John Santos when I was there—I think we figured out he was two or three years ahead of me? And I don't remember that I worked with Richard Burns. I was indeed involved with the festival; for some reason, I can't quite remember, but I came onto that scene late, too, but ended up trying to put the thing together in a mad rush. We man-

aged to pull it off, though not without a couple of snafus. I remember David Mamet's agent waking me up at seven in the morning screaming at me over the phone because I'd screwed up Mamet's plane ticket somehow and he was stranded in Texas. It was fixable but he was furious and wasn't about to let us make it right. But there were great moments, too. We booked Ginsberg to open the festival, and I had to drive to Chicago to pick him up at O'Hare. I remember it was snowing on the way back, one of those thick lake squalls, so the driving was tense, but he was very calming and seemed to be enjoying himself. Then, at one point, he saw something that made him grab for his bag and pull out a notebook and scrawl something down. I screwed up the nerve to ask him what it was. "Did you see that sign?" he asked. I had; we'd just passed a sign for an exit. "It's a perfect haiku," he said, delighted, thrilled. It was! It read:

Exit 11
 Indiana State Police
 No Public Restrooms

I think that was my first real glimpse of what it is to be poet—not to write poems, but to live poetry.

When I look at Linda DeCicco's SLF Album: An Informal History of Notre Dame's Sophomore Literary Festival, I see that John Santos chaired the 1977 festival and you chaired the 1979 festival. Along with Ginsberg and McMurtry, you had Hilda Morley, William Gaddis, Donald Hall, Ishmail Reed, and Robert Fitzgerald. An impressive group. What do you remember about these others and their interactions? It must have been your first experience negotiating with writers—something you've presumably had to do a lot at PEN. I think I had met Hilda Morley at Yaddo in 1976 and pressed her on you at the time. She was certainly the least known of these people, but her reputation emerged late as an important feminine presence at Black Mountain College, which was known for lots of macho males, especially Charles Olson. As for your own work, do you remember the Winter's Tale based poem? That's the one I'm quite sure Richard Burns went over in our workshop.

I think Hilda made the strongest impression partly because, yes, she was around for so much of the festival and she was so modest and open and accessible, but also because she was the only woman—a gender imbalance that probably mirrored what she'd experienced her entire long career. You got a real sense from her of the life of a woman of letters. She had this career that reached back so far and intersected with so many writers on both sides of

the Atlantic—Yeats and Lawrence and H.D. (with whom she had had a very close relationship, maybe in part because both of them were used to being the only woman in the room); Olson, Creeley and the whole Black Mountain Crew...

The others I remember mostly for their readings rather than the extra-curriculars, and I remember that it all came off remarkably well considering. I still marvel that ND would drop \$15K into the hands of sophomores to stage a literary festival; I definitely remember thinking it was madness then! As for that old undergraduate poem of mine, here's the way it begins. Leontes is speaking.

Three things very strange
happened this morning to me, all at once:

I felt old;
I felt I could write again; and
I could not even vaguely recall

her—her appearance, nor any of her
aspects or mannerisms, hair colour;
whether she would lie back, eyes closed

on our shared bed, or stare wildly and
pull at my hair in passionate moments
or if there was passion at all, ever...

I still like that a lot and I'm glad to hear it was published, even though the magazine misidentified you as "Lawrence Sims." I love the slow, halting waking up into the morning of consciousness in those first two lines that the wrong kind of reader would want to change to a perky "Three very strange things I happened to me all at once this morning."

Between your festival and John Santos', there was Theresa Rebeck's. The three of you have gone on to successful literary careers. John of course is very well known for his memoir Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation, and Theresa for her off-Broadway plays and work in television. Like Santos, you also worked on Juggler, the ND undergraduate literary magazine that for a while was one of the best of its kind in the country. You've also just told me off the record that while digging in your files for the Winter's Tale poem you've unearthed records of an early experience fighting censorship. Given that's part of what you now do for a living in the world at large, did you learn anything by that experience?

