We offer you the landscape of your birth—
Exquisite and despoiled.
We all share blame.
We cannot ask forgiveness of the earth
For killing what we cannot even name.
New Formalist Poets of the American West

By April Lindner
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Cover Design: Kathy Robinson
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Lindner, April.
New formalist poets of the American West / by April Lindner.
p. cm. — (Boise State University western writers series ; no. 149)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-88430-148-6 (pbk.)
PS271.L56 2001
811'.5409978—dc21
2001025932

Grateful acknowledgment to the following authors for allowing us to reprint poems in their entirety or from manuscript:
Kim Addonizio for “First Poem for You” (The Philosopher’s Club, BOA Editions), © 1994 by Kim Addonizio;
Dana Gioia for “Planting a Sequoia” (The Gods of Winter, Graywolf Press), © 1991 by Dana Gioia;
Robert McDowell for “A Short History of Farming in the Northwest,” © 2001 by Robert McDowell;
and Chryss Yost for “Advice for Women” (Escaping from Autopia, Oberon), © 1998 by Chryss Yost.
The editors also wish to thank Dana Gioia for permission to print an excerpt from “A California Requiem” (Interrogations at Noon, Graywolf Press), © 2001 by Dana Gioia, on the cover.

Printed in the United States of America by
Boise State University Printing and Graphic Services
Boise, Idaho
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INTRODUCTION

In the late 1970s and early eighties, when most American poets were writing autobiographical free-verse lyrics, a handful of mavericks flouted literary fashion. They used rhyme, meter, and regular form—both traditional and innovative—and tried narrative, satire, and light verse. In an essay entitled “Can Poetry Matter?” (1991) one of these poets, Dana Gioia, accused contemporary poets of writing mostly for each other. “The poetry boom has been a distressingly confined phenomenon,” he wrote. “Decades of public and private funding have created a large professional class for the production of teachers, graduate students, editors, publishers, and administrators. Based mostly in universities, these groups have gradually become the primary audience for contemporary verse” (2). As poets moved into the academy, Gioia argued, poetry lost relevance to the public at large. With their audience dwindling to a subculture of specialists, most poets became reluctant to write negative reviews. Readers hoping to find good new poetry among the volumes of mediocre work received little help from critics.

When “Can Poetry Matter?” ran in The Atlantic Monthly, a furor ensued. A threatened literary establishment made up largely of academic poets responded by dubbing Gioia and those who agreed with him the “New Formalists,” a term meant to be pejorative. Hostile critics characterized New Formalism as East coast, academic, and elitist, when in fact, the movement is strongly West coast, professionally diverse, and populist. Gioia summed up the
movement’s aims: “It is time to experiment, time to leave the well-ordered classroom, time to restore a vulgar vitality to poetry and unleash the energy now trapped in the subculture” (Can Poetry Matter? 24). Unlike most poets, a striking number of Western New Formalists—Dana Gioia, Robert McDowell, Vikram Seth, Michael Lind, Leslie Monsour, and Chryss Yost—make their livings outside of the “well-ordered classroom.” And while the New Formalists tend toward elitism in that they believe in literary standards, they take a distinctly populist view of the relationship between poet and audience. In an increasingly post-literate culture, these poets extol meter, form, and narrative as some means of making poetry more memorable and more attractive to a wider audience, a goal that is anything but elitist.

In the years that have passed since the advent of the “Poetry Wars,” the New Formalist message has gained momentum and changed the face of contemporary verse. Today a reader finds formal verse in the most mainstream of literary magazines, and would be hard-pressed to hear of a poet taking pride in his or her unfamiliarity with traditional forms. A handful of literary magazines—among them The Formalist and Scotland’s The Dark Horse—specialize in rhyme and meter. Books of formal and narrative poetry and critical studies about the movement are published regularly, and the first New Formalist anthology, Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism (1996), is about to be joined by a second volume, featuring work by a new generation of poets working in form.

The movement that we think of as New Formalism, a collection of poets working with a common aesthetic, in fact began as individual poets working independently. Only gradually did these poets become aware of each other and develop strong personal, professional, and aesthetic ties, ultimately coming together in the kind of literary community that historians think of as a move-
ment. It is significant that five of the most visible and vocal of these poets hail from the West coast. Dana Gioia, Mark Jarman, Robert McDowell, and David Mason all spent most of their respective childhoods in the West, and Timothy Steele, who was born and raised in Vermont, has spent most of his adult life in California. All but Jarman currently live in the West.

That so many major New Formalists are Westerners is no coincidence. The impulse behind New Formalism springs from an independence of spirit long associated with the Anglo-American West. Settled by pioneers willing to turn their backs on existing culture, the West has a strong current of contrarianism which also runs through Western literary history. Beat and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry originated in the San Francisco Bay area, as a reaction against, respectively, the academic formalism of the 1950s, and the deep-image and confessional lyric poetry of the sixties and seventies. While both movements were strongly anti-formal, both share with New Formalism an anti-establishment urge. Like earlier West coast poets, the New Formalists refused to simply accept the existing poetry culture as a given.

Though major New Formalists hail from all over the map, the movement is strongly Western in its populist approach toward audience. Like Beat poetry, New Formalism emphasizes auditory technique—rhyme, meter, and storytelling. Both the Beats and the New Formalists look on poetry as an oral, performative, and public art—a sign of their West coast populist backgrounds.

The New Narrative poets, a movement which overlaps with the New Formalism, reason that if poetry offers the pleasures most readers currently get from a good novel—characters and an intriguing plot—poetry can regain some of its lost cultural relevance. They use narrative verse to tell a gripping story and to reach readers who wouldn't ordinarily read poetry. The New Narrative, like the New Formalism, is a strongly Western movement, one
whose seeds were planted in 1981, when transplanted Californians Jarman and McDowell cofounded The Reaper, a little magazine which served for eight years as the primary forum for the New Narrative. With bold and irreverent humor, The Reaper assailed the narrowness of most current lyric poetry which, according to Jarman and McDowell, wallowed in “inaccuracy, bathos, sentimentality, posturing, evasion” (Reaper 1). As an alternative to the solipsism of much poetry, The Reaper prescribed storytelling. Its editors believed, “Emotion is inconsequential unless it is the result of a story. The story is communal; it is for others” (40). The Reaper published some powerful examples of the lucid storytelling it championed, by such poets as Andrew Hudgins, Rita Dove, and Sydney Lea, but finding enough strong narrative to keep a literary quarterly afloat proved a struggle. As a result, the journal, which folded in 1989, remains more memorable for its criticism than its poetry. Nevertheless, the magazine broke important ground and opened up narrative as a possibility for a new generation of poets.

