



The Collected Poems of  
**Robert Creeley**  
1975–2005

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# Also by Robert Creeley

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## POETRY

For Love  
Words  
The Charm  
Pieces  
A Day Book  
Hello: A Journal  
Later  
Mirrors  
Memory Gardens  
Windows  
Echoes  
Life & Death  
If I were writing this  
On Earth

## FICTION

The Gold Diggers  
The Island  
Mabel: A Story

## DRAMA

Listen

## ESSAYS AND INTERVIEWS

A Quick Graph: Collected Notes & Essays  
Contexts of Poetry: Interviews 1961–1971  
Was That a Real Poem & Other Essays  
Autobiography  
Tales Out of School  
Day Book of a Virtual Poet

## COLLECTIONS AND SELECTIONS

Collected Poems: 1945–1975  
Selected Poems  
So There: Poems 1976–1983  
Just in Time: Poems 1984–1994  
Collected Essays  
Collected Prose

## LETTERS

Charles Olson and Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence  
Irving Layton and Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence

## AS EDITOR

The Black Mountain Review, 1954–1957  
New American Story (with Donald M. Allen)  
The New Writing in the U.S.A. (with Donald M. Allen)  
Selected Writings of Charles Olson  
Whitman: Selected by Robert Creeley  
The Essential Burns  
Charles Olson, Selected Poems  
Best American Poetry, 2002  
George Oppen, Selected Poems

SELECTED COLLABORATIONS  
AND ARTISTS BOOKS

The Immoral Proposition (with René Laubiès)  
All That Is Lovely in Men (with Dan Rice)  
123456789 (with Arthur Okamura)  
A Sight (with R.B. Kitaj)  
A Day Book (with R.B. Kitaj)  
Numbers (with Robert Indiana)  
The Class of '47 (with Joe Brainard)  
Presences: A Text for Marisol (with Marisol)  
Thirty Things (with Bobbie Louise Hawkins)  
Away (with Bobbie Louise Hawkins)  
Mabel: A Story (with Jim Dine)  
7&6 (with Robert Therrien and Michel Butor)  
Parts (with Susan Rothenberg)  
Famous Last Words (with John Chamberlain)  
Gnomic Verses (with Cletus Johnson)  
Visual Poetics (with Donald Sultan)  
It (with Francesco Clemente)  
Life & Death (with Francesco Clemente)  
There (with Francesco Clemente)  
Edges (with Alex Katz)  
The Dogs of Auckland (with Max Giblett)  
Signs (with Georg Baslitz)  
En Famille (with Elsa Dorfman)  
Drawn & Quartered (with Archie Rand)  
Tandoori Satori (with Francesco Clemente)



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# Contents

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*Note*

*Preface: Old Poetry*

*Author's Note*

Hello: A Journal, February 29-May 3, 1976

Later

Mirrors

Memory Gardens

Windows

Echoes

Life & Death

If I were writing this

On Earth

Unpublished Poems

*Credits*

*Index of Titles and First Lines*

# Note

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AT SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS OLD Robert was as excited by the prospect of the University of California Press's bringing out his *Collected Poems* as he was by the prospect of our moving to Providence, Rhode Island, from Buffalo.

In the hospital in March 2005—on the last night of his life, as it turned out—he asked for the hard drive of his computer, so that he could work the next day on the manuscript for this volume of poetry.

Now I can only guess what he might have done. We had talked about his writing a new preface. I had thought about what he wanted to say: These are my poems. I love them and stand by them.

In retrospect, I realize the courage such an act takes, the courage artists have every day to produce something out of the raw feelings and intimate perceptions of life, then to hold it up to public scrutiny. In reading these poems again, I hear Robert's voice, and I see the last twenty-seven years of my own life laid out, almost a diary. I think of the way I first saw this writing, just words on a page, a little distillation of a day, tender and vulnerable and fresh, a moment, untried, yet a whole world of thought, life, and history in each. Those words, "This is my life's work. I love it and stand by it," are such an affirmation. To come to that moment, to say so clearly, without hesitation. To have that heart. Yes. Here it is. That heart.