It's funny, I really didn't remember much about any controversies surrounding the issues of *Juggler* that I worked on, but it's very clear from the letters I found in my files that we had to contend with some of the classic challenges editors everywhere face. There were administrative objections to some of the content of *Juggler* and other student publications. There were discussions of funding, of oversight, and of editorial responsibility. There were general insinuations that *Juggler* was a vanity project of a few with limited appeal. There were phone calls, meetings, letters—including one I just found where I concluded, "The interest of the *Juggler* is literary quality... There are many, many literary magazines with formats identical to ours at universities across the country, all operating through university subsidies... *Juggler* must be evaluated on its own terms, as a magazine which presents the serious intellectual and artistic efforts of some of this community's most creative and interesting young minds." So yes, sure, I must have learned a lot about negotiating with would-be censors and the need to fight for creative space. It's interesting, looking back—this was before M.F.A. programs, or before the real proliferation of M.F.A. programs, anyway, so *Juggler* and the whole literary community probably was more marginal and the struggle for space was probably lonelier in some ways then...but at the same time, I think the imaginative landscape may actually have been freer then, the late 70's, early 80's, than it is now. We really did have the keys to the laboratory, in many ways...

That's very interesting. The Juggler issue came between two other high-visibility controversies at Notre Dame, the 1968 Conference on Censorship and Pornography (about which Peter Michelson wrote an account in an early issue of NDR) that ended in censorship and a police raid, and last year's Vagina Monologues controversy, which did not end in censorship. We'll get to some of your own experiences with all this at PEN very soon, but first let me ask what you did directly upon graduating from Notre Dame. I think I remember that you were headed for Spain, and then I lost track of you for many years.

I did make it to Spain, spent about seven months in Madrid the year after I graduated, teaching and tutoring English and traveling whenever I could afford to. And the year after that I entered the M.F.A. program at Columbia. I'd applied for both the M.F.A. and Comp Lit programs, and opted at the last possible minute to do the M.F.A. I started in the fall of '82. New York proved to be a crucial move for me: the city just made so much sense to me, spoke to me, whispering, muttering, moaning, shouting, on so many levels. And the program kicked my ass good, and in good ways, right from

the start...

Who was teaching in that program and who was doing the kicking? Were there any fellow students from that period whose work was especially impressive? Here at Notre Dame both William O'Rourke and Valerie Sayers are Columbia M.F.A. graduates.

C.K. Williams and Phil Levine landed especially effective blows, and I definitely did some good, and more importantly direction-defining, work in their workshops. But there were many others who made impressions—how could they not? Columbia's program in those days drew on the constant stream of American and international poets passing through New York, so we had seminars with Brodsky and Walcott, short courses with Milosz and Borges. Brodsky did his standard Hardy, Auden, and Frost course and demanded more than anyone else from us as readers. Milosz reminded us that poetry's most fundamental, ancient purpose is to praise. For classmates, Vijay Seshadri and Marie Howe were in the poetry program when I was there and were among those who were doing work that I especially admired. It was a funny program in some ways—colder than some, I think, probably due to the fact that the faculty was all adjunct and a lot of energy went into getting the most out of the relationships with them as they passed through. And a lot of us were working—me full time as a word processor on the swing shift in a law office—so there wasn't all that much time for socializing. But what it lacked in warmth it made up for many times over in contact with remarkable poets...

What did you do after the M.F.A. and how many years are we talking about between your work at the New York law office and the beginning of your time at PEN?

It's about eleven years, and kind of a winding road. I finished the M.F.A. in the fall of '84 and for the next four years Katherine Davis, one of my classmates from Columbia, and I pieced together jobs when necessary—for me, teaching at a couple of colleges in Boston, a summer session at a prep school, whatever I could get—with residencies and travel whenever possible. We got married in the fall of '86 and went to Europe for several months, and the next year I had a fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. That was great, but bleak—it gets dark at about 4 in the afternoon in the winter in P-town, and by about February we'd decided our next address would be California, no matter what. We were aiming for

Northern California, but I got a teaching job at a prep school in LA, so we moved there in '88, thinking we'd spend a couple of years there and then move north. That never happened—we were there until we finally moved back to NYC in 2001.

