

Lea Graham, *A Range of Experience: An Interview with Michael Anania*

I arrived at Michael Anania's house in LaGrange, Illinois in my friends' rebuilt Chevette with archaeology tools in the back seat and a plastic hula girl mounted to the dashboard. It was a hot, hot day in late June and driving I-55 to Michael's place from Chicago's northside with Western Illinois stretched out before me, the radio turned up over the wind and traffic of the open windows, the dust from the tools flying and the hula girl swaying seemed to be a perfect way to begin a conversation with a writer whose life's work was about trying to bring all of his experience into his poems. I was reminded of the quote from the poet Charles Boer in describing his visits to Swallow Press in the late 1960s and early 1970s when Michael was editor, the press housed in downtown Chicago on Wabash Avenue, and the offices were only reached by a freight elevator: "You felt more like you were creating a pipe than a pipe-dream." However, upon arriving at the Anania household, I was reminded that the grit and toughness was only one part of Michael's oeuvre as we lunched on fruit, cheese and wine out on his patio, in the shade overlooking the garden. His work—like the person—is always a gathering, a ranging from dust motes to the elegance of a Bill Evans song, from the Plaza of inner-city Omaha where he grew up to the forests of Southern Italy.

LG: In "Excesses and Boondoggles" in your book of essays *In Plain Sight* (1991), you say "to live in a city—any city worth bothering about, at least, is to live with a city's past, not as an idea or an academic exercise but as a day-to-day fact of life, something you can brush elbows with or lean up against waiting for a bus." This seems to be very much what "Steal Away" in your new book *Heat Lines* (2006) is concerned with. Can you talk about the confluence of history, place and music in the poem?

MA: Cities change so dramatically. Buildings are torn down changed. Whole neighborhoods change. You were fascinated by the factory building where Swallow Press was housed; that building became a studio for a commercial advertising firm, and now is a very expensive set of condo lofts. Two things happen: the city changes all the time, yet it gives you these recurrent surfaces. You have familiar buildings, streets and sidewalks and a continual economic surge which changes places from one thing to another. When I moved to South Michigan Avenue, the area south of Roosevelt Road still had the vestiges of the great record industry for rhythm & blues music. Chess Records was still there. That gave way to changes in the record industry, and that part of South Michigan then fell into a kind of dereliction. Now it's been revived. Those lofts are quite expensive, but they leave very little of their past except brickwork façades and addresses. These kinds of changes happen in American cities all the time; they exaggerate the presence of change and propose a kind of urban elegy. I also suggested in that essay that economic change, the movements of commerce and trade through the city, means successives of mutations, dereliction and reuse. Sometimes the reuse is wonderful—small clubs, blues bars, galleries, none of which would have the resources for first use or even rehabbed use.

LG: Your use of proper names in “Heat Lines” is stunning in its abruptness and its turns within the poem—like the Jeffrey bus—an early image in the poem—rocks and corners. It seems that names function like that for you in your work—as connectors within the poem, but even more so as a kind of disconnection or more accurately, a dislodging from narrative even as they seem to suggest another narrative.

MA: I have always been interested in names and their weight in poems. The substance they gain is entirely different than what we accumulate adjectivally or in stylish apposition. Modification persuades us toward some episteme behind the poem. Names—proper nouns—simply and emphatically—assert it. Modification argues for the presence of the poet in the occasion being described. Names assert it, along with a community of assent and an enduring presence. These concerns were touched on in *The Color of Dust* (1970) where I used names with reverent familiarity that would not be known by any of my likely readers outside of Omaha. We acquiesce in traditional poems to named places: *Penshurst*, *Tintern Abbey*, *Westminster Bridge*. I was interested in whether or not names in Nebraska could be made to function in the same way, so that book opens “Just north of Clark Street / Grace Street” as a declaration of its significant space.

LG: How far back does your interest in names go?

MA: One of my undergraduate essays was titled “Do Proper Nouns have Meaning?” It’s an issue I’ve raised a number of times in poems. In *Riversongs* (1978), I adopted Saul Kripke’s notion that proper nouns are like addresses to which we send meanings to over time. They accumulate significances of various kinds—bundles, parcels, *billets doux*—from a variety of sources, some communal, some idiosyncratic. In *Riversongs*, the Plain of Jars in Cambodia is said to be “like a street name or an address,” as is the *Mare Tranquillitatus* on the moon. The Prague poem [“Factum, Chansons. Etc.” in *Selected Poems*, 1994] takes up the issue at some length, beginning with that quote from Carnap about “name” languages and what is determined and underdetermined in language which necessarily engages, though they elude Carnap’s positivism, history, politics, folklore and magic.

LG: Music has been such a central part of your work throughout your career. In *Heat Lines*, you refer to Curtis Mayfield, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Miles Davis and Gil Evans, among others. Can you talk about music as a kind of driving theme in your work—and in this, it occurs to me that the use of the word “driving” gets at both the figurative as well as the literal in that your interest in cars and listening to radio is also recurrent.

MA: Music seems always to be in its own present. We return to it, take our various presents to its present past. This effect is exaggerated, of course, by recordings and is really intense in jazz because of the unique nature of specific performances. To tweak the idiom, it keeps time. I’m especially fond of listening to music while driving; that’s the subject, as you suggest, of the Miles Davis/Gil Evans poem “Summer Night—Nebraska c. 1957.” The first delight is the

music's movement within the car's movement, then in that poem the way that recalling the music recalls the music as it was heard on that stretch of Nebraska highway in 1957 with a 1940s radio and a less than adequate 1950s radio signal fading and re-occurring with the shallow roll of the land, its distances—the music's and the land's both intimate and remote, at once coincident and disjointed. In Heat Lines' opening poem, "Steal Away" music is the significant history of the place. The poem is an elegy for Curtis Mayfield who used to visit at the apartment complex where I lived. It also turns out that the space across from my study window had held, before the gas stations took the place of its derelict building, the Plantation Club, where Sonny Boy Williamson was killed in 1948. He's joined in the poem by Little Walter Jacobs and Blind Lemon Jefferson, who were both also killed in Chicago streets, Jacobs in 1948, Jefferson in 1929. But that space was also part of the 1920s Stroll. The Lincoln Gardens, where King Oliver and Louis Armstrong played in the '20s was just two blocks away. Music has a redemptive quality, even when, as in that space, that past it gives present to is filled with violent death.

