

A Poet Drives a Truck

A Poet Drives A Truck:

Poems by and about Lowell A. Levant

Edited by

Ronald F. Levant

Carol L. Slatter

Caren E. Levant

Copyright © 2013 by Ronald F. Levant

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical reviews, this book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form without permission of the publisher. All inquiries and permission requests should be addressed to the Publisher, Truck Stop Press, 750 Salisbury Way, Copley, OH 44321.

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-0-615864-45-7

The seven poems by Lowell Levant from *Poems Read in the Spirit of Peace & Gladness*, copyright © 1966 by Peace and Gladness Co-Op Press, are reprinted by permission of Doug Palmer/Peace and Gladness Co-Op Press.

The four poems from the Bancroft Library Archives, University of California, Berkeley (“For Doug,” “New Born Spiders,” “Racing/Forgetting,” “To the Berkeley Police Department”) are from the following collections: BANC CD 376:2 and BANC CD 682:33-34, Berkeley Poetry Conference 1965 and Berkeley Poetry Conference, Young Poets from the Bay Area, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Reprinted by permission.

The sixteen poems by Lowell Levant and the two poems by Will Staple from *Coyote Run: Poems by Will Staple, Gene Anderson, Lowell Levant* are reprinted by permission of Gene Anderson/Anderson Publications.

The four poems by Kenneth Irby (“Waiting at the Mediterranean for Bean and Lowell,” “Strawberry Canyon Poem,” “We Might Say Poetry,” and “The Eye / circles, and seeks”) are from *The Intent On: Collected Poems, 1962-2006* by Kenneth Irby, published by North Atlantic Books, copyright © 2009 by Kenneth Irby. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Front cover photo: ©Rainer Plendl/ 123RF.COM

Back cover photo: ©mg1408/123RF.COM

Section artwork: ©dervish37/123RF.COM

Back cover photo of Lowell Levant by Julia Whitt

Table of Contents

Preface	9
Introduction	11
Poems Read at the Berkeley Conference 1965	
From Tilden to Tamalpias on the Witches' Carpet	19
Strawberry Canyon	20
To a Mouse I Dreamed I Killed	21
Poems from <i>Poems Read in the Spirit of Peace & Gladness</i> (1966)	
Peace and Gladness	25
For a Woodsey Friend	28
Orange Grove (probably in Southern California)	29
Mode of Relation (for Eileen Adams)	30
Adon Olom	31
The Harvest	32
Hold Things Full	32
Poems Read and Published in Various Sources in the 1960s and Early 1970s	
From <i>The Anthology of Poems</i> , Read at COSMEP	
Gliding Quilt	35
From <i>Aldeberan Review #3</i>	
2 20 68	36
From Open Reading #2 Fall 1972	
The Redeeming Power in Storms and Steep Cliffs	39
From Bancroft Library Archives (University of California Berkeley)	
For Doug	43
New-born Spiders	43
Racing / Forgetting	44
To The Berkeley Police Department	44
<i>The Bearing Links</i> : Collection Submitted for the Joseph Henry Jackson Award (1978)	
Easily Changeable With Nevertheless Appropriate Contrasting Facets	47
Rig-Pa-Med-Pa	49
Nettle Sting Makes My Skin Tingle	50
The Spoken Wheel	51

Three Sandstone Characters on a Cliff	54
Hush Wind	56
Holy Reverential Sidekicks	57
Generating Clouds of Enthusiasm	57
The Escape	57
To A Teamster Comrade	58
Such Shamanistic Vocables	59
Silver Moccasin	60

Poems from *Coyote Run: Poems by Will Staple, Gene Anderson, Lowell Levant*
(1978)