Around the time of the move, I was doing a lot of thinking about something you talked a lot about in one of the classes I had with you at Notre Dame. I'd always thought of poetry as a fitting arena for activism—I loved that Auden line in his poem to Isherwood, where he wants poetry that “makes action urgent and its nature clear.” But the '80s were the Reagan years, and by the time I'd finished the long, quiet, hermetic fellowship of the Fine Arts Work Center, way out there on the farthest fingertip of the empire, I was pretty sure Auden was right when he decided later on that “poetry makes nothing happen.” And by the time I got to LA, I was really feeling like something needed to happen. I got involved in the movement protesting the US proxy wars in Central America. And then, when I thought about writing something, I thought about what I wanted to read, and I realized what I wanted to read were the letters I saw new immigrants reading on the bus, on breaks at work. I told a friend I was co-teaching a poetry workshop with, a wonderful beat named Louis MacAdams, that I'd been looking for a book of these letters but there didn't seem to be one, and he told me to do it. My Spanish was pretty poor and I was still pretty new to LA, but in around 1990 I started showing up at some of the shelters and refuges where the undocumented communities gathered and asking if people were willing to share their letters. The response was amazing, and the letters—the letters read like dramatic monologues, they were poems, but better. They were full of the characters and the worlds people had left behind. Eventually I was also getting the letters the new arrivals had sent home, and there it was, the literature of the undocumented experience in the US, from the mundane to the harrowing. So that's what I did: I spent about three years meeting people and compiling and translating their letters. At the same time, I got a job with Human Rights Watch, which had a small satellite research office in LA focused on Mexico and the border, and I helped research and write their first report on human rights abuses by the US Border Patrol. After Ecco Press published the collection of letters in 1992, I started getting journalism assignments; I wrote stories on the border, immigration, and cross cultural issues through the 1990s. I learned about PEN in the middle of all this—the book was a finalist for a PEN nonfiction prize, and I became friends with the person who was doing the human rights work at the PEN office in LA. In 1995 he called me and said he was leaving the job. He said it was perfect for me: human rights, writing, and best of all, part-time, so I could

still write features and teach if I wanted.

Maybe a good way to get into just what it is you do at PEN is to ask why you're leaving for Cambodia tomorrow. (Reader, as you see, this email interview keeps things up to date: 9 January 2008.)

I'm going with a group organized by the International Freedom to Publish Committee of the Association of American Publishers to meet with publishers, editors, writers, and government officials to learn more about the climate for freedom of expression and press freedom and the state of literary culture in Cambodia. I'm also going to be meeting with writers to talk about PEN and look at whether there's an interest among Cambodian writers in establishing a PEN center there.

What are you going to tell these writers about PEN? I imagine only a few of our readers, even those who are members, have a clear idea about the mission of the organization. What is it?

To promote literature, to defend writers and free expression, and to foster an international exchange of literature and ideas. The last of these was really the founding principle of PEN—the organization was created in England in 1921 with the idea that bringing writers from different countries together could mitigate the kind of nationalism that gave rise to World War I. Its human rights efforts began in the 1930s—PEN's first official protests were against the Nazi book burnings in 1933, and before long it was working to rescue German writers. As such, it's the world's oldest human rights organization. The language and ideas of the PEN charter—which champions the free flow of literature and ideas across borders—formed the basis of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which proclaims, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

Organizationally speaking, PEN is a confederation of 145 PEN centers in 104 countries. PEN American Center is the largest of these, with around 3,000 members. It has programs aimed at advancing each of the three parts of PEN's mission. I direct the Freedom to Write Program, which is the human rights and free expression-protection work, and also the International Program, which is really the interaction between PEN American Center and the rest of the PEN world.

What did you discover in Cambodia? It's now January 25 and you're back already, going to and fro quicker than I'm able to deal with my email inbox.

It was an amazing scene. This is one of the world's poorest countries, but one where there's a kind of crazy, feverish boom happening, so it's very surreal. One morning you're in a village that's literally off the grid, way off the grid (our brilliant plan to bring the residents solar powered flashlights almost ran aground because I didn't install the lithium batteries ahead of time and there wasn't a screwdriver to be found in the entire village), and that afternoon you're driving past the gaudiest construction projects—skyscrapers, gated communities—in and around Phnom Penh. It's cowboy capitalism, wild, unchecked real estate speculation, largely corrupt; the words you hear everywhere you go are “land grab.” Things are changing in Phnom Penh so fast that people say they go away for a couple of months and come back and can't recognize the place. There's a definite buzz, a thrill to that—but there's also simmering tensions and the sense that millions of people are going to be left behind, really left behind, in whatever world is coming. Given the country's history, it's hard to look at that arithmetic and not see at least spasms of violence ahead.