LG: It also occurs to me in the first few poems of Heat Lines that music is a way of creating place. How are the music and landscape linked?

MA: I lived in a housing project in the middle of Omaha. It was an extremely densely populated area. I lived on a plaza where there were 200 kids. So, I had in my life both the sense of living in an urban environment informed on all sides by its rural context, farmland and space, by the cows and pigs in the stockyards every day. We liked to pretend that we were sophisticated—sophisticated and urban, but Omaha was, as Chicago was, a place that was entirely formed by its ruralness setting, and it succeeded Chicago as the edge of the West. When I was a kid you could catch a streetcar to the country. I worked on truck farms on the river silt picking cucumbers and picking strawberries and got there by taking the streetcar. The transition, between an intensely urban environment and an intensely rural environment cost five cents. To get back to your question, though, the music—particularly jazz and rhythm & blues—was a fact of the urban part of my life and was deeply connected to the mostly African American neighborhood where I lived. At the same time, I could go by streetcar to the South Side, to a place called Mandan Park and walk in the space where Lewis and Clark had walked in their trip up the river. For me, the western rural part is counterpoised by the urban, city part. In that sense, the connection between Omaha and Chicago is a pretty deep one. They were both rail centers, both stockyard centers and centers for the exchange of wheat. Omaha had formed itself on the west side of a river. Chicago formed itself around the eastern boundary caused by the lake. There are a lot of similarities. Also, my father was an intensely urban person. He never left the neighborhood without a suit, a tie and a hat. After the war, my grandfather, who had also been a very urban person, bought a farm. And so the farm I went to was my grandfather's, but he wasn't a farmer; he was an ex-bootlegger, ex-foundry worker, who owned a small farm.

LG: And this was your father's father?

MA: [Yes] my father's father. My mother's father had died in Germany when she was born. Her stepfather was a homesteader in South Dakota and then a harness-maker in Coleridge, Nebraska, where my mother lived. My mother lived in that rural universe, but she was born in rural Germany, a very different world. Olson says that "an American is a complex of occasions." Melville said that "an American is a loose fish and a fast fish, also." It's in the nature of what we are, duplicitous almost always, never quite what we say we are. Whatever we say is conditioned by the strange and ambivalent nature of the country. One of the questions I struggled with when I went to New York was "where does the Midwest start?" Is Cleveland a Midwestern city? Does that make Omaha a Western city? Grand Island, just one step west and not a very long one, fifty-seven miles from Omaha, is clearly in the West, no question about it. I went to school with a lot of Native Americans. I went to school with whites, African Americans and Native Americans. We were, are still, I think, multiple. If you are American, you choose what you are. To some extent, I chose to be Italian, although I'm as much German, I suppose, as I am Italian.

LG: How much did surname determine that?

MA: It's true that my surname helped it along, but it was driven by a variety of other things. Italian was, in many ways, more interesting than German, although I speak German better than I speak Italian. My attachment to my father added to this. My father died when I was quite young, so I never had to have conflicts boys have with their fathers, but just had this romantic figure. Also, Italians at that time were still being treated with prejudice; if you had an Italian last name, it pushed you in the way prejudice does toward being Italian. You were Dago ... and proud of it. I am as much German as Italian, and maybe more so since my mother raised me, but that is part of this duplicity I'm talking about—Americans are all very complicated. We are inherently multicultural. It's part of our cultural neurosis to either resist that fact or re-contrive it into a farce. There may be a few New Englanders left and a few Southerners who are not plural, but the rest of us from out in the raffish edges of America are never one thing.

LG: Was your father's father born in Italy?

MA: My father was born here, but his first language was Calabrese, the Calabrian dialect of Italian. His second language was Italian. His third language was English. He was probably unlike anyone else [my mother] had ever met, a very spiffy-looking urban Italian. In his fedora, three-piece suit, carefully knotted tie and highly polished shoes, he would have been at home in lower Manhattan or on Taylor Street in Chicago. My father's generation of Italians invented what it was to be an urban Italian. It has its comic side. They were dressing like they thought the bankers and the industrialists who owned America dressed ... except that if you were going to get a stripe in your suit, why not get a stripe that showed? If you're going to get a tie, get a wide tie; if you're going to get a hat with a brim, get a large brim. Everything got exaggerated toward self-parody.

LG: This seems connected to the sense of the West that we've been talking about, giving it a different kind of spin and seems part of the duplicity which you've been talking about. I'm reminded of the poet Thomas McGrath and his sense of the West, especially in his long poem *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, which you published when you were editor at Swallow Press. How were your experiences of the West similar or different?

MA: The McGraths were Irish-Catholics. They settled in North Dakota, and Tom has some Indian ancestry. McGrath's father saw the Wounded Knee encampment. Tom's embedded in that rural America environment in a different way than I was, more confirmed in it. But as you mention, *Letter* starts in L.A. and thinks its way back to that other space on the plains and occasions in Tom's past there. Eventually, at the end of part 2, it wants to reach toward some communal or magical communal life and invokes Southwest Native Americans—the kachina and the circle of light. Tom wanted communism to end in a mystical radiance in the American landscape, in American myth. But in terms of his westernness, he was western in a way that I wasn't, not the cowboy west, but the wheat growing west of the Great Plains. The most vivid memories from his childhood are of threshing machines in the Dakotas. The story about Cal, the Wobbly organizer, who was beaten up by Tom's own uncles for trying to organize the migrant workers, is Tom's political awakening. He runs down the hill and ends up under the stars in a creek among the mulberries. That radiant moment is his poetic awakening as well. McGrath was westerner in the sense that I'm not, although I lived on the margin of the West and had a keen sense that the West was the part of the world I lived in. The Union-Pacific Railroad headquarters were in Omaha. On the first floor there was a museum with the Golden Spike—the spike nailed the East to the West. Also, at the checkout desk in the children's reading room of the Omaha Public Library there was a bell jar that held a scalp. There was a little card explaining that it was one of the last scalps taken in the West. It certainly did make you think that you should bring your library books back in time! [laughter] Like the Golden Spike, it was an icon of the West. My longtime childhood friend Russell, who was called "the Red Menace" in *The Red Menace* (1984) was one of the great-grandsons of Logan Fontenelle, the chief of the Omaha Indians, who made the treaty that created the town. The housing project—the Logan Fontenelle Homes—was named for him. You had a sense, sometimes a burlesque sense, of westernness. When I go out there now and drive west of the city, the sky has a sudden expanse. That moment is for me the beginning of the West, that first sense of almost oppressive expansiveness, a sense of a change of place—West vs. East, rural vs. urban. There are fault lines in the landscape and in cities, like the San Andreas Fault, where the tectonic plates of history, culture and language abrade each other. I think UIC is on one of them; it's the Roosevelt Road fault line between Black Chicago and commercial Chicago. There is another one up towards Fullerton that divides commercial Chicago and the old ethnic residential areas like Logan Square. Those are places where the forces of the city seem to grate against each other. Omaha lies along a major fault line in the tectonics of American culture. It's a poetic advantage, I think.