Juniper Scrub Mountain Shade	65
Slipping Out of the Mountain Shade	66
Stump-Top Doctoring	67
The Chain of Unemployment	68
Mary's Flat	68
Painted Canyon Smoke Trees	69
Truck-Stop	70
To a Fog-Covered Moist Carpet of Precarious Rovers, Pussy- Brambles, Eucalyptus, Moss, Cow Dung – Dead and Alive, Uneven and Unordered, Just East of Tilden, with A Fence Around it	71
Hung Over in the Crotch of a Tree: Salmon Hole	72
Plush Wind Nectars	73
Grouse Ridge Idyll	74
Butte Creek	75
Compost Heap	77
Careless Love Canyon	77
Sitting Upstairs with the Windows Wide Open	78
Transmission Linkage	80

Unpublished Work of Lowell A. Levant

Enkidu	89
Slipping a Shade Below	90
Stoned at The Bialy's with Robert Kelley	91
Maha-Mudra:	91
The Sweetness	92
Letter to Doug & Ruth & Tad	92
In Gentle Lust	93
For Mom	94
For Caren	95

If you don't know, Why do you Ask?	96
Why am I so?	98
Winter Work	99
The Wheels and Gears of Beauty	100
A Poet Drives a Truck	101
Ode to my Father	102
A Visit near Bald Peak	104
Untitled Poems	
The sun has gone down on the swimminghole	107
I've ranged over meadows	108
The candle flame as steady as the	109
The deciduous trees have graced the hill	109
The escarpment of the desert mountain	110
The rap is the folding over of the bubbling	111
I don't know whether I'll ever become	114
How's about stalking off into a sidekick four-step	116
Without any expectation of reward	116
So characteristic of me to blunder	117
I'm considered a nut by several people	118
The primary prayer of the Jewish people	119
Poems about Lowell A. Levant	
Kenneth Irby	
Waiting at the Mediterraneum for Bean and Lowell	123
Strawberry Canyon Poem	125
We Might Say Poetry	127
The Eye / circles, and seeks	128
Will Staple	
Lowell's Dream	133
Sierra Buttes '87	133
Polar Bear Head #1	134
Nov 17 Sutra: nanao speaking to lowell & me	135
Bristlecone Pine	137
A Trucker Named Lowell	140
Doug Palmer	
To Lowell Levant	141
For Lowell	142
Gene Anderson	
Desert in Fall	143
Nocturne	144

Caren E. Levant	
What's left of you	145
Your Addiction	146
For Lowell	147

Preface

Gene Anderson

Lowell Levant bore one of the purest and most lyrical poetic voices of the wild and wondrous 1960s in Berkeley, and continued to write and read inspired poetry until his sad passing in 2010. He perfectly captured the plain-speech style of that era, and then went on to transcend it in highly personal poetry that carefully described his world in realistic but intense, concentrated, and evocative images. Much of his finest and most mature work describes his life as a trucker and equipment driver, a lifeway that gave him time for meditation and philosophy. Other poems describe the natural world of the Bay Area and the Sierra Nevada. Like the great Chinese Buddhist poets, Lowell could make the simplest and smallest things shine with enough radiance to illuminate any darkness. His poems were carefully written, using minimal phrasing to arouse the most intense experiences in readers and hearers. This book presents Lowell's collected works, and many poems by his close friends and family—a highly talented group, and much influenced by Lowell's work. Most shared the Berkeley experience, often as fellow students of Gary Snyder. All have continued to write in the spare but vivid and luminous style that Lowell perfected.

Gene Anderson is Professor of Anthropology Emeritus, University of California, Riverside, and author of many books, including: *The Food of China* and *The Pursuit of Ecotopia*.