The connection between narrative and New Formalism was not self-evident at first, despite the tendency of narrative poets to use rhyme and meter as a means of advancing a story line. A link between the two movements was established explicitly in 1989 when the journal Crosscurrents published a special issue entitled Expansionist Poetry: The New Formalism and The New Narrative, the first full-length consideration of what would prove to be a literary movement. Today New Formalists and New Narrativists often are grouped together under the heading Expansive Poets, a name that better captures both movements’ efforts to encourage a more varied contemporary poetry and to expand poetry’s role in American cultural life.
DANA GIOIA

From the Expansive poetry movement’s inception, Dana Gioia has been its most visible representative in both the poetry world and the popular media. In his poetry and criticism, Gioia has set the movement’s terms and, since the publication of his first book of poetry, Daily Horoscope (1986), has remained something of a lightning rod for criticism against Expansive poetics. Attention to Gioia’s ideas reached its peak in 1991 with The Atlantic Monthly’s publication of “Can Poetry Matter?” (The Atlantic received more mail in response to Gioia’s article—both lauding and castigating it—than over any article published before or since.) In addition to his three books of original poetry (the second, The Gods of Winter, appeared in 1991 and the third, Interrogations at Noon, in 2001) and his collected essays, Can Poetry Matter?, Gioia has published translations of Eugenio Montale’s Motetti: Poems of Love (1990) and Seneca’s Hercules Furens (1995). He co-edited a historical anthology entitled Poems from Italy (1985) with William Jay Smith, and a contemporary anthology, New Italian Poets (1991), with Michael Palma. More recently, he has published the libretto for Nosferatu (2001), an opera by neo-romantic composer Alva Henderson. A second prose collection, The Barrier of a Common Language, is forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press. With fine-press printer Michael Peich, Gioia has founded the first and only ongoing poetry conference devoted to teaching traditional poetic forms. Since its inception in 1995, the yearly West Chester poetry conference has doubled in size and remains unique in its focus on verse technique.

Michael Dana Gioia was born in 1950 in Hawthorne, California, the working-class section of Los Angeles that also spawned Quentin Tarantino and the Beach Boys. Of Italian, Mexican, and Native American descent, Gioia grew up in a close-knit Sicilian family and attended parochial school and Catholic high school. His
mother, an AT&T information operator, and his father, a cab driver, worked six days a week but still managed to support Gioia’s avid interest in the arts. The first in his family to attend college, Gioia was a scholarship student at Stanford, where he initially trained as a composer. Interested in tonal music, he found himself at odds with his teachers, who believed tonality a dead tradition. During a sophomore year spent in Vienna studying music and German, he became interested in writing poetry. Back at Stanford, he became editor-in-chief of *Sequoia*, the university’s literary magazine, where he flouted fashion by publishing formal poetry. Under his leadership, the journal’s readership increased until *Sequoia* had the highest circulation of any small West coast literary magazine.

After graduating, Gioia moved east to study comparative literature at Harvard, where he worked with the poets Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Fitzgerald. Though he completed the coursework for his PhD, Gioia felt that his studies were making him too self-consciously academic as a poet. He left Harvard for Stanford’s Graduate School of Business, but continued to write poetry at night. While working toward his MBA, Gioia met Mary Hiecke, his future wife. The couple received their MBAs in 1977, took jobs at General Foods in White Plains, New York, and were married in 1980. Gioia kept his identity as a poet secret at work even as he wrote the poems that would become *Daily Horoscope*. Responses to the book varied widely, including everything from accolades to pans. Gioia’s after-hours work as a poet was brought to light at General Foods in 1984 when he found himself featured in the first “Esquire Register of Men and Women Under Forty Who Are Changing America,” alongside Whoopi Goldberg, Bill Clinton, Steven Spielberg, and Julius “Doctor J” Erving. Soon Gioia found himself profiled in *Newsweek, Forbes*, and *Business Month* as “the businessman poet.”
In 1987, Dana and Mary Gioia lost their first son, Michael Jasper, to sudden infant death syndrome. Gioia was unable to write for a year. When he did begin writing again, his poems became noticeably darker in tone. (These poems are included in his second book, The Gods of Winter.) In 1988, the Gioias had a second son, Theodore Jasper, and in 1993, a third son, Michael Frederick. After fifteen years in New York's Westchester county, Gioia decided to leave his job as Vice President of Marketing in order to write full time. In 1996, the Gioia family moved to California's Sonoma Valley. Today Gioia is one of the few poets to make a living as a full-time writer and editor with no academic affiliation. (More information on Gioia may be found in Western Writers Series No. 143, Dana Gioia.)

A dedicated Californian, Gioia nevertheless doesn't shrink from criticizing the state of Western literary culture. He recently ignited controversy once again by writing about the decline of San Francisco as a literary center. In “Fallen Western Star,” a 1999 essay in Hungry Mind Review, he argues that despite San Francisco’s history as a literary mecca, the city’s diffuse geography and the individualism of the Western writer have failed to sustain an ongoing literary bohemia. Instead, Gioia argues, a Western writer’s central relationship is not with colleagues but with the landscape: “The mythology of the Western writer usually dwells on the romantic individual alone with nature—Jeffers brooding by the Pacific, lusty Henry Miller in Big Sur, or London on horseback beside the smoking ruins of Wolf House. The myth of heroic individualism, however, may not be a particularly useful way to imagine the real possibilities of West Coast literature” (21). Great Bay-Area writers exist, but they work in relative isolation, compared with their counterparts in New York or Boston, a situation which may serve to impoverish their work and which certainly weakens Western literary culture. According to Gioia, “Urban literary
culture is not a precondition of good fiction or poetry […] but it does seem to help. And its absence is keenly felt in the atomized and individualistic communities of the American West” (21).

For Gioia, San Francisco's decline as an active literary bohemia raises a question with relevance for numerous other American cities, namely, “whether regional literature can maintain a meaningful identity—something beyond local color and superficial accent—in the face of the global standardization of electronic media and the centralization of national literary opinion in New York” (21). This question is significant because, as Gioia puts it, “Local culture matters because human existence is local.”

As a poet, Gioia has proven himself adept at narrative and lyric poetry, free verse and traditional form. Though remarkable for their compression and understatement, his poems do not shrink from dealing with strong emotions. And though their author is clearly erudite, works like “Lives of the Great Composers” and “Maze without a Minotaur” remain fully accessible to a reader unfamiliar with classical music and mythology. With an elegance of expression more common to the academic formalists of the 1950s, Gioia strives for a contemporary idiom tuned in to the world beyond the ivory tower.

MARK JARMAN

Reaper co-founder Mark Jarman is an important poet and critic. He has written seven books of poetry, North Sea (1978); The Rote Walker (1981); Far and Away (1985); The Black Riviera (1990), which won the 1991 Poet’s Prize; Iris (1992); Questions for Ecclesiastes (1997), which won the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize; and Unholy Sonnets (2000). Jarman has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, as well as the San Francisco Foundation's Joseph Henry Jackson Award, and has been a