LG: One of the reasons that I brought up McGrath, besides the fact that you had published him which was part of the work you did during the late '60s and '70s, was that I wondered if you saw yourself as continuing in that tradition, taking up where McGrath left off?

MA: No, though it's a flattering notion. McGrath had different goals. There are only a few great Marxist poets: Neruda, Hikmet, McGrath and probably Hugh McDermott. I can't think of any others. Vosznzensky and Yevtuchenco, we think of as more Russian than Marxist. Tom was always trying to deal with Marxist paradigms. I was never more than a make-believe communist and mostly because it made people mad when I was in school. My yearbook is signed with things about "the Revolution" and the working class, but I was never in the party. I did send for a party card once, but they never sent one back. Tom said that they figured I was an FBI agent, but that they should've sent one anyway. I do owe McGrath, I think, a significant debt because he found a way to take the ordinary materials of the Midwest—weeds, quack-grass, bluestem—and make that stuff an essential part of the poetry. You couldn't get that from Williams. Williams had a different set of flowers, a different set of objects. Williams never traveled to the center of America. Whitman went all the way down the Mississippi to New Orleans, but Williams never dealt with the interior of America. His horticultural book is eastern. Also, I owe Tom the sense that the kinetic image is inherently a part of the politics of any occasion, that part that seems counter-political in McGrath I take away with me. My other teachers ...well, Tom was a friend and not a teacher, but I learned a lot from him. Olson was crucial because of his thinking about space and place and the relationship of myth and place to the physical person.

LG: But Olson was actually your teacher when you studied at SUNYBuffalo. How many years was that?

MA: He was there for two, and I was in his poetics seminar for the first year. I attended the second year, but I wasn't a member of the class. The important thing from Olson was that sense of the relationship of the body and the person to place, that place is an occasion of the self moving in a locale. Polis, for Olson, is the environment leaning in and him pushing out [as in] that diagram of the "Maximus Letter 27," "I compel backward / I compel Gloucester / polis is this," that sense of the body against something, and Olson's sense, which he takes from Whitehead mostly, some geographers, philosophers, is place as defined by movement and movement of the body and in an area of space. Two great American poets of that period were from Worcester, Charles Olson and Frank O'Hara. Both treat American material as though they were the equivalent to Greek and Roman materials. Well, in Olson's case, he actually puts the thing together—text, artifact, evidence and in his own way argument. What O'Hara does is treat the movies and streets of New York, and street signs (the pure products of America)—as though they were the parts of a Pindaric occasion, as obvious as the gods were to the Greeks. So, James Dean and Lana Turner have conspicuous mythic qualities. That's really important. Though there were certainly poets before who wrote about haircuts and Buicks and barbershops like my earlier teacher Karl Shapiro. They used the diction, the status of the poem to distance themselves from the junk that the poem was about. That's the great trope of American poetry of the '40s and '50s,

a distancing irony signaled by style, an ironic stance learned from Eliot, of course, that spared the poet the stain of what was all around him.

LG: Because of the banality of it?

MA: Yes, because of the banality of it. It's as though the poem is placing itself at a kind of aesthetic remove from the stuff that it's dealing with. The great invention of O'Hara is that he collapses that space: "O Lana Turner we love you get up" is not, does not do that same thing. "Of course I've been awfully drunk and behaved perfectly disgraceful, but I never actually collapsed ... O Lana Turner ..." It's the complete absorption into the stuff of the poem that is the virtue of O'Hara. In Olson? Well, Olson is arduous, and the mythic material he moves about is enormous. Olson wants everything in his intellect and experience to be in the poem as a part of its evolving mytho-poetic stuff. To connect back to McGrath—Olson's Marxism, in "The Distances" and "The Kingfisher," say, is different. Olson was in the Democratic Party, quite notably so for a while, not in the Communist Party. The Maoism of some of the poems is engaged with his concern for the communal nature of Mayan agriculture.

LG: I was wondering how I might characterize you as a poet—not just with this later work—like your recent book *Heat Lines*, but in the earlier work. I was thinking about your attention to moment and to gesture and the way you're constantly capturing time, but it's time that's already passed even as you've captured it.