Introduction

Ronald F. Levant

Lowell A. Levant (1944-2010) was born in St. Paul, MN. His father served in the Navy, in the Construction Battalion, or ‘Seabees,’ during WWII. After the war the family moved to South Gate, CA, where his father was a printer and his mother a homemaker. Lowell played the trombone in the South Gate school band, and graduated from Fairfax High School in Los Angeles. He initially attended U. C. L. A. but then transferred to the University of California, Berkeley. At Berkeley, Lowell was active in the Free Speech Movement in 1964, and was arrested in the Sproul Hall Plaza sit-in. After the prolonged and dispiriting trial, he withdrew from Berkeley and enrolled in the VISTA program, working with migrant workers in California’s Central Valley. Upon completing the program, he became eligible for the draft, in the midst of the Vietnam War. He sought and obtained conscientious objector status, and performed alternate service in Indio, CA, where he served alongside Gary Williams. Following in the footsteps of an earlier generation of “proletarian poets” and other intellectuals who then worked as longshoremen (such as Eric Hoffer), Lowell would have the twin vocations of poet and truck driver.

Readers of Lowell’s poems will notice four main qualities. First, as observed by his mentor Gary Snyder (personal communication, 6/19/12), there is “... the complex depth of his writing about work, machinery, trucks, equipment, repair, maintenance -- all in a deceptively slightly befuddled voice that masks the surprising competence of what’s being actually done. These poems have a unique presence in the real world, and they have great confidence and firmness; and are free of self-pity or whining in any way (unlike so many other lesser poets of his era).” Second, there is attunement with nature, characteristic of the “Deep Ecology” poetry of Gary Snyder. Third, there is musicality, which he also created when he played a Jew’s harp, sang, or strummed his guitar. Finally, Lowell’s poetry often took the form of the unfiltered, unfettered, free-associative declarations of the Beat Poets of his time, particularly those of Allen Ginsberg, whom Lowell admired. However, as noted by Eileen Adams (personal communication, 5/9/12), Lowell’s close friend and fellow poet: “Lowell’s free associative writing was tighter and came back down to earth to make sense or a joke.” Lowell’s principle mentor was Gary Snyder, who was his teacher at U.C., Berkeley. While Snyder is often described as the “Poet Laureate of Deep

Ecology,” he is also thought of as one of the Beats, serving as the inspiration for the main character, Japhy Ryder, in Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums*. Snyder has said: "The term Beat is better used for a smaller group of writers ... the immediate group around Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, plus Gregory Corso and a few others. Many of us ... belong together in the category of the San Francisco Renaissance. ... Still, Beat can also be defined as a particular state of mind ... and I was in that mind for a while (Parini & Candlish Millier, 1993)."

Lowell enrolled in Gary Snyder’s Poetry Workshop, when Snyder was a visiting faculty member at the University of California, Berkeley, during the 1964-1965 academic year. His classmates included Will Staple, Eileen Adams, Laura Dunlap, Jim Wehlage, Gene Fowler, Gail Dusenbery, and Hilary Ayers.

Lowell was first published in the *Occident*, the U. C., Berkeley, literary magazine. The title alone heralded his unique poetic presence, “To a Fog-Covered Moist Carpet of Precarious Rivers, Pussy Brambles, Eucalyptus, Moss and Cow-Dung, Just East of Tilden with a Fence around it,” a title which Lowell regarded as “inspired.” The poem has been well received, being republished several times.

The Berkeley Poetry Conference was held at California Hall at the University of California, Berkeley, from July 12 to 24, 1965, and provided a forum for leaders of what had then been termed a “revolution in poetry” to read their poetry and discuss their perspectives in seminars, lectures, individual readings, and group readings. The roster consisted of: Robin Blaser, Robert Creeley, Ed Dorn, Richard Duerden, Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Joanne Kyger, Ron Loewinsohn, Charles Olson, Gary Snyder, Jack Spicer, George Stanley, Lew Welch, Ken Irby, Jim Koller, David Schaff, and John Wieners. During the conference Charles Olson was designated “President of Poets,” and Allen Ginsberg “Secretary of State of Poetry.” Robert Creeley stated: "There will never be another poetry conference in Berkeley; Berkeley is too bizarre." (Berkeley Poetry Conference, no date).