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Born in Mt. Sterling, Kentucky, in 1952, Jarman is the oldest of three children. His father was a student at the College of the Bible, now known as Lexington Theological Seminary. The family moved to Santa Maria, California, when Jarman was a year old, and to Kirkcaldy, Fife, Scotland, when he was six. They relocated again in 1961, this time to Redondo Beach, California, the setting of many of Jarman's most memorable poems. Jarman has written, "Redondo Beach remains one of two points of origin for me, one of two grounds of being. The other is a linoleum factory town on the North Sea, another sort of beach town. Many of my poems return to Redondo, to the ocean there, to the life I lived there and would happily live again" (Buckley 158). Jarman earned his BA at the University of California at Santa Cruz, where he studied with renowned fiction writer Raymond Carver and George Hitchcock, a surrealist poet and editor of Kayak. At the relatively young age of twenty-two, he published a chapbook entitled Tonight Is the Night of the Prom. At Santa Cruz, Jarman met his future wife, the soprano Amy Kane, and his future collaborator, Robert McDowell. He received an MFA in 1976 from the University of Iowa, where he worked with Donald Justice, Marvin Bell, Stanley Plumly, Sandra McPherson, and Charles Wright. After that he traveled on to Indiana State University, Evansville (since renamed University of Southern Indiana) to teach for a couple of years before returning to the West coast to serve briefly as a visiting lecturer at the University of California, Irvine. Next, Jarman accepted a job at Murray State University in Murray, Kentucky, a three-hour drive away from Robert McDowell, and the two friends decided to found
Taken together, these poems arrive at an uneasy belief in a God whose ways can seem capricious, even cruel. Nevertheless, for the poet, the possibility of belief is a blessing in itself. The volume’s final poem celebrates Christian belief, declaring, “Someone is God who had a common name / That you might give a child or animal. / It happens overnight. The world is changed,” and concluding: “Today we meet our maker in a flash / That turns the ash of
yesterday to flesh” (83). Though a belief in God may offer only a “mirage of comfort,” this mirage is, for Jarman, a necessary one. With their wide tonal range and their willingness to simultaneously accept and transcend religious doctrine, the poems in Unholy Sonnets and its predecessor, Questions for Ecclesiastes, cement his position as one of the most important poets writing today.

ROBERT MCDOWELL

Though The Reaper met its demise in 1989, the spirit behind the publication lives on in Story Line Press, the publishing company co-founded and now run by Robert McDowell. Story Line has published many major New Formalist texts including anthologies such as Rebel Angels and A Formal Feeling Comes (1994), a collection of formal poems by contemporary women, and such defining books of criticism as Annie Finch’s After New Formalism (1999) and McDowell’s Poetry After Modernism (1991). In addition to his role as Executive Director at Story Line, and his editorial work, McDowell is an accomplished and innovative poet in his own right.

Born in Alhambra, California, in 1953, McDowell was raised primarily by his mother. His father left the family when McDowell was five, and his mother died when he was in his twenties. McDowell was an undergraduate at the University of California at Santa Cruz, where he, like Jarman, studied with George Hitchcock and Raymond Carver. As a graduate student at Columbia University, he studied with Mark Strand, Richard Eberhart, and William Jay Smith. After graduate school, he moved to the Mojave Desert and taught for two years at Antelope Valley Community College. Though his early poems were surrealist, he began writing narrative poetry in 1977. In 1978, he accepted a teaching job at Indiana State University at Evansville (now University of Southern Indiana).
In 1984, McDowell and Jarman were invited to choose and publish an annual series of books to be funded by the Nicholas Roerich Museum in New York City. This venture led to the birth of Story Line Press. That same year, McDowell moved back to California, this time to Santa Cruz, with the artist/designer Lysa Howard, who would eventually become his wife. McDowell and Jarman continued to collaborate on both *The Reaper* and Story Line Press until 1989 when the journal closed, and Jarman relinquished his duties as co-editor and publisher at Story Line. Story Line Press eventually expanded to publish more than a dozen books per year, adding novels, short stories, a verse play, and writers’ guides to the poetry books that are its main focus. The press remains the preeminent source of books about the Expansive poetry movement, as well as a venue through which many new and established formal and narrative poets are published. In the early 1990s, McDowell and Story Line Press relocated to Three Oaks Farm in Oregon’s Willamette Valley. Robert and Lysa McDowell, the latter of whom designs many of the press’s books, are the parents of Dylan Randall Joseph, born in 1987, Eoghan Patrick Morgan, born in 1992, and Jane Mary Katherine, born in 1997. In 1998, the press moved south to the Rogue Valley near Ashland, Oregon.

Despite his active career as a publisher, McDowell has continued to write his own distinctive verse. *Quiet Money* (1987), his first poetry collection, broke important ground for the New Narrative movement. Composed entirely of narratives and dramatic monologues, the book features a range of characters, some as unconventional as the bootlegger in the volume’s title poem, but most of them ordinary people in extraordinary situations: Bill, the husband in “The Liberated Bowler,” who gets married at the bowling alley and winds up a bowling widower; or “The Cop from Traffic Accident Control,” who seeks revenge for the murder of a friend.
With their unadorned, matter-of-fact delivery and their focus on plot, these poems read like a good collection of short stories. McDowell's second book, *The Diviners* (1995), is essentially a novel in blank verse. Both of McDowell's collections are remarkable for his adept use of dialogue and cultural detail to propel plot, and his ability to capture the cadences of ordinary speech. His third collection is scheduled for publication by the University of Pittsburgh Press.

Some of McDowell's more recent, uncollected poetry has taken an unexpected turn toward lyricism and autobiography. He remains, however, one of narrative poetry's most committed advocates. "I try to write a poem for the widest possible audience," he has written. "I believe that poetry is witnessing, that it is essential to a healthy, spiritual community. Whether it celebrates or indicteds, I hope that the poem is memorable, honest, clear. Writing narrative poetry encourages one to gaze outward, to be observant, even humble" (E-mail, 11 Aug. 2000).

**DAVID MASON**


As an editor, Mason has made serious contributions to American poetry, most notably when he co-edited the fourth edition of John Frederick Nims' classic poetry textbook, *Western Wind* (1999). Working with Mark Jarman, Mason also co-edited *Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism*. As a poet, Mason has received the Poetry Society of America's Alice Fay Di Castagnola Award, as well as a Fulbright fellowship to Greece. He has many projects in
the works, among them a collection of stories, a book-length memoir of Greece, and a translation of work by the Greek poet Yiorgos Chouliaras.

Mason was born in 1954 in Bellingham, Washington, a city on Puget Sound slightly west of Nooksack, the setting of a number of his poems. His father, who worked as a Naval officer, a pediatrician, and a psychiatrist, and his mother, a psychology professor at Western Washington University, were transplanted Coloradans who met in San Francisco during World War II. Mason’s parents divorced when he was fifteen after a separation of three years. The poet attributes his attraction to narrative and his choice of subject matter to his family history: “Like many other Americans, I’ve felt a subtle but real anxiety where identity is concerned. Perhaps this is because I am one of the many people who have grown up in broken homes. Perhaps it is because no two generations in my family have ever lived in the same place. I’m descended from wanderers, and a lot of what I write concerns deracination. I’ve also been blessed because these wanderers were marvelous storytellers, so I’m always aware of this attempt to make imaginary homelands through storytelling” (E-mail, 24 Mar. 2000).

In 1973, Mason left Bellingham to study at Colorado College, where he now teaches. At the end of his freshman year, he left school for Dutch Harbor, Alaska, where he spent seven months unloading crab and shrimp boats. Next he spent another seven months hitchhiking around the British Isles. In 1975, he returned to college in Colorado and began work on a novel about Alaska. He married Jonna Heinrich in 1978 and moved to her hometown, Rochester, New York. There he wrote and worked, at various times, as a gardener, housepainter, and harbormaster of the Rochester Yacht Club. In 1979, Mason’s older brother Douglas was killed in a mountain-climbing accident on Washington State’s Mt. Shuksan. (Donald, Mason’s younger brother, had also been on the
climb, but escaped injury.) Two years after this tragedy, Mason and his wife moved to a small Greek village, but returned to the States thirteen months later when Mason’s Alaskan novel was optioned by a film company. (In 1997, he would return to Greece for five months as a Fulbright writer-in-residence.) Mason was hired to write the screenplay, but the project fell through when the company closed its film division. Instead, he turned to part-time teaching at Colorado College, and in 1989 he began graduate studies with Anthony Hecht at the University of Rochester. In 1987 Mason and Heinrich were divorced. In 1988, Mason married the photojournalist Anne Lennox and became stepfather to Lennox’s daughter, Darcy Bergmanis Bertagnoli, born in 1966. Upon finishing his PhD, Mason moved to Moorhead, Minnesota, to teach at Moorhead State University. Since 1998, he has taught at Colorado College and now lives in the mountains outside Colorado Springs.