MA: Yes, that's the dilemma of time, which is why we're so easily seduced by photographs. We exist in a curious space between what we think of as the past and what we think of as the future. Everything we see is in the process of becoming as we see it, so to speak of the present is to expand the moment. It's very much like the idea of the relationship between place and space. We think about space in the Euclidian or Aristotelian sense, as empty, as a category—in Cartesian terms by the lattice of coordinates, hence location, or, in everybody's favorite word now, "site" as in "website." But if you think about it, place is really you, in the Platonic sense, in the receptacle; you are "in place," you can "lose your place," "be out of place," you can be "misplaced," but if you are none of those sad things, you are "in place." So place is defined as what surrounds you. That surrounding can be larger or smaller. Is LaGrange a place? Or is my yard with all of the wild stuff that defines the edges of it that holds all of the flowers and the trees, is that the place? Each time we think of place, we think of it defined with a set of boundaries set by ourselves, and as we move, it moves as well. In time, present is place-like in the sense that, if we talk about this moment that we're in right now, it is an area of time that opens up around our conversation. We know, though, that time is continuous, so that if I'm looking at a branch out the window and it's moving, even if I were painting it, as I look back, it would be different. Momentary time, Euclidian time, instantaneous time is not something we experience. We experience this area of time around ourselves, and even that area once defined suffers change. Place is really the area of space around us in time. I think place only exists in conjunction with time. It's not separable. You can separate it out as space in the Aristotelian or

Euclidian sense, but organically it is always engaged in time and process. Poetry has a unique ability to hold an instant in remarkable clarity. In my poems, that clarity is both essential and steeped in illusion. It is a gesture that you try to capture. The bright moment is something we extract from the flux of things, wonderfully susceptible to the image. The poem is uniquely capable of doing this because it can hold its place in a resonant instance of diction, music and myth.

LG: For example?

MA: A friend of mine in Paris—we were in a restaurant and the light was reflecting off the crystal of the wine glass and creating little diamonds on the table. Because the wine was moving, refracted bits of light were moving, and he said, “These are your poems.” I think it was meant to be a criticism [laughter], and I said, “I don’t mind that ... if they are that significant and vivid, and if they can be made to accept all the complexities of this occasion.” We look for something in time to extract from time, but the poem is itself, like music, quintessentially temporal, its structures, music gives a kind of architecture to time in space. My interest in space convened as place in time is a substitute for what in a lot of poets is a sentimental attachment to the evolving self. I don’t like that, I’ve never liked that in poetry; it’s never interested me. I think it’s elitist in the worst possible way. If you can paint better than anyone, there’s the painting, but you can’t “feel” better than anybody. I don’t think poets have particularly better feelings. In fact, I think poets, by and large, are troubled in that area; they’re feeling impaired. Well, I mean, somebody dies, and you set out to write an elegy. Two lines into it you’ve forgotten the person who has died and are thinking about how good the elegy is. You just don’t wail, you write, and writing is a different kind of process than screaming and keening and rending your garments and tearing your flesh. The poet’s response to write always engages all those other poetries. Somebody dies, and you’re at war with Theocritus, passing Shelly and Tennyson and closing in on Milton. Suddenly, the whole history of the elegy comes into play and then you’re thinking “How close can I veer to this; what do I do about that ... can I make this guy a shepherd really or...?” So poets are feeling impaired, writers in general are, I think.

LG: In the beginning of your career when you began dealing with place in place of the whole development of self and that sort of thing, were you conscious of what you were doing—in terms of who your influences were?

MA: Yes. I was very conscious of writing about place. I had left Nebraska and gone to Buffalo. I had written a number of poems which were influenced by Eliot at one point. I have this early poem called “The Revelation” which is this very long, complicated thing that [got] published ... and I wrote sex poems influenced by Dylan Thomas, like everybody. In Buffalo, I began to think about Nebraska. I knew a lot of people who had grants and had been to Italy and wrote these Italian poems. There were New York poems and Boston poems, and I thought I’d write Nebraska poems that would be every bit as poetic and exotic because they were about places in Nebraska nobody had ever been to. Then I began to investigate some of the things you touched on

concerning proper nouns and their relationship to place. So I began to use the names of places and streets in Nebraska with absolute familiarity. I used them as I would use them in that place—that's not directly Williams, but you can take it from him. Place is the largest area of the idiom of individual experience, so that [for example] Paterson is the idiomatic spread of Dr. Paterson. In that kind of idiom there is an absolute consistency between place and name, between location and speech. So there is an early poem of mine that says "so with a thin, green field over Charles Street." Well, that's Charles Street in Omaha, Nebraska, two blocks along the edge of the projects.

LG: One of the things that interests me is the way in which you have maintained a thirty-three-year collaboration with the printmaker Ed Colker at a time that the art world is about "the flavor of the month." Can you talk a bit about this partnership and the ways in which you've sustained it?

MA: Well, I'll tell you how it started. I met him at a party. He was teaching at UIC and was the head of the Art Department there. He said he was thrilled to meet me—can't beat that—and had my book *The Color of Dust* on his nightstand. He said he had done some work with Marianne Moore, with a Robert Frost poem and a Stevens poem. He asked if I'd be willing to have him work with one of my poems, and I said sure. He chose "The Fall," for which he made three separate lithographs, a dazzling piece, 24 by 36 inches, just beautiful. I was overwhelmed. Then we began talking; we talked about art and music, mostly. The advantage for me is that he is, as I've sometimes described myself, an "unreconstructed abstract expressionist." His very gestural and fluid art, action-filled. At the same time, it's absolutely scrupulous, craft-ridden. He's a print-maker—one of the best ever—and printing is an exacting process. I became entranced by what he was doing, and we talked through the connection between his interests and mine. The second collaboration was *Esthétique du Rôle*. That poem really emerged from a series of conversations we had in a studio he had in those days on Ohio Street in downtown Chicago. The old Museum of Contemporary Art was just a block away. That was the period in which Chris Burden was lying on the floor under a plate of glass in the museum and, just before his wife shot him as an art piece, putting tin foil over kitchen matches and firing them like rockets at his wife who was naked on a large piece of lavender paper. She and the paper both received scorch marks. "Esthétique du Rôle" is the aesthetic of the death rattle. That poem is a collaboration in a way the first one wasn't. The first one was a response on Ed's part to a poem that was already finished and published. *Esthétique du Rôle* [the book] was really a kind of engagement in which we both did work surrounding a conversation. It's wonderfully disjunctive and strange because of that, and then we went on from there. I sent him what I did—still do. Sometimes he calls about a special occasion. I wrote "Pochades" for a portfolio he did when he was at Cooper Union. There's just been a whole range of work over the years. His work for the Adami poems, which you saw today, has a very different palette. But it also has the essential feature of all of Ed's work, an enormously elastic, fluid, almost watercolor-like flow from image to image in prints. I showed the proofs for *sounds/snow* to a friend of mine, a painter and sculptor in

Wisconsin, and he said, “This can’t be done.” Which is exactly what Lester Young said about Charlie Parker. Ed was involved with jazz music and was part of Fantasy Records in San Francisco. He’s a good friend of Dave Brubeck’s and was close to Paul Desmond. He’s a wonderful resource because those musics interest me as well.