All of this is happening in a country that has one of the most effective censorship regimes I've ever seen. And what makes it effective is that its mechanisms are so unclear, so diffuse. We met with the Information Minister, who boasted, accurately, that the government abolished its censorship office in the late 1990s, there's no prior restraint on publishing, people can print whatever they want. And yet, funny thing—those were his words, ‘it's really funny, but people still send us their manuscripts for approval.’ Now THAT's an effective system. The people do the work themselves. And in your conversations with anyone who writes anything, you see why. A history professor told me he'd just finished a new 20th century Khmer history and given it to his department chair, and the chair told him, you'll want to change this and this and remove this if you want to have any hope of a promotion. A journalist says he's sitting on a major story because he's afraid publishing it will cause riots. Everybody's holding something back, everybody has a reason for holding something back. And very few of those reasons are traceable to the government.

And then, there's the fact that the whole country's holding something back. Incredibly, only now—30 years after the Khmer Rouge era—the country is gearing up to hold the first trials connected to Khmer Rouge atrocities. With UN and international support, 5 senior officers will stand trial this summer for crimes against humanity. Pre-trial hearings and testi-

mony were going on while we were there. It's a huge event, no question—and yet it's so far from the kinds of Truth and Reconciliation processes that have taken place in other countries emerging from national nightmares. Those processes are a much more far-reaching kind of public theater, where people are forced to acknowledge levels of complicity in exchange for amnesty, and so there's a much more complex discussion and national soul-searching. Under duress or not, huge numbers of Cambodians participated in the Khmer Rouge's excesses, or collaborated, or acquiesced. Trying only the five senior living officers and saying we'll leave it at that leaves a whole lot left unsaid.

It's a situation where you feel how dangerous—that's it, dangerous—it is that there's so little literary activity in the country. There's a growing number of historical narratives, first-person testimonials of victims or survivors and the like, but you realize how different that is from literature, from fiction and poetry, which are so much better able to explore the moral ambiguities and the terrible wars within. In Cambodia, literary culture in that sense had barely begun to take root before the Khmer Rouge went to work on it. The first novel in Khmer was published in the 1930s. I gather there was a promising period of creativity in the 1950s and 1960s, but by the 1980s it was all in ashes. Even now, the total number of novels written in Khmer is under 200. The majority of these, even post-Khmer Rouge, are agrarian romances with heavy-handed, uplifting messages. What was really exciting was that we met a few young writers who are seeing other possibilities, and one has started a very promising literary magazine. You look around the country, the cities especially, Siem Reap, Phnom Penh; you see the characters, international investors, gangsters, corrupt bureaucrats, college students, garment workers, sex traffickers; you feel these giant global forces and local forces at work, and you know there's great literature here waiting to be written.

That's an amazing account. I hope it's not a typical week, though. How often do you go out on a trip like this? And what IS a typical week like? When Salman Rushdie was president of PEN America you wrote some of the speeches he delivered, I believe. What's it like around the office? What different kinds of things are going on? And as far as the American literary scene is concerned, what kinds of anti-censorship fights need to be engaged on the national turf?

No, definitely not typical. I travel once a month or so, but a lot of it is domestic, Washington DC mostly. I take two, maybe three international trips a year, usually for conferences like the International PEN Congress, which takes place somewhere different every year. Once in a while I get

to take a trip like this one, where I really get to explore the scene in places where there are significant free expression struggles happening—Cambodia, Guatemala, Nigeria, Turkey, the Stans...It's the most extraordinary part of the job, that's for sure.