The conference was immensely popular, and soon grew too big for the allocated space and time. People participated in any way they could. Some even perched on the ledges of open windows of California Hall to listen to the “Revolution.” Lowell himself found a spot on a narrow ledge, a photograph of which is part of the UC Berkeley Archives. Denner (no date) recalls: “Paul X and I climbed up at random and found ourselves outside Robert Creeley’s workshop. There were a number of these workshops going on each day for two weeks and it was

warm and the windows were open, and Creeley was saying, ‘There is a war; there is not a war,’ and Duncan said, ‘Why don’t you let those guys come in,’ and Creeley said, ‘Sure, why not?’ and we hopped in, sat ourselves down and joined the I.W.W. of Poetry.” Due to the popularity of the conference, an extra day, July 25th, was added so that the growing crowds could hear from the “Young Poets from the Bay Area,” who would be introduced by Gary Snyder and included Gene Fowler, Jim Wehlage, Eileen Adams, Doug Palmer, Sam Thomas, Gail Dusenbery, Drum Hadley, Lowell Levant, and Jim Thurber. Lowell read seven poems. It was at this conference that Lowell received mentoring from Allen Ginsberg. He later attributed some of his inspiration to Ginsberg, who helped him to free his mind so as to not edit his thoughts while composing poetry.

Berkeley was a bizarre place to be in the 1960s. “J. Poet” (no date) captures the spirit of that time and place in the following passage:

What can I say about Berkeley, San Francisco and the Bay Area in the 1960s? How to convey the giddy sense of infinite possibility that hung in the air? You didn't need pot, hash, or acid to get high. There was a feeling of weightlessness permeating the air. Every day was sunny, everybody smiled, students at UC Berkeley almost danced down the street on the way to class. The air was cleaner, purer, sweeter. The streets were litter free — this is actually true. People didn't lock their doors, strangers began talking on a street corner and became life-long friends, poets and musicians were everywhere, soon to reinvent the way America produced art and made music.... Everything was possible, love was all around us, the world was changing fast and my new student and political and street friends (soon to be called hippies) were making those changes happen.

A big part of the Berkeley and S. F. poetry scene centered around the I.W.W. (The Industrial Workers of the World), which provided a home for the “Artists, Musicians, Poets, and Sympathizers Local,” members of which read at the I.W.W. Hall on Minna Street in San Francisco. Doug Palmer (who, as the street poet with the *nom de plume* “Facino,” wrote poems near Sather Gate at the U.C., Berkeley campus for passersby in exchange for whatever they wanted to give), edited *Poems Read in the Spirit of Peace and Gladness*. This anthology was published to showcase many of the poets who had attended the Berkeley Poetry Conference in July, 1965, and who read at the I.W.W. Hall from March-September 1965, seven months of readings, one reading each month, which were characterized as “loose” and “open.” The anthology was “meant to congratulate the poets who took part, and to

commemorate the spirit of those readings.” It was dedicated to, among others, “Gary Snyder, whose poetry workshop class at Cal. Berkeley served as a centering point.” (Palmer, 1966). Lowell’s poem “Peace and Gladness” opened the volume, and Palmer borrowed its title for the title of the anthology. This poem was a later version of “I Love What I Bind to Me” (a twist on a line in a Robert Duncan poem, “I bind what I love to me”), which Lowell read at the Berkeley Poetry Conference. Lowell had eight poems in this anthology.

Another focus for Berkeley poets was COSMEP, the Conference of Small Magazine Editors and Pressman, based in Berkeley, which published *The Anthology of Poems Read at COSMEP (the Conference of Small Magazine Editors and Pressman)*, in Berkeley, California, May 23-26, 1968, and the *Aldeberan Review* (no date), both of which published Lowell’s poems.