LG: There seems to be a consonance to what you both do in this sense of the tactile—the papers and printing on his part and the way that you name things.

MA: The thing about Ed is you’ve got two directions going on at once: his drawings which are action-oriented, fluid, always about movement, improvisational, kinetic things ... even the fruits and vegetables that are in that painting [In Adami] are very fluidly moving from one part of the thing to the other. All of that fluidity is then counter-posed to the absolute care of materials, printing, handmade French papers, the whole nature of making lithograph. The great area of compatibility between Ed and me is that I want my poems to feel spontaneous, sometimes even improvisational, and at the same time, to feel crafted and precise. I want there to be a sense of the forward-moving, impelling quality of the poem, so as you read it is as though it were being invented in the moment, and at the same time, to have that sense of accumulated knowledge and craft and complex musicality. Ed seems to me to have invented a way to have the same divergent qualities at play in ink and paper. That’s also one of the reasons we’re both so attached to jazz.

LG: That tension between improvisation and craft strikes me as what you always emphasized as a teacher: trying to get students to think about improvisation and spontaneity in poems while still honoring craft. Can you elaborate on that tension? MA: Williams said at one point that the real matter of technique is saying what you want to say rather than what you didn’t. There is a tendency on the part of students to treat all mishaps as though they were creative acts. “Why did you drop the baby on the floor?” “Oh yeah, that’s what I wanted to do. Kids can learn from suffering.” Typically in class, I insist that if you mention a tree, you need to know what kind of tree. I would ask questions: “Now do you mean the sidewalk that has quartz in the sand and sparkles or is it more limestone colored?” The pressure was to get them to think about the nature of what they were putting in the poem then ask the same questions about language: “Is this the word you mean?” “What does this word mean?” What’s the background of the word? The first stage of craft is clarity. Then you can talk about matters of craft in terms of poetic technique and line.

LG: I remember that one time it was “What kind of socks?”

MA: You’re asking people to bring an attentiveness to the poem. It doesn’t have to mean that you name the brand or size of the sock in the poem, but you need to know. My other question is: “Where were you standing when you were looking at this?” In the simplest sense ... where is the camera in this shot? And students don’t know. How you describe something is dependent on where you’re standing. The discipline of location—and here we are back in “place”—the discipline of location is the great lesson of imagism and of Pound and Williams—that objects are

not merely names, that it's not a nominal universe in which trees stand for all trees, that the poem is reaching for a kind of particularity in the world. Creeley, in his lectures and in comments around poems, would often talk about the poem's particularity. Strangely enough, Creeley's poems are not full of particular places, but he'd always talk about the poem's ability to illicit particular occasions as opposed to the general one.

LG: Could you talk a bit about your work as editor at Swallow Press? That was about a decade of your work?

MA: About seven years. I had been an editor before that. When I went to Buffalo, there was a magazine called *Audit* which had been started at Harvard and was moved to Buffalo. It had separated itself into two parts: *Audit*, a general magazine of essays and poetry, edited by Ralph Maud, who is an Olson scholar; and a fiction magazine called *Audit Fiction*, edited by David Galloway. Galloway has been in Germany for years, teaching American Literature. The magazine came back together in '62, and Galloway asked me if I would be the poetry editor of *Audit: A Quarterly*. Galloway took his PhD and got a job in Europe, and I fell heir to the magazine, but I didn't have any money. Albert Cook had just come to Buffalo as head of the department. Albert Cook was a poet, scholar/critic and translator and had edited a magazine of his own called *Halcyon*. Albert said that the department would help support the magazine, give us an office and a telephone, but he wanted me to take on Charles Doria as associate editor. Doria and [Charles] Boer had both been students of Albert's at Western Reserve. Doria is a really bright guy, but not strong on the practical side of things. Betty Cohen, who was an old friend of Al's, became the managing editor. It was one of those interesting moments—we sat down and decided that what we were going to turn *Audit* into a poetry magazine, *Audit/Poetry*—it was the first of those slashes—and not do fiction at all. Fiction seemed beside the point in those days. It was a high poetic moment—Olson had just gotten to Buffalo, Cook was there, Creeley wasn't on the faculty yet but was visiting, Duncan visited, so did Dorn, Kelly, Wakoski, Corso and Baraka. Mac Hammond was there, and George Starbuck worked in the library.

LG: So this was post-Black Mountain?

MA: Yes, this was after Black Mountain College and after the great Vancouver reunion on Olson's part—that had been the previous summer. We decided that we were going to favor long poems and that we were going to feature individual poets in every other issue. We decided would do an issue with the work of Frank O'Hara. Now remember at that point—this is in 1963—O'Hara hadn't had a book in trade publications since *Meditations in an Emergency* which was '57—so six years. *Second Avenue* had been published but in very limited edition in '56. *Lunch Poems* had been accepted by Ferlinghetti at *City Lights*, but I think he was enthusiastic about O'Hara when he met him, but not afterwards because the book was stalled there and nothing happened. *Love Poems* hadn't even been put together at that point. I called O'Hara on the phone, a cold call, as they say. The issue with essays by Kenneth Koch and Al Cook was a huge success—we printed 1500 copies and they sold in no time. Then there was a portmanteau issue