Typically we're plugging away in the office, which is a pretty lively place. My programs are just part of what PEN is doing; there are about 15 other people coordinating PEN's literary programs and awards, the World Voices festival, a writers-in-the-schools program, a prison writing program, and others. There are three of us and a couple of interns doing the Freedom to Write work, which is really advocacy work on a number of fronts. PEN has a case list of all the writers and journalists we know of who are in prison or otherwise threatened for their work around the world; it's about a thousand at any one time. We do work on probably a hundred of these in a year, from single actions to full-blown, sustained campaigns that we coordinate with our members and other human rights and free expression organizations in the US and overseas. A good example of this is our current "We Are Ready for Freedom of Expression" campaign, a big push to win the release of the 41 writers and journalists in prison in China before the Beijing Olympics in August. What's exciting about this particular campaign is that we're working with the Independent Chinese PEN Center, whose members are themselves on the front lines and under pressure—in December, the Chinese government shut down an awards dinner ICPC was planning in Beijing and detained or posted guards outside the homes of several of its members.

But a good deal of our attention is focused on issues here at home these days. Before 9/11, I'd say I spent 90% of my time concentrating on issues overseas, and maybe 10% on skirmishes here at home, mostly local school and library book removals or bannings. Since then it's been more like 50-50. It's essential: in the last three or four years there have been more threats to free expression in this country, and more backsliding on basic human rights, than any time I remember; we know it, and the world knows it, so we've got to confront what's happening here if we want to have any credibility or clout internationally.

The post-9/11 threats to freedom of expression fall into three broad categories: increasing surveillance and the way that can chill intellectual and creative freedom; decreasing access to information—information on what our government is doing, especially—and to alternative points of view; and the general erosion of basic human rights and due process protections. We've been taking on issues in each of these categories, in Congress, in the Courts, and in public programs and campaigns. In the first category, for instance, we've gone after surveillance provisions of the Patriot Act, includ-

ing one that gave the government broad access to bookstore and library records, and we're considering filing a lawsuit with several other human rights organizations challenging the NSA surveillance program, which we believe threatens our ability to communicate confidentially by telephone or email with our colleagues overseas. In the second, we've been defending the growing number of journalists threatened with jail time for protecting confidential sources, and also working hard to bring international voices, perspectives, and ideas to the U.S.; we were plaintiffs in the lawsuit challenging the government's refusal to allow Tariq Ramadan to come to the U.S. to teach at Notre Dame, for instance. And because writers around the world are routinely tortured, detained without trial, denied due process, and because their governments now point to the fact that the U.S. tortures and violates international due process norms to justify their own actions—and because it's just plain and shamefully wrong—we're working with a broad coalition of human rights groups to end these abuses by the U.S.

All of this, at every level, involves a lot of writing: shaping positions, preparing press materials, speeches, and testimony, drafting articles and op-eds and endless official letters. I'm writing all the time, over my own signature, over others', it doesn't matter—it's all about making action urgent and its nature clear. It's humbling, in a great way. Some of the most mundane and anonymous things I've written have had the biggest effect.

Can you give us a couple of examples of these mundane and anonymous interventions?

Sure. On the mundane side: late one Friday afternoon we got a call from a man in Brooklyn saying his uncle back home in Central African Republic had been arrested earlier that day and brutally beaten and he wasn't getting any medical attention for his injuries. There were real fears that he would not survive the weekend. We fired off a very bare-bones letter, basically saying we know you've got this guy in custody, we know he's in bad shape due to the mistreatment, and the world now considers you responsible for his fate. Just that can be enough: he was transferred to a hospital on Monday and released without charges within a few weeks.

And on the anonymous side: for the past couple of years, PEN has done a lot to help Iraqi writers, journalists, and translators who have been targeted for death find safe havens in other countries. Incredibly, though many are endangered because they worked with the U.S. or Western agencies or media, the U.S. was for a long time shockingly unresponsive to the plight of Iraqi refugees. PEN managed to get a small group of translators and writ-

ers resettled in Norway in 2006, and that fall I went to Norway and interviewed three of them. Those interviews were adapted into three op-ed pieces that ran under their names in the New York Times in November, 2006; they took up the full page. It was the first time many in the U.S. heard stories like this. *60 Minutes* called; I ended up going with its crew to Syria to interview several Iraqi writers and journalists who were hiding out there. As coverage of the crisis increased, so did pressure on the Administration to act. Slowly but surely: late last year we were able to resettle three Iraqi colleagues and their families in the U.S.; we expect two more soon; and we've given the State Department a new list of some 15 more this year.

