

**PETER MICHELSON IN CONVERSATION**  
**WITH JOHN MATTHIAS**



Peter Michelson (left) and John Matthias (right)

**NDR:** *Peter, you and I met in the fall of 1967 when Diana and I arrived at Notre Dame. I remember the evening well. There was a group of poets including Ernest Sandeen and Jim Dougherty that met from time to time. Ernie asked me to come to a meeting within twenty-four hours of arriving from London at some kind of cockroach motel in South Bend. We read and critiqued each other's poems. Thinking I'd better play safe, I read a poem in meter and rhyme. (I thought: "I'm at Notre Dame now; must be a meter and rhyme kind of place.) Nobody liked it. I said, "Hold on, I've got some others that are maybe better," and read those. You said—and I bet you don't remember—something like, "Oh, yeah, you ought to write like that." Jim and Ernie were not so sure. You drove me back to the cockroach motel, and I said to Diana: "Maybe it's going to be OK here; I've met this very cool guy called Peter Michelson." Do you remember that at all? If not, what's your first memory of our long association?*

**PM:** I do remember that night, though I don't actually recall saying that, but I'm glad if I did. And I don't remember the poems from this distance. What I do remember is thinking, he's a cocky guy, but he's got some range...this could get interesting.... And things did get interesting rather quickly. At some point early on you had set up a combination light show/

musical performance/poetry reading. Was this possibly from the early sections of *Bucyrus*? I was envious and impressed with the energy and oddness of Ooney & Olley Oam, etc., and that it all—lights, music, verse—had come together.

But my first actual memory was meeting you and Diana on the Notre Dame campus one afternoon. The day you arrived I think. You both seemed dazed, like newborn calves blinking in the sun. Diana beautiful in the background, in a mini skirt, very fashionable then in London...otherworldly in South Bend, Indiana. But glamorous as well, like a movie scene, maybe Julie Christie. (You may remember R. Duncan likening D to a movie star.) I smiled to myself, possibly, hopefully, to you both as well. That's my memory, an image really. You foregrounded, bearded, Diana back, shyly beautiful, like fawns.

**NDR:** *Well, we fawns certainly felt out of our element. The reader will need to know that this odd Ooney, Olley, and Oam bit is from a kind of prose poem or incantatory narrative (which I now dislike very much) that first appeared in Eugene Wildman's Swallow Press anthology Experiments in Prose in 1969. In the same year a few of your Pacific Plainsong poems appeared in another Swallow Press book, Michael Anania's New Poetry Anthology. Swallow had recently moved to Chicago from Denver. You knew Gene Wildman well, and must have met Michael around the time you came to Notre Dame. I came to Notre Dame by a kind of accident, which I've talked about elsewhere and won't go into here. How/why did you come to Notre Dame, and tell us something about the University of Chicago when you were there.*

**PM:** My going to Notre Dame was essentially due to the ministrations of my now departed and dear friend from the University of Chicago, John McManmon, then Father John. I've written an essay about our friendship ["Pater Noster," *Quarter After Eight* 3 (1996)], which will be in the *Selected Essays*. He engineered the job and interviews, the whole thing. He was there the first year Donna and I and kids were at Notre Dame, but then he fell in love and went, as it was called, "over the wall." He was part of a group of young Holy Cross priests at Notre Dame, which included John Gerber and several others you likely knew, who were a new wave. Now he and Gerber are both prematurely dead, and others of their generation have gone into administration or otherwise not survived. John and I were both grad students at Chicago.

In those days the University of Chicago English Department, or that segment in which I was interested, was Neo-Aristotelian, sometimes noted as the Chicago School, very old-fashioned and hardcore. I was attracted to

Elder Olson, who sent me to Richard McKeon to brush up my Aristotle. Wayne Booth was also there but inclined to modernize a bit. My training was largely with Olson, both a very good poet and incisive Aristotelian critic. I learned enormously, enough to eventually recognize I would have to bench a portion of it if I wanted to do what I wanted to do.