and the notable poets in that issue were Mac Hammond—that was the first publication of his poem “The Horse Opera” and Robert Kelly. And then the next of the single author issues was Robert Duncan. I did the editorial work on the Duncan, but by the time it came out I had moved to Chicago to teach at Northwestern University. I came to Chicago in ’65. The Duncan issue came out in ’66. In ’66, Allen Swallow, who had been a college friend of Tom McGrath’s at LSU and had been publishing books of poems in Denver, including all of McGrath’s early work, died. In the winter of ’66–’67, four guys from Chicago bought the company. One of them, Durrett Wagner, who had been in *Ideas and Methods* at Chicago, was a Western American historian. Durrett became the press’s senior editor. Swallow had a great list of books in Western Americana. People in the West tended to know the press for its *Western American History*; if they lived in the East, they knew it as a poetry publisher. The poets published were McGrath, Allen Tate, Yvor Winters, J. V. Cunningham and a long list of conservative poets from Winters’s circle. In fiction, the press published Anais Nin and Frank Waters. Wagner came to see me at Northwestern—he was the Dean at Kendall College in Evanston—and we talked about the press. Gene Wildman was at the University of Chicago, the editor of the *Chicago Review*, which had just published the first *Anthology of Concretism*. When Wagner asked me what he should do, I said, “publish this as a book.” He looked at it—it was amazing concretist stuff from all over the world. “Why this in particular?” he said. “Because,” I told him, “it will separate you from the [earlier] Swallow Press and Winter’s circle of rhyming poets. It will make your place and do very well.” And I was right. The book did extremely well, got into schools and was in print for a dozen years. So, I became the poetry editor for Swallow in ’67. In ’68, I became the literary editor. Wagner did all of the Western Americana and general books. I edited the poetry and Nin, then I started the series in experimental fiction. I published Federman and Sukenick, Wildman’s novel and his anthology *Experiments in Prose*. I also did Cyrus Colter’s fiction.

LG: And this work at Swallow was in addition to teaching?

MA: I taught all through that time. I was teaching at Northwestern University when I started. Then I went to University of Illinois at Chicago. I would get up in the morning, drive down the Kennedy and get to the office around 7:30. I’d work until I left fifteen minutes before my first class at UIC. I’d teach my class, do my office hours and then go back to my office at Swallow. I did that from ’68 to ’74. I published a lot of books ... seventy-five to eighty books during that period. We were doing enormously interesting things, I edited a series of books called *Poetry Europe*, really interesting stuff.

LG: How did dealing with other people’s texts all day long feed your own writing?

MA: There are two sides to it. I talked myself into reading a whole lot of manuscripts—I didn’t want to have poetry read by someone who could say no but not say yes. I was getting about 3500 manuscripts a year. It was a lot of work, and I was always behind. At one point, I decided that I was becoming the world’s greatest authority on “mortal poetry.” That is, I was reading student poetry and I was reading the submitted “stuff” that came over the transom. At the same time,

stunning things would turn up—Matthias, for instance. Matthias sent me poems unsolicited. They were dazzling. Peter Michaelson, James McMichael, Allen Planz, a brilliant Hart Crane-esque poet from New York and Linda Pastan. As soon as I got the job, I called Charles Boer and said, “Send me the manuscript of *The Odes*,” poems I had heard in Olson’s class. It was the first New Poetry Series book I published at the press.

LG: During the late 1960s, early 1970s you have that great poem “News Notes” that is dedicated to John Matthias about the Chicago riots. How would you describe that time in your career?

MA: John had come up to Swallow from Notre Dame. We were working at the office on 23 Modern British Poets when that riot occurred in Grant Park. We believed we were changing the world, that literature was an agent for change, so we worked through the revolution, at least through that bit of it. We assumed we had changed the nature of poetry and set out to change the nature of fiction. There was a wonderful sense of capacity during that period. The lovely thing about the press was that for a time it was a “destination” for a lot of writers who were crossing the country. So, people just stopped by. In Paris at a panel discussion, Richard Ford reminded me that he had come by Swallow when he was still a graduate student. People would just turn up. Russian writers, writers from Latin America—Nicanor Parra got off the elevator one day—Paz, Tate, of course, and Federman, Nathaniel Tarn, Diane Wakoski, Nin, often, John Montague, Leon Forrest, Robert Duncan, Daniel Weisbort, it was dazzling in that sense! It was also enervating and my poems ... I suppose I probably wrote fewer poems than I might have in that period because I was so busy. At the same time, what do you trade for those experiences? Being at the center of things was a whole lot of fun and, certainly, getting to make decisions, however peripheral, about the way things should go was exciting. In the same period, I was on the board and eventually the chair of CCLM, the literary magazines organization [now CLMP]. At a meeting in New York with the NEA Literature panel, I was asked to defend myself as a member of the eastern establishment. I laughed, couldn’t help it. Michael Bessy, the chair and president of Atheneum, was very serious and asked, “Why are you laughing?” I said, “I’m from Omaha, Nebraska. I live in Chicago. My office is a derelict building on South Wabash half a block from police headquarters. You guys are the eastern establishment. Have I been made a member? Do I get a badge? Is the check in the mail?” [Laughter.]

LG: How do you account for these kinds of associations or labels?

MA: The labels are probably unavoidable and almost always wrong. There’s a sense of grievance in literature that affects us all. Everybody complains all the time. Sticking a label on those other guys is a way of coping, I guess. In a way, we’re victims of our success. It doesn’t feel like success. It doesn’t have the kinds of rewards the rest of society dishes out to fresh-out-of-law school, undistinguished attorneys—no BMWs, no condos over the lake—but we have succeeded in making poetry a more widespread and democratic enterprise. Unfortunately, that freedom has created a lot of truly awful, mawkishly personal poetry. The open mic reading is one of the circles of hell. The same freedom has also created an almost inexplicable anxiety among

people who aren't especially interested in poetry, a reaction that has conferred rewards of all sorts on conservative, even reactionary poets.

LG: It seems to me that what good publishing does—it functions like a filter or a screen. Of course, it can be about who you know or luck and all of that, but after having been on the open mic scene [in Chicago] for a few years [I found that] it can get masturbatory, you know?

MA: And in public! Here's the real dilemma: there are an awful lot of people out there, given the proliferation of writing programs, who have learned to write pretty good versions of bad poems. It's like fake furniture, you know? Like the furniture you get at Target or Walmart. You can sit on it. It doesn't break. But there's no craft to it. The woods are pressed wood chips; the grain is photographed from real wood and glued on. There are a lot of people who have learned to put together a poem that has four legs and won't fall down, but if you look at it carefully, it has no more substance and even a lot less genuine energy than some of the open mic stuff. There's a whole lot of poetry out there that is just crap. It's harder to distinguish because so much of it is well-made crap. It's all "me" and "I." It's part of the great, long, further adventures of the first-person singular and not very interesting.