If there are poems left out, acknowledgments not made, inadequacies of text or explication, the fault is mine. I plead inexperience. But I know this work stands on its own.

Onward.

PENELOPE CREELLY  
PROVIDENCE, NOVEMBER 19, 2005

# Preface: Old Poetry

---

Ay, tear her tattered ensign down!  
Long has it waved on high,  
And many an eye has danced to see  
That banner in the sky;  
Beneath it rung the battle shout,  
And burst the cannon's roar;—  
The meteor of the ocean air  
Shall sweep the clouds no more.  
—OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

*Even to speak becomes an unanticipated drama, because where one has come to, and where it is now has to go, have no language any longer specific. We all will talk like that, yet no one will understand us.*

When I was a young man, I felt often as if I were battling for the integrity of my habits of speech, my words, my friends, my life. W. C. Williams had put it most clearly, and with the expected emphasis of that time: “When a man makes a poem, makes it, mind you, he takes words as he finds them interrelated about him and composes them—without distortion which would mar their exact significances—into an intense expression of his perceptions and ardors that they may constitute revelation in the speech that he uses.” In the furies, then, of the war and the chaos of a disintegrating society, I felt a place, of useful honor and possibility, in those words.

*As though one might dignify, make sufficient, all the bits and pieces one had been given, all the remnants of a family, the confusions of name and person, flotsam, even the successes quickly subsumed by the next arrival.*

This was originally published as the preface to *So There: Poems 1976–1983* (New York: New Directions, 1998). On July 1, 1998, Robert Creeley wrote to Peggy Fox of New Directions about his use of italics in this preface: “The paragraphs in italics are simply to have a variation of ‘voice,’ the italicized sections being more reflective, reacting to the subject or thought in mind, the non-italicized sections being the forward statement, so to speak. Otherwise quotations are in quotes.”

*And after that, the next—and then the next again. How would one ever catch up?*

There was no identity, call it, for the poet in my world. It was only in my mind and imagination that any of it was real. “Only the imagination is real,” Williams said. It felt particularly American to have no viable tradition, no consequence of others seemingly sufficient, my elders contested if not dismissed. Yet, paradoxically, we were exceptionally chauvinistic, felt finally a contempt for the poetry of that old world, the European, which nonetheless still intimidated us. All the arts, it seemed, fought to become dominant in whatever scale they might be weighed in—Abstract Expressionists vs. the School of Paris, John Cage vs. Benjamin Britten, Louis Zukofsky vs. W. H. Auden. Already that person as *myself* had become an insistent *we*, a plural of swelling confidence.

*They say you can be sure of three things in America, in any company, and you can always let them be known without fear of social reprisal. One, that you know nothing about opera. Two, that you know nothing about poetry. Three, that you speak no language other than English. Is that true?*

René Thom somewhere speaks of poetry's being like humor. It stays local because it uses its mean

with such particularity. Just so, a friend tells me of a friend of his, a fellow student who is Japanese saying, “~~What the Americans think is interesting in Japanese poetry misses the point entirely. They miss the essence, the kernel, the substance of its effects.~~” Another friend once told me he had written a haiku whose second line was a measured one mile long.

*“A Nation of nothing but poetry . . .” Who owns it? “He is the president of regulation . . .” How do they  
that go? How is it (ever) far if you think it? Where are we? It was poetry that got us here, and now we  
have to go too. “I’ll hate to leave this earthly paradise . . .” Is there a country? “Image Nation . . .”*

Despairs since I was a little boy seem always the same. No money, not enough to eat, no clothes, sic  
forced out. No job or identity. Years ago, driving back to San Geronimo Miramar from Guatemala  
City in the early evening, I caught sight of a body lying out into the narrow road, so stopped to see  
what had happened. It was a man, drunk, trying to kill himself in that bleak way. He had spent all his  
life’s accumulated money in one day’s drinking, and had lost his identity card as well—and so he no  
longer actually existed, in any record. I kept trying, uselessly, persistently, to help.