I began learning that when I became editor of the *Chicago Review*. This was about 1961 to 1964, a few years after the magazine's famous Beat issues, for which the university had suppressed it. I've written about that ["On *Chicago Review*, *Big Table* and *The Purple Sage*," *TriQuarterly* 43 (1978)] so I won't rehearse it here. As an editor I began understanding the need for a working rather than dominant relationship between critical discipline and imaginative energy. That you needed to provide ample rein for both but especially for the latter. And it was in that context that I began seriously writing both critical prose and poetry. I don't know that I had assimilated all that, but that's what I brought with me to Notre Dame. As well, of course, as a wife and two little kids. Anti-war dynamics were already in the air. Little did we know or even suspect how severely that tsunami was going to engulf us.

**NDR:** *I'd forgotten the Aristotle! I suppose Leo Strauss was also much in evidence, with his band of Platonists. In fact, I want to come back to that, and also pick up on Wildman and Anania. (I think Wildman followed you as editor of Chicago Review and quickly produced the anthology of concretism as an issue of CR that you ended up introducing as a Swallow Press book.) First, though, back to your own work. You gave a reading during my first year at Notre Dame that I remember vividly, in part because of the huge and enthusiastic audience. You read that night the shorter poems that appeared in The Eater in 1972. I'm sure those poems included the title poem, "I Dream Profuse," and the Rita Hayworth poem. Did you read any of the earlier plainsongs that night? That I can't remember. Looking at Anania's New Poetry Anthology, I find five plainsongs, along with a biographical note saying that you "are working on two poetic cycles, The Eater and Pacific Plainsong. Had you finished most of the short poems in The Eater before starting off on the plainsongs, or were you writing those and the shorter poems at the same time?"*

**PM:** Strauss was not so much in my zone, though the classical tradition was, and of course the Great Books. Probably people such as Allen Bloom and Milton Friedman were around, but I wasn't really aware of them until much later, especially Friedman who did so much damage in South America. But my access to literary knowledge *was* primarily through classical conservatism, then the hallmark of the University of Chicago in general. And it was

more along Aristotelian than Platonic lines. As I said, it was editorial work that opened me up to wider horizons, though of course that came gradually, residually.

In that regard, *The Eater* was how I learned what a line and breath and intellection were. Only when you and Michael and Gene pointed out what I was doing and introduced me to Charles Olson did I begin to grasp what I was after. That book, you recall, is dedicated to you three. I was learning. You mention “I Dream Profuse,” where I was venturing to “master” conventional versification, and “Whatever Happened to Rita Hayworth,” where I was getting a grip on something like projective verse, without yet knowing there was such a thing. I didn’t come up with “Advertisement,” which is sheer projective bravura, until the book was going to press. And by that time the plainsongs were under way. So there was a lot simultaneously swirling around in my head. As I was sorting it out it became increasingly useful. There are better and worse examples in *The Eater*. “Mercy Is No Soldier’s Art,” for instance, was an ambitious attempt and if not a flat out failure neither quite a success. Whereas in “For J.M., Remembering May 4, 1970” and in the title poem, in their rather different ways, I think I got it right.

But by 1973 you were already on the roll that has continued.... *Bucyrus* was out maybe three years, “Poem in Three Parts” was already written, *Turns* was en route, and the future lay ahead. All this in the after glow of the Sixties and the great upheavals of that time. How had you put in practice that complexity of poetics while we had been so distracted by setting the world straight for our kids to live in it?