LG: This leads me back to some of the things surrounding the development of self that we were talking about earlier. In *Heat Lines*, you are dealing with your family in a much more direct way than you have done in the past. After having worked with you for so many years, I have noticed that while you have never discouraged anyone from dealing with or using materials surrounding heritage, you seemed to have a great distrust of it. However, "A Place That's Known" has a kind of elegant poignancy to it.

MA: That was a tough poem, a poem about my mother's death. It starts out in the housing projects with her feet out from the front step, where she'd sit at night and smoke—she smoked Chesterfields. On warm nights, she'd smoke the last cigarette outside before she went to bed. I think the thing that enabled me to do that poem was the lyric of that very powerful song from WWI, "a place that's known to god alone." When all this is over, we're going to go to a place that no one knows about and "let the rest of the world roll by." That idea of the place that's known, "a known place" is quite powerful. It is the place with all other places—"known to God alone." My goal was—I mean I wanted to write the poem about that experience of my mother's death—but I also wanted to write about her life in place, in the familiar place of the projects and in that other "known place." It may be my most vivid thing—except for a few prose passages in *The Red Menace*—I've written about the housing projects and what went on there. It's finally a poem about language that is about those whisperings that my mother offered to me and my brother and sister against the violence and chaos that surrounded us—it was a frightening place ... people killed each other, a woman down at the other end of our building drowned her children, people got stabbed or cracked over the head with skillet. And my mother would tell the same stories over and over again. Her words and the objects she kept in a green strongbox on

her shelf became the “space” that she gave us against that chaos. That’s a long way round to explain how a very personal poem is not really about me or my feelings.

LG: That’s the function of story, isn’t it?

MA: That’s the function of story and of language in general. The source of all places is the place that we choose or is chosen for us as our beginning. For me, it’s that Plaza and the housing projects bonded completely with speech, story and song. That’s the place out of which everything else is defined. As I began writing poems, I began noticing, parsing even, the inherent mythos of the place. Clark Street, in the initial poem in *The Color of Dust*, dead ends at both ends—one end is a bakery and the other end is a brewery. It’s yeast on both sides. The Bonton, the tavern in the poems, at the corner of 20th and Clark, the “good time” place. The Holy Rollers storefront was at 21st and Clark Street. At 22nd and Clark there was a giant crab apple tree whose roots had upended the sidewalk. The Crosstown Transit of that poem is on 24th Street, the literal transit line north and south from which the city grid was made. So that “known place” is the place out of which everything else is made. It is—I think this is the deep poetic connection, convened out of language and perception jointly—not just perception and personal experience but language and its place.

LG: Is that how it worked with the Calabrian poems?

MA: I knew very little of Adami, which is where my father’s family is from. I had only one photograph, two men barely seen standing at the corner of a large house. And one book of poems by the Calabrian Adami poet Michele Pane. The house in the photo was not an Anania house but was Pane’s, so the only photograph I ever had of that place was the photograph of a poet standing next to his house. Pane, who was an exile, not an immigrant, wrote about that place in the dialect. This was a deliberate, revolutionary act—he was put in jail for it—for a revolutionist poem called “The Red Man,” his first published poem. For a time, he edited an Italian magazine that was dedicated to Italian dialect poetry rather than Tuscan poetry. So that poetry and that dialect had emerged in that place. Calabria is such a strange place. There’s not one dialect; rather there are several hundred. Each village or little area has a dialect distinct from others. It was like moving into a fable in which there is an absolute consistency between life and language, a language that’s emerged in place through its history, part Neopolitan Italian, part Latin, Part Greek. Pane’s language flows through all of the “In Adami” poems. Sitting in Filomena’s house with the hearth fire going, one of the images in Pane came back to me “lingui di fuoco”—the hearth’s tongues, the tongues of the hearth, the fire and the smoke—outside I realized that I had been watching the genesis point of the image. The autumn evening was suffused by the smoke from these hearth fires and with them it was suffused as well with the speech at those hearth sides. It’s as though the spoken language rises with the smoke and drifts down the mountainside. It’s stunning. Because of Pane, the poet, who tried to give value to the spoken language, that that spoken language still exists. It’s read and memorized in the local schools. The last poem in the series, “Raffaele’s Table,” is specifically about language in that place.

LG: How do you see this portion of the heritage stuff linked to that which you dealt with earlier in your career?

MA: Well, the Italian stuff worked itself out in a different kind of way. I don't often write incidental poems. The Carmelo poem, that starts the sequence, seems incidental, but by the time I get to the Raffaele poem, I'm back at all my usual stuff: language, place and the past. The early poems that might seem similar are "Document," which you mentioned earlier and "Avante Courier." "Document" deals with the confusion that led my mother at seven to be incarcerated on Ellis Island. My grandmother had made a deal to marry her dead husband's younger brother, who was living in Nebraska and South Dakota. He had been a homesteader and a miner. Immigration authorities thought his name and his dead brother's were too much alike, so he had to go to New York to prove he was a different person than the person who had died in Germany. All of it had to do with immigration quotas. I tried to take that into the experience of Nebraska as land and cope with the Dust Bowl. My mother and grandmother came from a world of relentless greenery. It was Northern Germany and its soil is rich, deep and dark. It's peat moss, really—not just green but spongy, deep, relentless green. It rains 250 days a year. The lichen on the slate roofs is green. There's green everywhere. Nebraska is brown, and they arrived there in 1927 in the middle of the Dust Bowl. And so "Avante Courier," the poem about rain following the plow—that's about my mother's experience during the Dust Bowl, being put to bed at night with a wet napkin over her face to keep the dust off and waking up in the morning looking like the Shroud of Turin—as it has this ghastly version of your face on it. Trousseau linens that my grandmother stitched all her life were stuffed into the windows and doors to keep the dust and dirt out. A number of early poems are based in that experience. I suppose if there's a difference, since you touched on "A Place That's Known" and the Italian poems, that it probably has to do now with a desire to see those things as more completed discussions than as issues.