An incisive critic of the contemporary poetry scene, Mason has spoken out against the lack of invention and passion in much recent poetry. He also is a brilliant narrative poet and one of the best lyric poets writing today. His narrative, “The Country I Remember,” is one of the strongest works the New Narrative movement has yet produced. In his criticism, Mason stresses the usefulness of poetry in daily life. He writes, “We may feel isolated from God, from any meaning we have desired, but the language of poetry can’t help being a kind of ceremony. It insists, sometimes against all reason, that we are not alone, that our most intimate or noble, trivial or terrible natures are already understood” (The Poetry of Life 29).

TIMOTHY STEELE

A master of the formally tight, luminous lyric poem, Timothy Steele also is a critic of considerable importance. His first two poetry collections, Uncertainties and Rest (1979) and Sapphics
Against Anger and Other Poems (1986) were reissued in a joint volume, Sapphics and Uncertainties: Poems, 1970-1986, in 1995. His newest book of poetry is The Color Wheel (1994). He has been the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Peter I. B. Lavan Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets, the Los Angeles PEN Center’s Literary Award for Poetry, a California Arts Council Grant, and a Commonwealth Club of California Medal for Poetry.

As a critic, Steele has produced the groundbreaking volume Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt Against Meter (1990), in which he explores the assumptions that underlie literary modernism. According to Steele, the free-verse revolution of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot has resulted in a generation of poets who essentially write mannered prose broken up into lines. Missing Measures makes the case that poets are becoming unable to hear and write metrical forms. As a result, free verse becomes increasingly meaningless as poets have less and less sense of the tradition from which their poems depart. Steele also has written All the Fun’s in How You Say a Thing (1999), a study of meter and versification, and has edited The Poems of J. V. Cunningham (1997).

Steele was born in 1948 in Burlington, Vermont. His father was a teacher and his mother a nurse. In elementary school, Steele read the poetry of Robert Frost, who later would become Vermont’s poet laureate. Of this early influence, Steele has said, “Frost wrote enchantingly about Vermont, its landscapes, seasons, and people. When I began to write poetry, his model was important. It was he who had compared free verse to playing tennis with the net down. If for no other reason than his example, I would have been reluctant to write verse without first learning the rules of the art” (Walzer, “An Interview” 3). In 1970, Steele earned a BA from Stanford, where he was influenced by the legacy of the formalist poet and New Critic Yvor Winters, who taught at
One challenge is particularly acute for a Western Expansive poet: the struggle to make use of the traditions of English verse to describe the realities of the contemporary American West. The novelist and critic Wallace Stegner has written of the need for Western writers to link the past and present:

What is most essential to human life and to its continuance remains a love of nature, an enthusiasm for justice, a readiness of good humor, a spontaneous susceptibility to beauty and joy, an interest in our past, a hope for our future and above all, a desire that others should have the opportunity and encouragement to share in those qualities. An art of measured speech nourishes these qualities in a way no other pursuit can. (Missing Measures 294)

MAKING TRADITION NEW

One challenge is particularly acute for a Western Expansive poet: the struggle to make use of the traditions of English verse to describe the realities of the contemporary American West. The novelist and critic Wallace Stegner has written of the need for Western writers to link the past and present:
In the old days, in blizzardy weather, we used to tie a string of lariats from house to barn so as to make it from shelter to responsibility and back again. [. . .] I think we had better rig up such a line between past and present. If we do, the term "western literature" will be enlarged beyond its ordinary limitations, and its accomplishments not so easily overlooked. (The Sound of Mountain Water 201)

Stegner may have had the Western past in mind, but for modern New Formalist poets, English-language traditions of rhymed and metrical verse belong to an American past that Western poets may reclaim.

Though Stegner feels distaste for the present, which he calls "the uglified and over-engineered and small-spirited civilization that threatens to turn us into one gigantic anthill" (Mountain Water 201), he nonetheless sees that a writer will be relevant only if he engages not only the past but also the time and place in which he lives. In an essay in the anthology The Geography of Home: California's Poetry of Place, Gioia sums up the dilemma of the Western poet who must call upon a British literary tradition to describe a landscape far removed from England:

A California poet almost inevitably feels the competing claims of language and experience [. . .]. Our seasons, climate, landscape, natural life, and history are alien to the world-views of both England and New England. Spanish—not French—colors our regional accent. The world looks and feels different in California from the way it does in Massachusetts or Manchester—not only the natural landscape but also the urban one. There is no use listening for a nightingale among the scrub oaks and chaparral. (Buckley 74)
Gioia and the other Western New Formalists seek to remain actively in touch with British literary traditions while capturing the realities of the American West. These poets often put a new spin on traditional Western themes to give them contemporary resonance. In doing so, they are fulfilling an important part of the poet’s task. As Gioia put it, “I believe that it’s the poet’s job to redeem the ordinary world around us for the imagination and the spirit—even if that world is the suburbs and office life. But the poet cannot attempt this redemption at the price of simplifying or distorting it. One must see the world for what it is. One must present all of the burdens and miseries of this common life and still see the value in it” (qtd. in McPhillips 15). By reworking traditional Western themes, these poets are helping to keep Western literature vital and relevant to contemporary Western life.

Landscape—in particular the arid and rugged rural West—has been a time-honored theme of Western literature. In “California Hills in August,” Gioia provides his own take on a landscape whose beauties might not be evident to “[a]n Easterner”:

I can imagine someone who found these fields unbearable, [ . . . ]

An Easterner especially, who would scorn the meagerness of summer, the dry twisted shapes of black elm, scrub oak, and chaparral, a landscape August has already drained of green.

[ . . . . . ]

And yet how gentle it seems to someone raised in a landscape short of rain—the skyline of a hill broken by no more trees than one can count, the grass, the empty sky, the wish for water. (Daily Horoscope 4)
Written while Gioia lived on the East coast, this poem contrasts the aesthetic sensibilities of the Easterner and the Westerner and implies that our native environments shape what we perceive as beautiful.

_Daily Horoscope_ is permeated by a sense of homesickness. The theme of exile is articulated most fully in the title poem, a complex lyric exploration of how ephemeral a sense of real belonging can be. The poem’s speaker—an oracular voice not unlike that of a newspaper astrologist’s—ruminates on dreams, visions, and epiphanies, phenomena that promise a feeling of true understanding and real belonging in the world. Inevitably, however, feelings of understanding and belonging are fleeting. Well-being is envisioned as a place from which one is exiled, a place figured, tellingly, as “the lost geography of childhood.”