**NDR:** *Ah, if only we had set the world right. I had come via London from Stanford and San Francisco where a lot of early political protest had gone on—the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, marches to the napalm center in Redwood City, confrontations with the Hells Angels. I’ve recapitulated a lot of it in a long short story that you’ve read called “A Reunion,” which includes the visit I had with you in Boulder last fall. I suppose all of our writing during this period was “political,” even some of my own stuff that had to do with medieval alchemy and witchcraft. More obviously so in the case of your plainsongs. What was the political climate like before I arrived? By 1967, I simply slipped into the gap left open when I left Stanford and when I arrived at Notre Dame from London. You and I were both, I suppose, controversial among certain factions of the university—but interestingly, probably not the C.S.C. priests, who were themselves pretty radical and who were in touch with the Berrigan brothers and others of the New Catholic Left. There was a big outdoor Mass on campus where male students handed their girlfriends their draft cards and they, to implicate them-*

*selves in the act, burned them. At the time, I found this extraordinarily moving. But you and I were basically secular types. I remember thinking that some of my early students, some of whom were very devout, had something in their lives that I lacked. It wasn't that I especially wanted that thing, whatever it was, but I did certainly notice that it existed. It was an amazing generation of students. I've never seen a better one.*

**PM:** Yes, that was an extraordinary generation. Possibly in its genes or its religion, I suppose. But there was a collective sensibility, a recognition about our history, its vicious colonialism that had been unacknowledged. For which the Vietnam War was the signature. Much of that ambience was because we, across generations, came to an awareness at more or less the same time. When you think back you recall things like the teach-ins, which emphasized research and data that was then broadcast by comedians—Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, etc.—and writers such as Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, Bly, Vonnegut, Heller, Mailer, and others. It was a communal time. Everyone was both contributor and consumer. But yes, at Our Lady there was a very special patina.

As a sort of consequence, perhaps, I had to move on. Actually, we both did. From '68 you and I were never neighbors again. And some years we were separated by continents and oceans. Yet there was a sense, an esprit, of collaboration that has persisted with us. Including Michael Anania. When I went to the great *Purple Sage*<sup>1</sup> misadventure in Wyoming we were still collaborating, and among other projects your British anthology emerged. Can you account how this next phase of your career discovered itself?

**NDR:** *My anthology of British poetry was originally intended to be a Purple Sage project. When you left Notre Dame, I even considered following you out to Laramie, Wyoming, for what looked as if it might turn into a major publishing center for avant-garde literature. More, perhaps, on its failure later. But the real nexus was still Swallow Press, which eventually co-published 23 Modern British Poets with TriQuarterly magazine. It was in the late Sixties/early Seventies that all of the action was happening there—Wildman's Anthology of Concretism, Anania's New Poetry Anthology, my Bucyrus and 23 Modern British Poets, your Eater, Anania's own The Color of Dust, Wildman's novel Montezuma's Ball. All of those projects have things in common. I can remember you saying at the time that you would rather have been in Experiments in Prose than New Poetry Anthology. But looking at both books (I'm doing that right now),*

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1. In 1969 Michelson left Notre Dame and went to the University of Wyoming to start an experimental arts and literature journal entitled *The Purple Sage*.

Experiments in Prose *has dated badly*. All of those experiments with design were quite remarkable in their time, but of course new technology, both for the page and for the screen, has put them in the shade. I think that my summer editing *23 Modern British Poets* would never have happened without Anania's support and your own. Michael actually came to the airport to see me off on my editorial adventure with a contract in his hand, and I remember sending all kinds of things to Wyoming from London. The book was mostly impulsive, but I got a few things right—including giving lots of space to poets as different as Basil Bunting, Roy Fisher, George MacBeth, Nathaniel Tarn, Tom Raworth, Lee Harwood, and Ken Smith. Most of the twenty-three were barely known in the US at the time. But as to how the “next phase of my career discovered itself,” it was mainly a matter of my excellent luck at having married Diana. Those summers at her family home in Suffolk made both life and work easy. But back to the Swallow/Notre Dame/Laramie vortex. And we should probably add *TriQuarterly*/Northwestern to that, and *TriQuarterly*'s great editor Charlie Newman. Swallow also published Newman's *A Child's History of America* at about this time, a book like no other. What are your thoughts on all these connections? Do you see any aesthetic unity to all the serendipity happening then?