LG: Can you comment on the emotional weight present in these later poems?

MA: It's hard for me to judge the differences between my poems. I read back sometimes and think they're too much alike. But it's hard for me to gauge. There is a set of issues that has always interested me. They remain the same, and there are issues now that are different and that I'm willing to move more to the front of the poem.

LG: Like the way you did with that early poem "For Myself at 25"?

MA: Well, that's just funny, don't you think? "I have a new tie from France / a recollection of dance"? That belongs to another category of poems I think of as "songs." Something like the "Eclogue," the subway poem and the "Valeeta" poem. I think of them as songs. That is, I think of them as being fulfilled by their own musicality. I like the idea of having these strange materials—the "blue light of television" is one that has always pleased me, or to get Lash LaRue in there. My father's nickname when he lived on the streets was "Jesse." Jesse is the father of

David—King David, songster and dealer. You put in your time in the Bible class, right?
[Laughter.]

LG: That is such an interesting question to end the poem on: “Am I a songster or a dealer?” Is that a question you’re asking yourself?

MA: Well, Peter Michelson in an essay takes that question quite seriously perhaps because he’s seen me as an editor, conniver, organizer and as a poet. He sees it as an essential question—whether or not I’m a “songster” or a “dealer.”

LG: I wonder if that’s a dilemma for you being a poet who has been in the university and had the kind of career you’ve had? Do you wonder about these early experiences or images—as I do when I ask myself if “chicken litter” was really a big part of my early and formative years? Do I really remember this correctly?

MA: The dilemma for all of us—and it doesn’t have success built into it in the short run, but it is the great issue of American poetry—is how to sustain poetry, the thing we love and cherish, and to put as much of the strange universe of our lives in it as we can. Teaching can distance you from those issues, but so can middle-class comforts or revolutionary ardor. If you write a poetry that is both decorous and consoling, the world will treat you well. If that decorousness runs on the side of confession or sexual revelation, it will reward you heavily, but that’s not the issue. I could certainly have written poems to make the university happier with me as a poet—the “flannel shirt” pastorals that threaten no one’s intellectual security or poems about received opinions in a fixed diction. I have always wanted to stretch the diction of the poem and stretch the universe of materials that the poem could contain. I don’t know any other American poet who has written a poem about his father whacking the top of a table with the butt end of a Smith and Wesson revolver. That’s important to me.

LG: Is it possible to capture the paradox of what it means to be an American?

MA: The last poem in *The Color of Dust*, “Diversions Upon an Old Refrain,” has two contending landscapes. One comes from *Random Harvest*, where the main character loses his memory and is taken in by a woman who was actually his love interest before the amnesia. She has this lovely country house and garden. The other landscape comes from my version of Omaha—the “skinner” who holds up a hand without fingernails, the wino who blocks the gangway past the icehouse with a biblical quiz, a scene in a medical school clinic, an area of junked cars where a gang bang takes place. I wanted to test one space against another, to test the movie/novel decorous space against the space of my actual American life. The lady’s garden of sweet flowers is drawn in around her like a needlework coverlet uncovering a garden of weeds and gutted cars. The question is can you make a poem that will hold both of those things? Can you make poems that will hold the poetic traditions of our language and the myth and facts of America? Can a poem about jazz and blues also manage *Superfly*, the city’s genius and its violence? Those are the issues worth struggling with, I think. Otherwise, what is the point of

being false to your experience in order to write a poem? You can be false in a lot of ways. You can pretend you're from England or that your grandparents spent a lot of time together sipping tea and talking about Emerson. You can connive your experience into a kind of self-centered pastoral that has no political, cultural or social dimension, an afternoon talk show in which you are both host and guest. You can take up aesthetic issues with elevated disdain and worry loudly over "standards." But the American dilemma remains. How can I get all of the diverse, sometimes looney materials of America into poems without betraying them with smug ironies or reducing them to greeting cards? That's the struggle.

LG: You still think that this is the struggle we have now?

MA: Oh, of course!

LG: I think there are a lot of younger poets who might say "We're postWilliams. We're done with that."

MA: But what are they done with? Some have moved into LANGUAGE poetry, which is something we've all played around with, that kind of distancing randomness and use of text and quotation. But where does that get you? It simply allows poetry to abandon its attachment to substance. They do it by a kind of Derridian trick of saying "Well, substance is merely another construction within the meta-category of presence." I've never wanted to do that. I've wanted to approach, as exactly as possible the texture of experience and thought with the tactile, with the visual potentials of language. If that's Williams, you can't be post-Williams in any useful way. If they mean post-Williams in the sense that Williams' naïve enthusiasm for things is somehow no longer worthwhile, you could say that, but I don't see it happening. I like O'Hara [who says], "After all in America only Whitman, Crane and Williams are as interesting as the movies." What O'Hara did was adjust his enthusiasm for neon and traffic lights and the movies to what he thought poetry could do. In many ways he was a Romantic poet, so was Williams, for that matter. To say you're post-Williams means what—that you're not quite post-Creeley, have left Olson in the dust, are just edging by Schuyler with Ronald Johnson in your sights? The actual Williams tradition in American poetry is incredibly rich and varied. Offering it all a dismissive "post" seems a bit like empty self-congratulation. We are all Williams' heirs, just as we are Whitman's.

LG: I'm always amazed, in talking about O'Hara, how contemporary those poems feel—and they were written fifty years ago.

MA: Fifty years is right. *Meditations in an Emergency* was published in 1957. Some of those poems were published in *Poetry* in 1951. It's amazing stuff, its dictions, its materials and its sheer poetic verve. The issue in American poetry is what you can put in and at what cost; how much of your experience, your intellectual development, the state of the language, our evolving sense of the nature things and the concreteness of your life you can get in without losing what Ashbery call[ed] "the art part," and in the process making something of more consequence than

the always limiting self. I'm willing to admit that my background, since we've talked about so much of it, is not very common in poetry. There aren't many German-Italian poets who were raised in Midwestern African American neighborhoods, listening in childhood to extreme dialects of three languages. There aren't many people with the same range of experience, but everybody has a range of experience.