Lowell lived with his close friend, the poet Kenneth Irby, for many years in Sam Thomas’s old house on Russell Street in Berkeley, and they mutually influenced each other. Irby read at the Berkeley Poetry Conference (although, unfortunately the recording of his reading was lost). Irby contributed four poems to the volume that were written about or to Lowell. Irby (personal communication, 5/30/12 and 6/10/12) recounted how he met Lowell in the Spring of 1967: “& there is the poem, “Enkidu,” Lowell read the night I first met him – a group reading somewhere on Telegraph, Robert Duncan & I went to -- & I was very struck by that poem indeed, that someone was writing a poem about that figure from Gilgamesh, not something that showed up in poetry readings in those parts in those days! & the force & power of the imagination at work (note the shift to the first person & what’s involved at that point, on to the end). I asked Ruth Palmer who that was, & she told me & introduced us!”

Lowell was also very close with Will Staple, a classmate in Snyder’s class, to whom he dedicated one of his poems at the Berkeley Poetry Conference. They travelled periodically to Havasupai, Arizona, and visited friends among the Havasupai tribe. During a sweat lodge ceremony, Lowell was given the name Cacoat, which means Brown Fox, and Will was named Cathot (Coyote). Lowell invoked his Havasupai name in the poem “Slipping a Shade Below.” The visits to Arizona often began with a stop in Riverside, California to see another long-time friend, Gene Anderson. The collaboration between these three poets led to the publication of *Coyote Run* in 1978. Staple and Anderson each contributed poems to the present volume.

The proletarian theme of truck-driving mentioned earlier became quite important in Lowell's work, as reflected in the poems "A Poet Drives a Truck," "Transmission Linkage," "Truck Stop," "To a Teamster Comrade," "The Chain of Unemployment," and "Wheels and Gears of Beauty," and in his collection entitled "Bearing Links," which he submitted for the Henry Joseph Jackson Award in 1978.

Lowell read poetry in unforgettable way. Gene Anderson (personal communication, 5/6/12) recalled:

The last time I saw him, he and Will [Staple] stopped by my house about three or four years ago and we got him to read through all the poems in COYOTE RUN, including "Transmission Linkage." Lowell was always a consummate reader. He had a gentle, slow, serious voice, but he would sound playful during the surrealistic passages and musical or chant-like for the rhymed and internally-rhymed lines. He would also drift into a workingman's conversation style for the technical and mechanical riffs, as in "Transmission Linkage." His voice was always cadenced and expressive, soft but rich. He never overstated--no drama, no romantic excess--but he was never boring; he conveyed a rich, deep emotionality, never monotonous, always varying with the material. I would always get choked up--as I do now, reading the poems and hearing his voice in my mind. Farewell, guide.

Finally, Lowell was a truly unique person, to whom other people felt deeply connected, but at the same time there was a sense that, as Doug Palmer put it, Lowell's feet seemed to not touch the ground. Lowell knew that he danced to a different drummer. His self-awareness about this and other aspects of his personality was reflected in several poems, particularly "Easily Changeable With Nevertheless Appropriate Contrasting Facets," "Why Am I So?," the untitled poem "So characteristic of me to blunder..." and the last paragraph of "Transmission Linkage." Eileen Adams (personal communication, 5/9/12) wrote: "In sum: Lowell was a humble Shaman-poet who was lonely, at times, like the rest of us, and had accomplishments and doubts, like the rest of us. In his poems he didn't seem to let it get him down for long because he could easily find the humor and fun in his everyday tasks and adventures. He slipped easily back and forth between ephemeral and "down-home" good ole boy rhythms to gift us with his delightful vision."

This volume follows the chronology just recited in regard to previously published and collected work. It begins with poems read at the Berkeley Poetry Conference, followed by work published in *Poems Read in the Spirit of Peace and Gladness*. Next comes poems read and