**PM:** Oh yes, though maybe not unity so much as vitality. The juice was flowing in so many directions. The *Purple Sage* misadventure was a kind of touchstone of what we were all about, even in its unfortunate demise feeding *23 Brits* to Swallow to keep the action going. Your anecdote of Michael seeing you off with the contract is an incisive image of the time. And you're right, Charlie was a great editor, and *TriQuarterly* was one of if not the most virile magazine of the century. A good part of Charlie's genius was his alertness to the simultaneity of vastly different aesthetic projections. I'm reading his posthumous novel, *In Partial Disgrace*, and you can see the dissemination of his diverse synapses crackling like a string of cherry bombs. Whether that comes together there I don't know yet, but it sure as hell did in *TriQuarterly* and in his essayistic works, *A Child's History* and *The Post-Modern Aura*. A moment ago I said *virile* in regard to Charlie's work. That was certainly one of his strengths, though ultimately it may also have preyed too much upon him.

Laramie had its role in the Swallow/*TriQuarterly*/Northwestern/Notre Dame vortex you cited. I still have bits and tatters of *The Purple Sage* in my archives, prime among them a few copies of D. M. Thomas' *The Lover's Horoscope*, the very thing that brought down the grand experiment in the Rockies. But, as we're suggesting, its impact was greater than its tragedy, a small tsunami that is still rolling across the aesthetic seas.

**NDR:** *The one thing we haven't yet added to the mix so far is your work on the poetics of pornography. One of your early essays on the subject was in TriQuarterly, and I can remember Ernie Sandeen listing it among other publications by Notre Dame faculty when he wrote to offer me a job when I was still in England. When did you begin working on pornography, and why? Did it date back to the University of Chicago? Did it have anything to do with Aristotle? D. M. Thomas's The Lover's Horoscope was a kinetic contraption with dials to spin leading to instructions recommended for an erotic evening, but I wouldn't say it was pornographic. It was one of the stranger artifacts I sent you from London. However, it upset the administration at Wyoming and led, ironically, to your year in Chicago where you finished The Aesthetics of Pornography, published by Herder and Herder in 1971 and revised as Speaking the Unspeakable much later (SUNY Press, 1993). Can you tie up a few of these threads?*

**PM:** Incidentally, I also have Thomas's prototype "kinetic contraption" of cardboard, paper wheels with verses, held together with paperclips and other household items that you sent from London to Laramie. The "printer" right away caught on to what we wanted. In fact for that and the poster, which you may recall, the workers in the shop enjoyed the idiosyncratic irregularities they had to work out for the projects. They found the *Horoscope* quirky, you and I found it beautiful and charming, but it did flirt with both obscenity and porn. And there were women who found it much too male oriented, which of course it is. In any event it was and is a damn good piece of work and was perfect to start off our international experimental venture from the high plains west. Alas, I was not savvy enough to persuade the administrators. I suspect Charlie would have been. So it goes, for the want of a horseshoe nail.

As a kid I read paperbacks from shops on Seattle's First Avenue, mainly soft-core porn about teenage gangbangers in Jersey City with large bosomed girlfriends. It was at the University of Chicago where I began to recognize that serious writers employed obscenity and pornography. I read Steinbeck as a teen and noticed his attentions to the waterfront hookers on Monterey's Cannery Row, and then *East of Eden* with its sexual motif came out big when I was in high school. Along the way you run into hushed references to Joyce's *Ulysses* and likewise Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley*, and you read Ginsberg and LeRoi Jones before he was Baraka and bits of *Naked Lunch* show up, as does Henry Miller. Somebody steers you to Freud and then, with a poke in the ribs, to Havelock Ellis, and so it goes. At Chicago I got into criticism seriously and pitched a dissertation on porn to Elder Olson. He said not only would he not direct me on it but would oppose its acceptance

by the department. It's much too ambitious he said, the implication being that it would cause me grief.