For Gioia, childhood’s lost geography is distinctly Californian. It is not surprising that some of the most emotionally affecting of the poems he wrote after moving back to the West coast deal with place. One of the most moving poems in Gioia’s oeuvre is the openly autobiographical “Planting a Sequoia,” in which a bereaved father inscribes a landscape with personal meaning as a way of coming to terms with the death of his son:

All afternoon my brothers and I have worked in the orchard,
Digging this hole, laying you into it, carefully packing the soil.
Rain blackened the horizon, but cold winds kept it over the Pacific,
And the sky above us stayed the dull gray
Of an old year coming to an end.

In Sicily a father plants a tree to celebrate his first son’s birth—
An olive or a fig tree—a sign that the earth has one more life to bear.
I would have done the same, proudly laying new stock into my father's orchard,
A green sapling rising among the twisted apple boughs,
A promise of new fruit in other autumns.

But today we kneel in the cold planting you, our native giant,
Defying the practical custom of our fathers,
Wrapping in your roots a lock of hair, a piece of an infant's birth cord,
All that remains above earth of a first-born son,
A few stray atoms brought back to the elements.

We will give you what we can—our labor and our soil,
Water drawn from the earth when the skies fail,
Nights scented with the ocean fog, days softened by the circuit of bees.
We plant you in the corner of the grove, bathed in western light,
A slender shoot against the sunset.

And when our family is no more, all of his unborn brothers dead,
Every niece and nephew scattered, the house torn down,
His mother's beauty ashes in the air,
I want you to stand among strangers, all young and ephemeral to you,
Silently keeping the secret of your birth. (Gods 10)

Existing rituals are insufficient in helping the narrator cope with a son's death, so he must transform established tradition to meet his special needs, commemorating his son's brief life in a way that will transcend an ordinary human life span. The poem's speaker takes pleasure in the cryptic nature of this commemoration: future generations will notice the sequoia without understanding its
symbolic importance. In this sense, the tree differs from a gravestone which vainly tries to sum up a life in a handful of words and a pair of dates. "Planting a Sequoia" is that tricky thing, a successful poem about the failure of words, and it is significant that the poem says little about the speaker's grief and less about the lost child. Just as the poet uses action and imagery to conjure emotion in the reader, the poem's speaker makes use of native soil and plant life to express his ineffable sorrow and love.

Like Gioia, David Mason has written a number of moving poems in which a rural landscape is inscribed with personal meaning. Many are set in the mountains and deal with his older brother's death in a mountain-climbing accident. In "What Is It There?" Mason explores how landscape can bear the imprint of tragedy. The poem's speaker imagines

[...]

the calls

of crow and chainsaw, fishermen

knee deep in the river's clatter—

sounds heard at last as silence

captured in the slow descent of clouds,

the dampness softening all fears.

A mother screams for her lost son

until the walls remember it,

and where there are no walls a crow

clings to its rainy branch, scattering

small drops of water as it takes the air. (The Buried Houses 37)

This poem is a model of the classical restraint that characterizes many New Formalist poems. Only the line about the mother screaming for her lost son points us toward the deeper significance of a place described mostly in terms of its physical properties. The poem's title raises a key question: What is haunting about this place? In place of an overt answer, the poem concentrates on
description. Mountain peaks appearing and disappearing in mist
take on the otherworldly attitude of "memories or myth," words
that suggest that this landscape has become a place of personal
myth and of remembrance. While the landscape is mythologized by
its association with death, this association isn't merely incidental.
What makes the glacier so haunting and beautiful is precisely
what makes it so dangerous—its sublimity.

In a related poem, called "An Absence," the speaker longs again
for the distant landscape where he can best mourn his brother:

[... ]

Now I live in another state
with hills for mountains and less rain.
You would have hated the small scale
of everything here, and how pain
comes early, stays late.

I’ve grown by distances, and lost
that place where I could visit you.
Though nothing’s written on your stone,
I hope you never feel alone.
I hope it feels like rest. (The Buried Houses 53-54)

Grief has given the remembered mountain range a significance
that ordinarily is not inherent in mere firs and waterfalls, an im-
portance that the speaker both flees and longs for. The mountain’s
features take the place of a gravestone and speak eloquently of a
brother who “would have hated the small scale” of a tamer land-
scape.

Mark Jarman’s poems of place often deal with a different, but no
less sublime, natural feature: the Pacific. In “Ground Swell,” one
of Jarman’s most powerful and oft-anthologized poems, the ocean
serves as a metaphor for the force of history:
There was a day or two when, paddling out,  
An older boy who had just graduated  
And grown a great blonde moustache, like a walrus,  
Skimmed past me like a smooth machine on the water,  
And said my name. I was so much younger,  
To be identified by one like him—  
The easy deference of a kind of god  
Who also went to church where I did—made me  
Reconsider my worth. I had been noticed.  
He soon was a small figure crossing waves,  
The shawling crest surrounding him with spray,  
Whiter than gull feathers. He had said my name  
Without scorn, just with a bit of surprise  
To notice me among those trying the big waves  
Of the morning break. His name is carved now  
On the black wall in Washington, the frozen wave  
That grievers cross to find a name or names.  
I knew him as I say I knew him, then,  
Which wasn't very well. My father preached  
His funeral. He came home in a bag  
That may have mixed in pieces of his squad.  
Yes, I can write about a lot of things  
Besides the summer that I turned sixteen.  
But that's my ground swell. I must start  
Where things began to happen and I knew it. (Questions 14)

Finely-observed particulars of surfing force the reader to identify with the speaker, to swim a mile in his wetsuit. Similarly, the speaker is forced to put his own life into a historical context by his empathy with and admiration for the older surfer. Just as the surfers are at the mercy of the Pacific, individual personalities are
at the mercy of history. Toward the poem’s end, the image of a literal wave transmutes into the wave-like shape of Washington’s Vietnam Memorial wall. Water freezes into stone, a motion that mimics the fate of the “older boy” and of so many other young men in the Vietnam era.

The place where personal history intersects with communal history is the subject of another poem set in Jarman’s childhood hometown. In “Cavafy in Redondo,” a gently self-mocking narrator remembers walking the streets of Redondo Beach as a younger man, imploring a woman to be his lover. This memory is framed by a description of Redondo’s decline from a charming small seaside town to a run-down urban outpost, a longer historical view that puts the personal drama into context. We’re told that the love affair eventually ended, a strategy which serves to deflate the drama of the courtship, just as the nostalgic description of “Stucco palaces, pleasure bungalows, the honeycomb / of the beachcombers’ cluster of rentals” (Far 76) is deflated by the later vision of missiles which “[. . .] came to squat above our house / on a bench-marked hill, turned obsolete, / and floated away on flatbeds, ruptured patios in their places” (77). The imagery evokes the ancient ruins this town’s architecture will eventually become and provides a hint (in the cold-war era missiles) of how quickly ruin might come. The reader is told that “[. . .] History builds to last, / crumbles to last, shakes off its dust / under the delicate excavating brush—to last” (77). The love affair’s beginning and end are dwarfed by larger concerns. Lovers, like cities, eventually end up as dust. When the freeways connected Redondo Beach to Los Angeles, the town’s character was forever changed. “Cavafy in Redondo” simultaneously chronicles this change and insists that it doesn’t matter in the larger scheme. Calling his past desire “sentimental,” the speaker refuses to mourn for his lost love affair just as he refuses to mourn for a bygone way of life. The poem
concludes: “My parents—all of us—have come and gone and left / no ghost here, and that is our good fortune, / to give it all to the ocean, the troubled sleeper” (77).