Given these urgent issues that you deal with on a daily basis, what do you think of the often theory-based teaching of literature on American college campuses today? If you were talking to the Notre Dame English Department, for example, what would you most want to tell them.

This is a really interesting question. I do definitely have a sense from conversations with younger colleagues and much more recent graduates that I'd be kind of at sea in many English Departments these days. That whole new critical vocabulary was just making it into the fringes of the departments when I was at ND; I had one or two philosophy classes where we read Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, some others. I was interested, impressed, but it didn't seem to me to have much to do with the actual production or pleasures of literature...so it's just really hard for me to picture what it even looks like to have a theory-dominated literature curriculum. It does seem a million miles away from what I'm dealing with every day. And yet the truth is, even the literature I recognize, contemporary American fiction and poetry, is often a million miles away from what I'm dealing with. I remember when I was at PEN in Los Angeles, one of my interns wrote a letter to Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Nigerian writer, who was in prison at the time and eventually executed by that country's military regime. Saro-Wiwa, who gave up a very successful career writing fiction and teaching to lead a protest movement against oil exploitation in his home region, wrote back saying how as a novelist he'd never experienced censorship; that the regime was perfectly happy to let him publish his fiction because nobody reads. He said while he still often envied the literary and academic life in Europe and the United States, he'd come to see that as a luxury in Africa, where literature needs to be in the streets. Ironically, Saro-Wiwa's version of street literature, which was really essays and articles exposing the exploitation, penetrated U.S. universities in the way his novels didn't; there was a good deal of campus or-

ganizing in support of Saro-Wiwa's Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People in the mid-1990s.

The fact is, the old Soviet-era paradigm of the imprisoned dissident fiction writer or poet really has shifted. The real battle in many parts of the world is not over ideas but information. PEN's case list is full these days of journalists and bloggers and activists, not novelists. I wonder if the shift to critical theory, which as I understand it has as at least one of its preoccupations exploring the power relationships surrounding a work of literature, is at least partly a reflection of this shift?

The narrator of J.M. Coetzee's Diary of a Bad Year writes in that novel of a book very like the author's own Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship, saying "In the 1990s, I recall, I published a collection of essays on censorship. It made little impression. One reviewer dismissed it as irrelevant to the new era just dawning, the era inaugurated by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the break-up of the USSR. With world-wide liberal democracy just around the corner, he said, the state will have no reason for interfering with our freedom to write and speak as we wish; and anyhow, the new electronic media will make the surveillance and control of communications impossible to carry out. Well, what do we see today? Not only the re-emergence of old-fashioned restrictions of the baldest sort on freedom of speech—witness legislation in the United States, the UK, and now Australia—but surveillance (by shadowy agencies) of the entire world's telephonic and electronic communications. But the masters of information have forgotten about poetry, where words may have meaning quite different from what the lexicon says, where the metaphoric sparks always one jump ahead of the decoding function, where another, unforeseen reading is always possible." Does this perhaps bring us back to Rimbaud? Is poetry, despite its small audience, still a subversive and liberating force in times of centralized control, commercial exploitation of media, political surveillance, and loss of privacy?

That's a great passage. It's funny though: I've come to suspect that the collapse of the Soviet Union actually removed one of the most effective checks on the censoring impulse in the U.S.—an impulse which, let's face it, is universal. Look at what's happened with National Endowment for the Arts, for example. One of the great engines for the expansion of literary culture in the United States has to be the NEA. It was founded in 1965, at the height of the Cold War, and it served a very valuable propaganda purpose: while the Soviets were busy suppressing unorthodox and dissident literature, the NEA was supporting avant garde and challenging and non-commercial art in the U.S.; some of its founding language even praises the role of the