*We will keep ourselves busy enough, working with our various procedures and values. There’ll be no  
irony or blame. Whoever we imagine it’s for will either hear us out, else leave with a sense of better  
things to do. Better we learn a common song?*

Seventy-two my next birthday and still feeling good, still pouring it out. Hardly a day goes by that  
don’t think of something, either to do or to be done. Stay *busy* seems to be it. But most it’s like  
coming back again to childhood, dumbly, even uselessly. When I saw my old school chums at our  
fiftieth reunion, I realized I hadn’t seen them—Fred, Marion, Katie, Ralph and Patsy—since we were  
fourteen. Now we were over sixty, all the work done but for whatever was left to tidy up. It was  
great, unexpected relief not to have to say what we had earned, merited, lost or coveted. It was all  
done.

*So now for the bridge, as in music, carries one over—*

Trust to good verses then;  
They only will aspire,  
When pyramids, as men,  
Are lost i’ th’ funeral fire.

And when all bodies meet,  
In Lethe to be drowned,  
Then only numbers sweet  
With endless life are crown’d.

—ROBERT HERRICK

*With love, for Herrick and Zukofsky.*

BUFFALO, N.  
FEB. 8, 19

# Author's Note

---

Insofar as the specific lines of these various poems are, in each case, the defining rhythmic unit, it is crucial that their integrity be recognized, else a false presumption of a poem's underlying beat may well occur in those cases where a runover line, i.e., a line broken by the limits of a page's dimension may be mistaken for the author's intent. Therefore all such lines are preceded by this symbol (◄)\* and are indented the characteristic space (1 em) from the poem's left margin. Read them as if they were one with the lines which they follow.

R.

\*This note appeared in *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley, 1945–1975*. Please note that in this second volume of collected poems, however, a slightly different symbol (◄) has been used to identify runover lines.





# Wellington, New Zealand

---

“That’s the way  
(that’s the way

I like it  
(I like it”

.

Clouds coming close.

.

Never forget  
clouds dawn’s  
pink red acid  
gash—!

.

Here comes  
one now!

.

Step out into  
space. Good  
morning.

.

Well, sleep,  
*man*.

.

Not *man*,  
*mum’s*  
the word.

.

What do you  
think those hills  
are going to do now?

.

They got  
all the  
lights on—  
all the people.

.

You know  
if you never  
you won't

---

2/29

It's the scale  
that's attractive,  
and the water  
that's around it.

.

Did the young  
couple come  
only home  
from London?

Where's the world  
one wants.

.

Singular,  
singular,

one  
by one.

.

I wish I  
could see the stars.

.

Trees *want*  
to be still?  
Winds  
won't let them?

.

Anyhow,  
it's night now.

Same clock ticks  
in these different places.

3/1

Dunedin

River wandering down  
below in the widening green  
fields between the hills—  
and the sea and the town.

Time settled, or waiting,  
or about to be. People,  
the old couple, the two babies,  
beside me—the so-called

aeroplane. Now  
*be born,*  
*be born.*

.

I'll never  
see you,  
want you,  
have you,  
know you—

I'll never.

.

“Somebody's got to pay  
for the squeaks in the bed.”

.

Such quiet,  
dog's scratch at door—

*pay for it all?*

.

Walking  
and talking.

Thinking  
and drinking.

.

Night.  
Light's out.

3/3

“*Summa wancha*  
out back”

Australia

---

•  
“Sonny Terry,  
“Brownie McGhee”

in Dunedin (in  
Dunedin

3/4

10:30 AM: Ralph Hotere’s

Warm.  
See sun shine.  
Look across valley at houses.  
Chickens squawk.  
Bright glint off roofs.  
Water’s also,  
in bay, in distance.  
Hills.

3/5

Christchurch

You didn’t think you  
could do it but you did.

You didn’t do it  
but you did.

•  
Catching Cold

I want to lay down  
and die—  
someday—but  
not now.

•  
South, north, east, west,

man—home's best.