Both “Ground Swell” and “Cavafy in Redondo” entice the reader with biographical detail, only to downplay the importance of the personal. In that sense, Jarman’s work contrasts with that of Timothy Steele, whose carefully controlled lyrics are often unabashedly domestic. Taken as a body, Steele’s poems add up to a vivid picture of daily urban existence. Steele’s relationship with urban Los Angeles is ambivalent; his poems simultaneously celebrate and critique city life. The tone of Sapphics and Uncertainties is set by the volume’s opening poem, “From a Rooftop,” a work whose final stanzas resonate with echoes of Wordsworth’s “Composed upon Westminster Bridge”:

It is as if dawn pliantly compels
The city to relax to sounds and shapes,
To its diagonals and parallels:
Long streets with traffic signals blinking red,
Small squares of parks, alleys with fire escapes,
Rooftops above which cloudless day is spread.

And it’s as if the roofs’ breeze-freshened shelves,
Their level surfaces of graved tar
Where glassy fragments glitter, are themselves
A measure of the intermediate worth
Of all the stories to the morning star
And all the stories to the morning earth. (Sapphics and Uncertainties 3-4)

Here the poet looks downward on a distinctly urban view and finds peace and beauty. Similarly, in “Fae,” the speaker looks for and finds community in an inhospitable environment:
I bring Fae flowers. When I cross the street,
She meets and gives me lemons from her tree.
As if competitors in a Grand Prix,
The cars that speed past threaten to defeat
The sharing of our gardens and our labors.
Their automotive moral seems to be
That hell-for-leather traffic makes good neighbors.

Ten years a widow, standing at her gate,
She speaks of friends, her cat’s trip to the vet,
A grandchild’s struggle with the alphabet.
I conversationally reciprocate
With talk of work at school, not deep, not meaty.
Before I leave we study and regret
Her alley’s newest samples of graffiti.

[. . . .] (The Color Wheel 20)

Here the elements of urban life that might seem to discourage community surprisingly promote it; the graffiti gives the narrator an occasion to commiserate with Fae, and his visit to her garden is made more of an occasion by the difficulties he must go through to get there. Like “From a Rooftop,” “Fae,” with its ironic echoes of Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall,” is a poem of acceptance, in which a country-born poet sees beyond the hardships and ugliness of the city into the grace that may be found there as readily as anyplace else.

Elsewhere, however, Steele paints the urban West as alien, even hostile. The uncharacteristically pessimistic poem, “Baker Beach at Sunset” describes a San Francisco-area beach as emblematic of the modernism Steele has made a career of critiquing. The poem’s speaker has been rendered unable to write by modernism’s “self-scrutiny,” a vice he finds embodied by Baker Beach, “a place the ocean comes to die.” The poem ends: “Seaward, tugboats and
Elaine and Tom move on. They live abroad,  
As far from Al's designs as possible.  
Their only link with home is Eleanor,  
Whose letters tell of working overtime

[. . . .]
And just the other day Al spoke to her,
Despairing, as ever, over his son’s decline.
He told her how he’d overheard a fool
Declare at lunch that Tom, the bum, had quit
The job to run off with a colored girl.
Al stepped right up, but then was at a loss.

“She’s dark because she lies out in the sun,”
Was all he thought to say. The others blinked,
The one who talked made quick work of his food,
Apologized and scrambled up to go. (Diviners 45)

Al’s attempt to stand up for his son is misbegotten; lying to his bigoted coworkers is still a far cry from acknowledging his own prejudice. As McDowell’s adept characterizations make clear, Al is a bigot. There is, however, a touch of pathos in his clumsy defense of Tom. Al’s strong work ethic, shared by so many men of his generation and class, clearly marks him as a product of the postwar suburbs in which he lives. Like his father, Tom is representative of his own generation. A baby boomer intent on being different from his parents, Tom flees America permanently after his father’s death. The book’s upbeat ending, in which Tom and Elaine complete a circle by moving back to the country of his ancestry, implies that a child can consciously overcome his upbringing. A product of the sixties, the idealistic Tom believes he can change his life by changing his address. Los Angeles is Al’s turf, whereas Ireland represents a chance to live closer to the land and to the past:

In bed Tom lies awake to watch the moon,
And sees the great migrations circling back,
The children home in lands their elders fled,
Back home among their births and burials. (71)
For Tom and Al alike, time and place are destiny.

A WESTERN REQUIEM

A recent variation on the poetry of place, environmental poetry is charged with a sense of the fragility of our physical environment. Like Robinson Jeffers, whom Jarman has called a prophet of the environmental movement, Expansive poets have weighed in on humankind's place in the natural environment. David Mason's "Versions of Ecotopia" explores how the human urge to lay claim to new territory must inevitably rob the West of its beauty and distinctive character:

[. . . . .]

For those who always lived there it was dull
as drive-in movies and hot cars, until
the heroes of development had built
a bit of Phoenix by the oyster beds,
a Trumpish tower downtown, L.A. at the fringe.

As slaughtered buffalo disturb our dreaming plains,
a rainy fish smell lingers in Ecotopia.
At night the plaid giant rattles his axe
and growls in Swedish, up to his neck in muck
where the tall, unbarbered forest used to be.

You find yourself in unexpected traffic,
pressed in a narrow shoal of weeping lights,
looking through the rain for an exit sign,
and thinking of an old scroll you once saw
rubbed to nothing by a billion loving hands. (Buried 39)

Admiration for a beautiful locale almost inevitably leads to its ruin, as nature lovers move into subdevelopments named after the natural features that were razed to build them.
In a recent poem titled “A California Requiem,” Dana Gioia dramatizes how living at a remove from the natural world contributes to the human willingness to clear-cut forests and pave over fields. In a daring move, Gioia dramatizes this issue by imagining a conversation between a first-person poet narrator and an imagined chorus of the undead, refused by the earth they despoiled. Turning to leave a cemetery in his “blessed California,” the narrator pauses when he hears “[f]aint but insistent” voices saying,

“Stay a moment longer, quiet stranger. 
Your footsteps woke us from our lidded cells. 
Now hear us whisper in the scorching wind. 
Our single voice drawn from a thousand hells.

“We lived in places that we never knew. 
We could not name the birds perched on our sill, 
Or see the trees we cut down for our view. 
What we possessed we always chose to kill.

“We claimed the earth but did not hear her claim, 
And when we died, they laid us on her breast, 
But she refuses us—until we earn 
Forgiveness from the lives we dispossessed.

[. . . .] 
“Forget your stylish verses, little poet— 
So sadly beautiful, precise, and tame. 
We are your people, though you would deny it. 
Admit the justice of our primal claim.

“Become the voice of our forgotten places. 
Teach us the names of what we have destroyed. 
We are like shadows the bright noon erases, 
Weightlessly shrinking, bleached into the void.
"We offer you the landscape of your birth—
Exquisite and despoiled. We all share blame.
We cannot ask forgiveness of the earth
For killing what we cannot even name.” (Interrogations 20-21)

Though the chorus belittles the poet/narrator, only he has the power to make amends for the damages they wrought. By remembering and transmitting the names of the felled trees and dispossessed birds, the poet can teach the value of what has already been lost, can “ask forgiveness of the earth,” thereby redeeming those who valued the earth too lightly. Of course, the poet’s power is limited to language; what has been destroyed will remain lost. When the chorus urges the narrator to put aside his “stylish verses [. . .] / So sadly beautiful, precise, and tame,” the poem implicitly contrasts art—which is manmade and therefore “tame”—with the natural world, whose wildness and variety art can only imitate. “A California Requiem” makes the case that the besieged natural world is the most urgent subject a contemporary poet can address.