He wasn't wrong on that, and it took me some doing to handle its dynamics. I didn't really manage that until the second book on the subject, by which time I had a better handle on the development of philosophical materialism in the history of aesthetics and on porn, vulgarity, obscenity as logical consequences. The irony was that Charlie had got me to write a piece about going with Ron Tavel to meet Andy Warhol. The editor of *The New Republic* had seen it and wrote asking for something. I proposed what turned out to be "An Apology for Pornography," which was headlined on the cover of the magazine. That led to a contract for the first book, *The Aesthetics of Pornography*. So, yes, to get back to your question, it did date back to Chicago, and Aristotle was central to my differentiation between idealist and materialist poetics and the historical tango between them.

**NDR:** *Well, alas for the fate of The Lover's Horoscope and the whole Purple Sage enterprise, but hurray for Swallow and TriQuarterly. After your year in Chicago on the—what shall we call it, "severance pay" from Wyoming?—you were at Northwestern for a while, and then ended up at the University of Colorado. Having grown up in the West, you were heading back in that direction. Not too long after you arrived there, you were joined by Ed Dorn. One outcome of the meeting between you was Rolling Stock, a strange publication. Can you talk a little about Dorn and your sense, perhaps, of any connections you see between the plainsongs and Dorn's Gunslinger? I'm a little vague about the dates by which both of those sequences, yours and Dorn's, were completed—but very roughly at about the same time?*

**PM:** Colorado, in 1973, was interested in me because it was about to start a Creative Writing program. There was already a nucleus there—Sidney Goldfarb, Marilyn Krysl, and Reg Saner. Then I was hired about the same time as Steve Katz and Bill Matthews. A year or two later, after Ron Suenick came, I found out Ed Dorn was on the coast, where he'd been teaching off and on. So we, primarily Sidney and I, made a concerted effort to get him to Colorado. He came for a year, and it evolved into a regular thing. I had met Ed briefly at Northwestern, where I had invited him to read from *Gunslinger* 1970 or so, shortly after the first two books came out. I had read his poems in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* in the early Sixties and remarked its distracted and edgy wit. I read *Hands Up!* in the mid-Sixties, a more extended exposure of his manner.

That he wove history, the classics, geography, quotidian life, and po-

litical economy into intriguingly energetic fabrics such as “The Debt My Mother Owed to Sears Roebuck” caught my attention. Also a long ambitious poem modestly titled “The Land Below,” sometimes soaring over and sometimes motoring through planes of civilizations manifest finally in the landscape of American history. That’s a mouthful, but, as I say, its ambition and possibilities caught my attention. I had missed the London books in the mid-Sixties, so I didn’t catch up with his work again until *Gunslinger*.

By that point I’d begun *Pacific Plainsong*. And of course all the while I’d been reading around. Olson, for example, even his letter on projective verse in the Allen anthology, and Ginsberg and Kerouac and the Beats and so on. And Ed was there in the context of my autodidactic curriculum, autodidactic in the sense that I was figuring out what I wanted to do in relation to the sum of my reading, which of course was broad by virtue of being a teacher all this time, where Pound and Eliot and Marianne Moore, to say nothing of Keats and Coleridge and so on, were mandatory.

And then also I occasionally reviewed contemporary poets, Elizabeth Bishop, Isabella Gardner, Daryl Hine, Lucien Stryk, etc. So in all this reading and writing I was configuring what I needed. Ed was there, to be sure, but it’s hard to say precisely who or what was a direct influence. I was writing and revising the plainsongs already when I read the first books of *Slinger*. I look back now and see that the first “plainsong” I published was in 1965 in *TriQuarterly*; by 1968 or so I had written the five songs that are in Michael’s *New Poetry Anthology* (1969). The Wingbow Press edition of the complete *Slinger* was published in 1975. The Brillig Works edition of the complete *Pacific Plainsong I–XIII* was published in 1978, though I think it was completed by ’76.