published in various sources in the 1960s and 1970s including the *Aldeberan Review* (no date), and *The Anthology of Poems Read at COSMEP (the Conference of Small Magazine Editors and Pressman)*, in Berkeley, California, May 23-26, 1968. We then turned to the later 1970s, with Lowell's collection titled "The Bearing Links" submitted for the Henry Joseph Jackson Award in 1978, and his poems published in *Coyote Run*, also in 1978. I believe that "The Bearing Links" includes what Lowell considered his best work at that point in time, as he had written to Caren Levant in 1980 that he had held back some of his best work from *Coyote Run*, because Fred Bruncke of Shaman Drum Press was planning to publish a solo volume of his work (which regrettably never occurred). Next is a selection of Lowell's unpublished work, both early and more recent, including his last poem, written in 2009, "A Visit Near Bald Peak." This section includes some longer untitled and unfinished poems which were important pieces that he had invested a lot of effort in. Finally, there is a selection of poems about Lowell, contributed by Kenneth Irby, Will Staple, Doug Palmer, Gene Anderson, and Caren Levant, his niece, who he referred to in the poem "From Tilden to Tamalpais on the Magic Carpet Ride," read at the Berkeley Poetry Conference.

References

Aldeberan Review # 3 (no date).

The Anthology of Poems Read at COSMEP (the Conference of Small Magazine Editors and Pressman), in Berkeley, California, May 23-26, 1968.

Berkeley Poetry Conference (no date). Wikipedia.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berkeley_Poetry_Conference

Denner, R (no date) Preface to Berkeley Daze.

<http://www.bigbridge.org/BD-PRE.HTM>

Parini, J., & Candlish Millier, B (1993) *The Columbia History of American Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press.

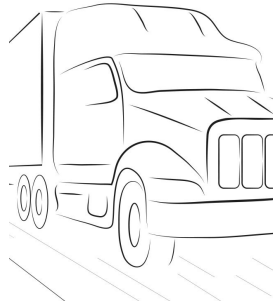
Palmer, D. (1966). Editor's note, *Poems Read in the Spirit of Peace and Gladness*. Berkeley, CA: Peace and Gladness Co-op Press

Poet, J. (no date). Forward and Beyond. From Berkeley Daze.

<http://www.bigbridge.org/BD-FOR.HTM>

Staple, W., Anderson, G, & Levant, L. (1978). *Coyote Run*. Grand Terrace, CA: Anderson Publications.

Poems Read at the Berkeley Poetry Conference



*Editors' Note: Four poems read at the Berkeley Poetry Conference not included in this section were later published in Poems Read in the Spirit of Peace & Gladness and are included in that section: *To a Fog-Covered Moist Carpet of Precarious Rivers, Pussy-Brambles, Eucalyptus, Moss, Cow Dung – Dead and Alive, Uneven and Unordered, Just East of Tilden, with A Fence Around it; A Mode of Relation (for Eileen Adams); Orange Grove (probably in Southern California); and Peace and Gladness**

From Tilden to Tamalpias on the Witches' Carpet

Edges curled, the carpet rises, shakes
 out its dust, braces, and arcs.
over fog-draped meadows facing east
 on Contra Costa Hills,
where spider webs swell on the river-making green
and launch moon-lilies. The moon waxes
 full, turns to the Bay, lights up
 gray water pockets, and passes
 in front of luminous clouds
which attempt to keep it in their clutches.
 without a howl
Muir Woods' wind leaves salt on my
 niece Caren's cheek,
creeps through the loose-webbed vines
 that pad the floor
and sifts & rearranges those vagrant
 red wood twigs that always belong somewhere
 else in this pattern.
Laurel trunks rest deaf. From their scars
branches shoot straight up to the light
and make a dense forest spacious.

Strawberry Canyon

Thick chaparral trail
spider webs cling to my face
I step firm on the fresh mud
a thin groove a bent branch
a low clump of mud spattered leaves
slip in the dark mud and nettles in the hands
gloomy bay and bunched together buildings
Contra Costa ranges draw mist from the Arroyos
rustle of ridge grass in this clearing just below chaparral knoll
deer out of hiding
slim game trail to the dirt road cut into the salt slopes
motorcycle ruts smooth out in the mud
precarious shiny slugs
baby lizard with smooth brown white skin
deer crashes into willow brush
last bird sounds of day
this incense cedar grove shades the dirt road deep green
walk faster
but watch for slugs