Though less explicitly polemical, two more poems by Gioia and Mason are exercises in empathizing with the natural world. In “Becoming a Redwood,” Gioia offers advice on seeing nature from the inside:

Stand in a field long enough, and the sounds
start up again. The crickets, the invisible
toad who claims that change is possible,

And all the other life too small to name.
First one, then another, until innumerable
they merge into the single voice of a summer hill.

Yes, it’s hard to stand still, hour after hour,
fixed as a fencepost, hearing the steers
snort in the dark pasture, smelling the manure.
And paralyzed by the mystery of how a stone
  can bear to be a stone, the pain
  the grass endures breaking through the earth’s crust. (Gods 55)

The poem moves from the difficulty of empathizing with something
as alien as a tree, through acceptance, to terror, as the “you” ad-
dressed by the speaker merges completely with nature only to re-
alize that “there is no silence but when danger comes.” The poem’s
movement toward silence and fear points to our human reluctance
to abandon words and empathize fully with nature. It feels more
comfortable—less dangerous—to believe ourselves on a level safely
above trees and crickets and feral dogs. Resonating back to Keats’s
theory of negative capability, which asserted that poets must know
how to identify fully with their subjects, “Becoming a Redwood”
suggests that empathy is also a crucial skill for non-poets who
would learn to see nature for what it really is.

A similar impulse lies behind David Mason’s “Three Characters
from a Lost Home,” which gives voice to a cedar, water, and
woodsmoke, and in doing so, captures something elemental about
each. Of the poem’s three inanimate narrators, the cedar is most
vulnerable to human meddling:

  Though they drill and count my rings,
  mark Columbus near my heart,
  a thousand other happenings
  elude discovery from the start,
  and I have secrets deep enough
  only the pale blind taproot knows,
  worming far beneath the duff.
  The uplift of my trunk bestows
  in swooping terraces a green
  intelligence to catch the wind;
  invisible, it can be seen
When I am shaken and I bend
and almost let my branches fly.
I grow unmoving till I die. (Country 61)

Though humans have the power to fell a tree and calculate its age, only through negative capability are we able to share the tree’s “green intelligence” or imagine the secrets to which its roots are privy. The poem’s title hints, gently, at the impulse behind its composition. The cedar, river, and woodsmoke are elements of a “lost home”—possibly a place the poet has left, probably a place that no longer exists in its original untrammeled beauty. Certainly, for poets who would characterize and celebrate the Western landscape, the rapid changes overtaking that landscape are an increasingly important subject.

HEROES, ANTI-HEROES, AND ICONS

Of concern for any Western writer is the tendency of the East coast literary establishment to underestimate outsiders. The poet William Everson has written of “the antagonism the West feels towards the East, part of which stems from the fact that the West feels that it is not taken seriously by the East” (Birth 147). In his book-length narrative poem, Iris, Mark Jarman addresses the literary world’s neglect of the poet Robinson Jeffers by reinventing Jeffers as an iconic figure. A young mother fleeing an abusive marriage, Iris takes comfort in her dog-eared book of Jeffers’s poems, which to her represent the possibility of a more fulfilling life. Iris finds refuge for a time at her mother’s home in Kentucky, until her brothers are killed in a drug deal. Her search for security takes her to California, but she doesn’t find the purposeful life she longs for until many years later, when she journeys on to Jeffers’s Tor House in Carmel. In the meantime, Jeffers’s poetry and the story of his life provide a sustaining mythology for Iris, who at
times imagines what her life would look and sound like if written by the man she thinks of as “her poet”:

That woman you have heard of who returned with her girlchild, to the family mobile home,
Parked on a hump of clay beside a forty-acre square, entering the daily rhythm
Of that near fatal family—I have been watching her.
[. . . . .]
My eyes are all I have. Lidless, tearless, less expressive than a stroke victim’s,
They are two dry unflinching points of observation. They see her now, in the library.
All along the lit oblong of glass the hard-shelled and dusty summer insects
Collide and flail themselves to death. There are boundaries we cannot cross. She reads. (30)

For Iris, Jeffers is a figure of near-religious importance. For Jarman, Jeffers clearly deserves to be ranked with the great literary modernists who were his contemporaries.

In his celebration of the literary outsider, Jarman is like many post-Romantic poets (most notably the Beat poets) who seek heroes in unlikely places. In an earlier poem, “The Black Riviera,” Jarman mythologizes an anti-hero—the drug dealer—as lord of the underworld, whose black car glides “close to the roadtop, / So insular, so quiet, it enters the earth” (Buckley 165). In “Into the Movies,” McDowell probes the psyche of a hobo who finds solace in memories of the films of Preston Sturges. And in “The Next Place,” David Mason tells the story of a travelling medicine show charlatan.

In recent decades, American writers increasingly have looked to popular culture for figures to mythologize. The New Formalists are
no exception. In fact, one element that separates these younger formal poets from earlier academic formalists is their willingness to incorporate popular culture in poems that aim to be high art. This move represents another strategy for “redeeming the ordinary world” by making art out of the most prosaic of phenomena. Writing about popular culture is also one way to make poetry relevant to an average reader, who may well be more intrigued by an ode to the Supremes than by one on a Grecian urn. In Mark Jarman’s “The Supremes,” we glimpse the Motown trio, but the poem’s real subject is a specific moment in the life of the narrator and in the history of Redondo Beach. The narrator recalls watching the Supremes on a portable television at the local market where he and his friends have stopped for sweet rolls after a morning of surfing. Jarman compares the song “Stop! In the Name of Love,” with its simple, repetitive musical phrases, to the waves the boys have just left behind:

But what could we know, tanned white boys,
wiping sugar and salt from our mouths
and leaning forward to feel their song?
Not much, except to feel it
ravel us up like a wave
in the silk of white water,
simply, sweetly, repeatedly,
and just as quickly let go. (Far 14-15)

By the poem’s end, both waves and musical repetition turn out to be a metaphor for the passage of time. The shopkeeper sells his market, high rises are built in its place, and the narrator leaves Redondo Beach for good. For Jarman, the Supremes serve as a cultural touchstone, emblematic of a specific moment in history, their music as “full of simple sweetness and repetition” as time itself.
Similarly, Gioia’s “Cruising with the Beach Boys” explores the power of pop music to evoke powerful emotions. The poem’s narrator, a grown man on a business trip, finds himself moved to tears by a Beach Boys song on the radio of his rented car. The song, which goes unnamed, transports him vividly back to 1969:

Every lovesick summer has its song,
And this one I pretended to despise,
But if I was alone when it came on,
I turned it up full-blast to sing along—
A primal scream in croaky baritone,
The notes all flat, the lyrics mostly slurred.
No wonder I spent so much time alone
Making the rounds in Dad’s old Thunderbird.

(Daily Horoscope 5)

Though the narrator recognizes the self-indulgence of his tears as well as the one-size-fits-all emotional manipulation of the pop song, he can’t help succumbing once again to self-pity. “Cruising with the Beach Boys” is both a tribute to and a critique of the power of pop music.