**NDR:** *Can you say a little about Rolling Stock?*

**PM:** About 1980 Ed and Jenny Dorn, Sidney Goldfarb, and I decided we’d start not so much a literary magazine but something more like a cultural gazette. Ed came up with the perfect title, *Rolling Stock*, an image evoking the dynamics of the railroad industry—speed, power, mass, momentum... gravitas. Our logo, as you recall, was an old-fashioned steam locomotive, the engine that built modern civilization. We did publish poetry and fiction, but largely as it suited our sense of the socio-cultural pertinences of the moment. We published Tlinget poetry (Andy Hope) and Pawnee fiction (Roger EchoHawk), for example, as we focused attention where we thought it was needed. On the other hand, we had regular cinema (Stan Brakhage) and legal (John Daley) correspondents and also a golfing column (Nicholas

Sedgewick). We published commentary on and translations of writing from all over Asia, the Arctic and Aleutians, all the Americas, Europe, and Africa as well as the Near and Far East. We commissioned friends and colleagues for everything from news oddments, obituaries, translations, reviews, and commentary to photography and art. You recall; you sent translations from Sweden and gossip from the Cambridge Poetry Festival.

Between the four of us (Sidney dropped out as an editor after the second year but was of course a close friend and informal presence) we knew quite a number of talented people, and we drew on them frequently, whether occasionally or regularly. Lucia Berlin, who has had posthumous fame with the republication of her collected stories, *A Cleaning Woman's Manual*, was a regular contributor, as were Tom Clark with reviews of contemporary poetry, Marilyn Krysl and Jane Brakhage with stories, and Tom Raworth with essays, among others. The editors also contributed regularly. As our initial plan we agreed that each of the four of us would write an essay as anchors for the first issue. As it happened, I was the only one who did my homework, a longish essay on, as it was titled, *"The Blinding Lights of Contrariety: A Dialogue on Buddhism, Poetics and Metaphysics."*

It's a mouthful, but it was fun. I conjured up my old friend and colleague, the literary critic Jerry Graff, and enlisted him as "Graph" for the dialogue. He has a low opinion of poets, "hoaxers" he calls them. This was just after there had been a scandal amidst Buddhists, specifically Ginsberg's Naropa Buddhists at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, around Allen's guru Rinpoche and his infamous bullying of W. S. Merwin and his lady friend at a religious retreat in the mountains. So "Graph" and I meet up via a kind of magical realism at the continental divide and have a dialogue. Because the incident had considerable publicity that dialogue has had an occasional visibility on the internet.

**NDR:** *When you rather suddenly went to China, you kept up the Rolling Stock work. I remember being surprised that you made this big geographical leap as you had been a reluctant traveler aside from moving around in the US. I told Michael Anania recently that when I recently reread your poem "The Eater Goes 1) West, or 2) to the Movies" I thought you had gone so far west that you had ended up at the movies in the East. Or maybe in the movies in the East.*

**PM:** Yes, I was in China in 1982. I was reading what writers I could in translation, interviewing writers, and writing about contemporary Chinese life and culture as I experienced and assimilated it. And of course I was teaching at the Tianjin Foreign Language Institute. It was a busy but excit-

ing time. Interviews were especially difficult because I had to tape them on a small, not-always-reliable recorder and then transcribe them a phrase or sentence at a time on my portable typewriter, usually with the help of an interpreter. It was tiresome and time consuming. However, when I interviewed Wang Meng, a prominent writer in the progressive tradition of Lu Xun and as problematic to the government, an attaché from the US embassy wanted a copy, as Wang was considered a bell weather literary figure. Finding willing and able translators was also difficult, partly because native speakers were often wary of cooperating with foreigners. Because of that I was obliged to find students or faculty willing to help me who wouldn't do it on their own recognizance. Hence my somewhat ersatz translations of Gu Cheng, Bei Dao, and Wang Meng. But when I returned I discovered that there were scholars and critics of Chinese literature and culture who were interested in the *Rolling Stock* material from China.