---

Nary an exit  
in Christchurch.

Only  
wee holes.

3/9

## Out Window: Taylor's Mistake

Silver,  
lifting  
light—

mist's  
faintness.

## Friend Says of Job

FOR BARRY SOUTHAM

You get to see all kinds of life  
like man chasing wife  
in the driveway  
with their car.

Mutual property!  
They want to sell their house?

Elsewise absences,  
eyes a grey blue,  
tawny Austrian

hair—the voice,  
speaking, *there*.

Hermione, in the garden,  
“weeping at grief?”

Stone-statued single woman—  
eyes alive.

---

## Milton über Alles

When I consider  
how my life is spent  
ere half my years  
on this vast blast  
are o'er . . .

Reasoned recognitions—  
feelings fine.

Welcome  
to the world,  
it's still  
pretty much the same.

That kiwi  
on yon roof  
is a symbol,  
but the ocean  
don't change.  
It's all *round!*  
Don't  
let them kid you.

3/11

## Palmerston North

## Soup

I know what you'd say  
if I could ask you—  
but I'm tired of it—

no word, nothing again.

---

Letter from guy says,  
“she looks well,  
happy, working hard—”  
Forget it.

I’m not there.  
I’m really here,  
sitting,  
with my hat on.

It’s a great day  
in New Zealand  
more or less.  
I’m not alone in this.

Lady out window hangs clothes,  
reds and blues—  
basket, small kid,  
clothespins in mouth.

Do I want to fuck,  
or eat?  
No problem.  
There’s a telephone.

I know what you mean,  
now “down under” here,  
that each life’s  
got its own condition

to find,  
to get on with.  
I suppose it’s  
letting go, finally,

that spooks me.  
And of course my arms  
are full as usual.  
I’m the only one I know.

May I let this be  
West Acton, and  
myself six? No,  
I don’t travel that way

despite memories,  
all the dear or awful

passages apparently  
I've gone through.

---

Back to the weather,  
and dripping nose  
I truly wanted to forget here,  
but haven't—

ok, old buddy,  
no projections, no regrets.  
You've been a dear friend  
to me in my time.

If it's New Zealand  
where it ends,  
that makes a weird sense  
too. I'd never have guessed it.

Say that all the ways  
are one—*consumatum est*—  
like some soup  
I'd love to eat with you.

3/16

This wide, shallow bowl,  
the sun, earth here  
moving easy, slow  
in the fall, the air  
with its lightness, the  
underchill now—flat, far out,  
to the mountains and the forest.  
Come home to its song?

.

Sitting at table—  
good talk  
with good people.

.

River's glint, wandering  
path of it.

Old trees grown tall,  
maintain,  
look down on it all.

.

*Bye-bye*, kid says,

girl, about five—  
peering look,  
digs my one eye.

---

.

Sun again, on table,  
smoke shaft of cigarette,  
ticking watch,  
*chirr* of cicadas—  
all world, all mind, all heart.

3/17

## Wellington

Here again,  
shifting days,  
  
on the street.  
The people of my life

faded,  
last night's dreams,

echoes now.  
The vivid sky, blue,

sitting here in the sun—  
could I let it go?

Useless question?  
Getting old?

.

I want to be a dog,  
when I die—

a dog, a dog.

.

## Bruce & Linley's House

Fire back of grate  
in charming stove  
sits in the chimney hole,

cherry red—  
but orange too.

---

.  
Mrs. Manhire saw me  
on plane to Dunedin,  
but was too shy to speak  
in her lovely Scots accent.

We meet later,  
and she notes the sounds are  
not very sweet  
in sad old Glasgow.

But my wee toughness,  
likewise particularity,  
nonetheless come  
by blood from that city.

.

## Love

Will you be dust,  
reading this?

Will you be sad  
when I'm gone.

3/19

## Sit Down

Behind things  
or in front of them,  
always a goddamn  
adamant number stands

up and shouts,  
*I'm here, I'm here!*  
— Sit down.

.

Mother and son  
get up,

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