artist as the “prophetic outsider.” NEA money subsidized almost all of the great literary magazines in the ’60s and ’70s and many, many individual poets and writers. But as soon as this essential propaganda purpose is diminishing, as soon as Glasnost comes to the Soviet Union, look what happens. The right turns its attention to the NEA, protesting grants for ‘offensive’ and ‘obscene’ art and leading a campaign to defund the agency. And it’s not just the right—the early ’90s brought campus speech codes and political correctness, a kind of censorship of the left, also in the name of decency, of not giving offense. Well before 9/11, the margins had closed in on both sides: the phrase “don’t go there” had become a kind of the cultural watchword. And that lost ground, I think, really paved the way for the breathtaking changes Coetzee mentions. The Bush Administration was extremely skillful not only in exploiting people’s fear but in tapping into this cultural shift. It bans news photographs of coffins of servicemen and women killed in Afghanistan and Iraq, but it does so supposedly out of sensitivity to their families. That a country that came to a collective understanding of the realities of the Vietnam War partly through just these kinds of images accepted this shows how much ground was lost during that decade, I think.

It’s this kind of dynamic, where official restrictions mask as or piggyback on cultural inhibitions, that’s really the most sinister and sophisticated kind of censorship; it’s not unlike what I saw in Cambodia. I had my own jarring experience with it. A few days after Hurricane Katrina, FEMA announced that it was not going to allow any more photographs of dead bodies. A couple of hours later I got a call from Reuters asking if PEN had a reaction or comment. I said we naturally opposed such a ban, and that I didn’t see how you report a story whose subject is death without allowing the public to see images of the subject of the story. That quote was picked up by right-wing blogs that insisted the issue was one of respect and sensitivity—and within an hour I was getting a steady stream of extremely angry emails questioning my upbringing, suggesting I had “no decency,” and, in one case, expressing the wish that my family—or better yet, I—had been among those lost in the floodwaters. Within a day, CNN had filed suit and FEMA had withdrawn the obviously unconstitutional ban, but a message had been delivered. How much more effective that it was delivered not by the government of the masters of information, but by my fellow citizens, maybe even my neighbors.

So, is poetry a subversive, liberating force in the United States these days? I’m not sure I share Coetzee’s faith that its sparks pose any particular threat or danger to the masters. But I’m pretty sure that’s not what Rimbaud, at least, was after. That whole strategy of the total derangement of

the senses had as its purpose a rejection of the working world, the political world; it was “to arrive at the unknown,” to make himself into a “seer.” In some ways I hate to say it, but I do think he was onto something. Activism is the arena of the known – you *know* it’s unjust that eradicable diseases still decimate significant portions of the earth, that immigrant laborers are exploited and mistreated, that cultures and species are being extinguished; you know this is another indefensible war. If instead of doing something about these things, you turn to poetry, you’re really turning your back on what’s known and committing yourself to something else, to knowing something more, to seeing something deeper. That’s a subversive, liberating *gesture*, to be sure. I suppose if enough of us were doing this, the masters would get pretty nervous.

We’re printing two of your poems directly following this interview. “California Song” connects directly with your work as an activist, but “The Trick” does not, which is why I’ve chosen these two from the several you’ve sent. There is even a shard or two of Rimbaud in the dream imagery of this second poem, and, stretching Rimbaud’s notion a little bit, one could almost call it an Illumination. The argument between these two poems, if that’s what it is, recapitulates some of what you’ve said in the interview, and it recapitulates versions of a debate we’re familiar with from the ’60s, the ’30s, and, with the greatest consequences, revolutionary and then Stalinist Russia. When I read “gesture” above, I almost hear “mere gesture.” These two poems are not new, but you tell me you are writing poems again. What do you make of your impulse to do that after a lengthy silence?

Well, I think it’s just that, a desire to see something, reach something, beyond what I’m seeing every day. I don’t think of it as “mere” at all: when all is said and done, writing poems just engages me in ways other writing doesn’t. It takes me out of ‘all this now too much for us’ and puts me into a conversation with things that pre-exist and outlast it—language, form (not just poetic form but the form of thought, rhetoric, argument), craft, the tradition. It requires, in my case anyway, more listening than speaking, a real sensitivity to the pressure each of these elements wants to exert—or, ideally, all of them are exerting, all at once—on experience. It really feels like a kind of collaboration; I love to feel these forces working and follow them out, and sometimes I even set them up, set them in motion. “California Song” was a case of that: I’d been through this town and come away with all these images that obviously connected with issues I’d been working on, but the poem came from a totally different direction, from playing with that Shake-