*Rolling Stock* ran for ten years, from June of 1981 to June of 1991. After that first issue we all wrote for the paper, as we called it, as well as produced it. Production technology advanced unbelievably in that time. We began by using light tables to make it up, and by 1986 or so we were doing it all on a computer. Actually Jenny [Dorn] learned the computer faster than Ed or me, and she essentially executed the production right up to when we went to the printer. In those production stages, i.e., after you've made the editorial decisions—proofing, designing, making and placing heds etc.—you're facing a tight deadline, and we required a fair amount of whiskey, coke, and marijuana. In the whole process you're a crew and a kind of intimacy develops. Naturally there were some editorial arguments, but in general we were pretty much in synch on what we wanted. When the paper came off the press we took copies to the bar at the Hotel Boulderado for review, exhausted but exhilarated.

**NDR:** *During the year in China, your work took an interesting turn with the poems from When the Revolution Really (1984) called "Notes from the PRC." These are in a kind of dialogue with the translations you mentioned, which are also in the book. Also, in a way, they're in dialogue with the poems you wrote a little later about your time in Ceylon. The Eater really had gone East.*

**PM:** Well, in a way, yes. And for someone who'd spent most of his life in the American West and Midwest, it was a bit of a leap from Colorado to China abruptly in 1982. I was married to Marilyn then, and we took two of our kids with us. So it was a family as well as cultural and literary adventure. Ed had just published the *Yellow Lola* sequence of *Hello La Jolla*, incisive

short jabs at, often enough literally, the day's events. They are a fusion of journalism, essay, and verse. I inadvertently took that methodology with me, and it turned out useful, requiring quick perceptions and jabs in a busy time with little space for leisurely contemplation. So the "notes" owe a debt, which is acknowledged in that book. Similarly, the same MO was useful later in Sri Lanka, where my circumstances were often as frenetic as in China.

I had taken on two tasks. The first was as a volunteer for Peace Brigades International; our function was to witness democratic situations—e.g., elections, union strikes, court proceedings, etc.—as international observers, the rationale for which was it provided some protections for local activists. There were some indications it worked. The other was working as a volunteer for devising an English language ESL curriculum from scratch for Eastern University of Sri Lanka. It was located in Batticaloa, frequently at that time a free fire zone.

Before I left for Sri Lanka Judith (Aplon), who was a skilled ESL teacher, gave me a crash course and a box of books. The Lanka poems reflect both jobs. "Official Habits" is an account, for example, of a court trial we observed. "Pitching the Catch and Vice Versa" comes from a visit to a corporation after a union strike. The cultures were vastly different, but my time in China did somewhat cushion me in Sri Lanka. Again, there was no luxury of contemplation, so I was obliged to turn my ignorance to advantage. My perceptions were first time experiences, so first impressions often took on the charge of revelation. In that way, yes, there is a kind of dialogue between the two sets of poems and also with Ed's *Hello La Jolla* methods.

But I should note that Ed had used the essayistic manner, as he thought of it, earlier in *Recollections of Gran Apacheria* and later in *Abhorrences*. I should also note that neither he nor I use the style exclusively. It opens itself to intellection, meditation, and lyricism alike. That it invites that sort of mediation is primarily my attraction to it. In the Sri Lanka sequence such poems as "Mean Times Mean Demeanor" or "Enduring Witness, the Mosque at Kattankudi" began as impressionistic notes, but as I worked on them they elaborated meditatively. Whereas "First Law of Lankan Dynamics" or "Nature or Nurture" are in the quick perceptual mode, but more syllogistic than imagist. Sometimes, as in "Pitching the Catch and Vice Versa," there's a fusion where the two approaches merge ironically. In both the China and Sri Lanka sequences there is this dialogue of perspectives. Well, I suppose there is the same stylistic conversation throughout all my work.

**NDR:** *This brings us, as far as The Eater's world travels are concerned, to Finland. When you finally went to western Europe it was not to Paris or London. There you were in the dark winter in Scandinavia. How did this come about, and what were the effects on what you wrote in that period?*

**PM:** Finland was wonderful. It happened as Judith and I were falling in love and decided we wanted some sustained time together. Neither of us is a traveler as such; we both have traveled but always in the context of a working relationship to where we were. So I applied for a Fulbright lecture-ship, and Finland fell into my lap. We went to Turku in August, and from the start it was Brigadoon, a magical time and place. We both taught and also traveled, as Europeans do, all over Europe. In September the al-Qaeda attacks on the US cast a rather different, indeed counterpointing, aura. So Brigadoon was compromised but still lustrous.

Still, it was a complex atmosphere that inclined me more toward prose than poetry, and moreover I had committed myself to several essay projects with deadlines. One of which was writing an introduction to Joe Richey's edition of Ed's interviews on poetics for the University of Michigan Press. The upshot was I didn't write a lot of poetry, though what I did turned out to be important. Riva, my stepdaughter, sent word that she and her long-time boyfriend, Rohan, were getting married. The poem I wrote, as a kind of epithalamion, began in Finland and then circulated through the geography and turbulences of the world, settling in Sri Lanka, Rohan's native land. It is, as intended, a happy celebration of their marriage but was also a return to a poetics wrangling politics, history, and lyricism together in a surge of language, as I had done in the plainsongs.

That poem spun into the sequence of dream poems. Judith dreams profusely, like Desnos and the French surrealists. And especially like Desnos she remembers them. Her recounting them was central to our life together. As I took notes and images, rather than interpret them, I absorbed them into my own psyche. My imagination merged with the "Priestess of the Dreams," so those poems are really a collaboration, where the world's sense or lack thereof is not so much the issue as how our mutual consciousness *was* the issue. That year of 2001–2002 was a kind of *annus mirabilis*, and not only for us. Also, of course, they were love poems but at the same time evoked a *memento mori*. I turned sixty-five that year, though I didn't retire for another five years. But my physique gradually began to deconstruct. While I didn't regard a knee or back problem as mortal, I think in the back of my mind aging was a presence.

Looking back past the dream poems I see oblique aging motifs in not a

few of the poems in *Mixed Frequencies*, some more direct than others. “The Afflicted Man,” for instance, is a young man remarking an old one. I am now “afflicted” myself. In “The Day I Saw the Light” an aging man recollects an important teacher who set his consciousness in motion. Whereas, in the dream sequence, “The Lunar Light” features an aging woman meditating as she watches the setting moon. Judith’s a few years younger than I, but we weren’t kids. And whether Brigadoon was recoupable was an ongoing conversation with us. I insisted yes, we could do it again. She would smile and say no. In terms of that sort of dreamscape mutual adventure, she was right. Finlandia was the last hurrah.

I don’t mean to suggest morbidity, just that a cognition of time passing asserts itself here and there. Vitality drives the poems, just as the title, *Mixed Frequencies*, suggests. And the full title, adding “East and West,” I think enforces that. The Sri Lanka poems are very much in their own continuous present. Liveliness has always been a factor in my work and personality. A number of my former students are longtime friends. I am pleased to say a refrain from them is that I won’t get “old.” A consummation devoutly to be wished...but I think I’ll stop right there.

**NDR:** *Peter, that sounds to me like a good note to end on, more or less. Any last thoughts (not last words!) you’d like to add? Something we haven’t touched on, or just something else you’d like your readers to know?*

**PM:** Well, since aging’s reared its inevitable head, just this: You and I, and friends that we’ve mentioned and more that we haven’t, have been allies for half a century. The world continues as it will, however we chide, cajole, or celebrate it. Friends and allies matter, and I am grateful for mine, who are present in my work as in my consciousness. Above all, they have told me—however right, wrong, or indifferent I might have been—that I am alive and that we are all on the bus. Moreover, you’re not just *on* the bus, you’re *driving* the damned thing. So stay awake and, as the poet said, for everybody’s sake, watch out where you’re going.