spearean cliché of bestowing immortality on the beloved through verse, but ironically; I mean, who reads poetry, and so what kind of immortality is that? So there was that argument with the tradition, but it's taking place in the middle of all these scenes and experiences that were right in front of me. It was watching how the poem absorbed and transformed those experiences, and then began generating images and experiences, and how out of these a parallel, more political argument emerged, and how they came together toward the end: for me, there's just no other kind of writing where the process itself brings this level of revelation, of discovery. In that sense, you're right, "The Trick" is different, but that's because it really was an illumination: the scene and the overall shape and the actual, exact language of the first dozen or so lines came to me in a dream; I woke up writing them down, and over the next couple of days just pretty much followed the vision out and filled out a form that was clearly set. But really, it's just a matter of degree, of how much exertion was required before things began to be revealed. It's mostly exertion for me these days, but even on bad days it's a strange and mysterious thing, and lately I've really had the sense that behind all the images and experiences I've accumulated over the last several years, there are things waiting there to be seen.

CALIFORNIA SONG, AND VARIATION ON A THEME*Larry Siems*

I will make you as famous
 as Manuel Capetillo,
 whose name means little

cape or head or something,
 and isn't known
 outside barrios and California

towns like this one. Here,
 however, the quartzoid
 alphabet of the universal

theater marquee
 conveys that name across
 the sidewalk in such a way

that makes it clear he is
 the megabolt himself,
 the deathfighter, the star

of *Relampagos, Enamigos*
del Muerte, the matinee
 of which has recently begun.

I paused a moment to watch
 it swallow all but me
 and the stop-and-go motorcade

of the Anglo majority,
 a moment that became other
 moments, and more.

Soon, a stray,
 straw-hatted, scarecrow
 campesino propped against a wall,

and his transistor's raunchy
scratch of mariachi
made the dead arcade –

a March of Dimes display
card filled
with halves of quarters,

a long, plodding, ramble-on
promenade of arches –
shimmer like an irrigated

paradise of rainbows.
So I am sitting
under one such rainbow,

staring east down a side street
in your direction.
You can't imagine a scene

of such scientific perfection,
the sun is something
dropped from a syringe

and squeezed between clear slides,
and the palms rocket
upward on thin pillars

of fire. In those fields
the pickers stoop, staked like
balloons, orange and lemon

nylon iridescing
off their backs, working.
Somewhere in that white

atmosphere of work,
of work, of overwork,
of sunstroke,

Manual Capetillo's name rides
like an ad behind a biplane,
like a hand-sewn bolt

of lightning. The Relampago
lives this way for them, hot,
free, beautiful, just

out of reach,
just as you are –
which is what fame is,

distance, separation.
Yet, though his fame is great
to them, their language

keeps him from us,
keeps him for themselves,
which is why I

offer only this small
fame to you, this form
of address to a tiny minority,

this one-liner, this poem.

THE TRICK*Larry Siems*

St. Francis with a knife
 set the skiff free
 that brought us to the island;
 ducks, hawk, loon, crows and doves,
 his own birds rioted.
 So we ran down to see
 what made that ruckus rise.
 Cut clean, one end
 slumping in muck, the rope
 that snubbed the bow lay eased.
 The snub bow spun
 dream-slow; it drifted up,
 dark brown against the sun-
 set yellow of the lake.
 We stood, the water sneaking
 across our shoes, a hand
 holding a handful of deep,
 rich, root-threaded earth
 in the eroded bank.
 Out fifty feet, a hundred
 maybe, in thin reeds,
 it settled, in water
 we knew well we could wade.
 We knew the lake's cold
 mud and rot-bristly bottom:
 it pocked and clouded
 with each step, kicking up
 black and diamond-backed
 leeches that would flap like flags
 in a stiff wind.

It was still
since we had scared the birds,
and out across the glaring
water the boat floated.
There I stood, with a fist
of mud, to throw, or lure
it in, as though to call
home a lost animal.
We stood, two boys, blank pupils
adjusting past a squint,
sinking in shore, watching
a thing adults would call
dead in the water, calm,
its rope drawn, unrippling,
a thing afloat and fixed
as our red compass needles,
buoyant beyond belief.