The undeniable if unfortunate hold of popular culture on our imaginations is also the subject of Robert McDowell’s “The Origin of Fear.” This short narrative describes how a young boy’s sense of mortality is formed by an unlikely influence: a series of billboards commissioned by the California State Highway Commission to discourage reckless driving:

Fascinated, he stares at a giant billboard
Where a woman like his mother, dressed
In black, weeps above an open casket.
A gray man in a gray suit lies inside.
Their two small grieving children flank the box
While a black oak highway trails off behind.
And over a hill, in the upper left-hand corner,
A black-cowled, risen Death’s Head smiles.
[...]
The boy will never sleep the same again [...]. (Quiet Money 44-45)

The billboards command their power through grim suggestion, by emphasizing the grief of survivors rather than the gore of car crashes. They also manage to communicate the religious fervor of the artist to the young boy, who as a man is haunted by his own apostasy. The man’s terror is rendered more powerful by the fact that he doesn’t completely understand its source. McDowell paints a vivid portrait of the sneaky ways in which popular culture can work on our psyches.

THE GREAT AMERICAN NARRATIVE POEM

The best works of the New Narrative address large and complex subjects. Though Dana Gioia has, to date, written only a handful of narratives, all explore ambitious themes. In “The Homecoming,” Gioia examines the complex inner life of a murderer, an intelligent young man who consciously decides to become a killer. “The Room Upstairs” explores the redeeming power of love by depicting a self-absorbed bachelor landlord ennobled by the intense attraction he feels for a young student who rents a room from him. As strong as these poems are, Gioia’s most powerful narrative poem to date is “Counting the Children,” an American masterpiece, and one of the most powerful works by any contemporary poet. Set in an unnamed California city and narrated by Mr. Choi, a Chinese-American accountant, “Counting the Children” tells a fairly simple tale. Sent to audit the estate of a deceased old woman, Mr. Choi is appalled by the solitary woman’s odd collection of old dolls, each once cherished by someone, now reduced to utter junk. The
realization that time inevitably obliterates all things and all people—that “Dust has a million lives, the heart has one” (Gods 14)—is particularly terrifying for Mr. Choi when he returns home to bend over his sleeping daughter. The poem comes to a complete circle as the father notices a shelf of his daughter’s beloved dolls:

I feared that if I touched one, it would scream. (19)

How is it that a narrative like “Counting the Children” can take a topic as familiar as the inevitability of death, and somehow engage not just the reader’s intellect, but also her emotions? Part of the answer lies in the poem’s elegant language and its vividly drawn, unified imagery. Another part of the answer lies in the nature of narrative itself. In their essay, “The Reaper’s Non-Negotiable Demands,” Jarman and McDowell make a strong statement: “Emotion is inconsequential unless it is the result of a story. The story is communal; it is for others” (Reaper 40). While this declaration overlooks an enormous body of powerful lyric poetry, it is true that storytelling at its best can reach out to its audience and contend with weighty and complicated subjects in a way that feels more engaging than didactic.

The power of storytelling to put across complex ideas is evident in Mason’s “Spooning.” In this deceptively entertaining, even funny poem, a single incident illuminates the tensions running through an ordinary family, and changes the way a young boy views his grandfather. The poem’s occasion is the grandfather’s death. Sorting through personal effects, the adult grandson finds a publicity still of Lydia Truman Gates, a film star who visited the narrator’s hometown, Nooksack, Washington, when the narrator was a boy. He recalls how his grandfather claimed to be an early beau
of the actress, and how, during the star's visit to Nooksack, he had once tried to ascertain whether or not his grandfather's story was true:

The chauffeur tried to block us, but she said,
"That's all right, Andrew. They're just kids. I'm safe."

"Our grandpa says hello," I blurted out.

She paused for half a beat, glanced at Billy, then peered at me as if to study terror, smiling. "Well I'll be damned. And who's he?"

"Don't listen to him," Billy said. "He's nuts."

"George McCracken," I said, "the one you spooned with down by the railroad tracks."

"George McCracken." She straightened, looked up at the strip of sky.
"Spooned. Well, that's one way to talk about it."

She laughed from deep down in her husky lungs.
"Old Georgie McCracken. Is he still alive? Too scared to come downtown and say hello?"

She reached out from her furs and touched my hair.
"Thanks for the message, little man. I knew him. I knew he'd never get out of this town.
You tell your grampa Hi from Liddy Carter." (Buried 64-65)

Despite its lighthearted tone, this poem grapples with weighty themes. The poem ends with the speaker recalling his boyhood encounter with Gates:

I thought of her decaying on a screen,
hers ribs folding like a silk umbrella's rods,
while all the men who gathered around her
clutched at the remnants of her empty dress. (Buried 66)
In these final lines, Mason contrasts the timeless nature of celebrity with the time-bound nature of the woman inside the starlet. This brief but multilayered narrative also illuminates the life of a family. We glimpse, in passing, the narrator’s mother’s dissatisfaction with life in northern Washington, and his father’s attachment to that life. Most of all, the narrator’s brief brush with celebrity sheds new light on the grandfather, allowing the grandson to see him both as a romantic figure who courted Lydia Truman Gates and as a failure, who never made it out of Nooksack.

Capturing the spirit of a decade was the goal of one of the earliest and most ambitious works of the New Narrative. The author of The Golden Gate (1986), which depicts the cultural milieu of San Francisco in the 1980s, was neither Western nor even American. A native of Calcutta, India, Vikram Seth studied demography and economics at Stanford and was a friend and classmate of Dana Gioia and a private student of Timothy Steele. In rhymed iambic tetrameter sonnets, Seth succeeds in telling a complex novel-length story of the dovetailing love lives of five young singles in 1980s San Francisco. Dedicated to Steele, who helped its author hone his skills as a metricist, The Golden Gate is a technical tour de force; even the author’s note and the table of contents are sonnets. Its characters are drawn with the complexity a reader would find in a novel. The most memorable of these characters is John, a defense-industry yuppie:

John’s looks are good. His dress is formal.  
His voice is low. His mind is sound.  
His appetite for work’s abnormal.  
A plastic name tag hangs around  
His collar like a votive necklace.  
Though well-paid, he is far from reckless,  
Pays his rent promptly, jogs, does not
Smoke cigarettes, and rarely pot,
Eschews both church and heavy drinking,
Enjoys his garden, likes to read
Eclectically from Mann to Bede.
(A surrogate, some say, for thinking.)
Friends claim he's grown aloof and prim.
(His boss, though, is well-pleased with him.) (4)

Clever and moving, The Golden Gate is as ambitious, in its own way, as a more recent epic, Michael Lind's The Alamo. Lind, a native Texan, recounts the violent historical episode in 6,000 lines of rhyme royal. Noteworthy for its chutzpah as well as its wealth of historical detail, The Alamo often makes use of wildly anachronistic language and metaphor, and is heavy on plot exposition. For example:

If even Austin, peacefulest of all
the Texan leaders, could be seized and penned
without a hearing, what fate might befall
those fellow Texans aching to defend
their chartered rights with more than ink and wind?
The news of the impresario's release,
to this, added an argument for peace [...] (14)

Published in 1997, Lind's volume received more media attention than greets most debut poetic efforts, in part because he is the Washington editor for Harper's magazine and is well-known as a political pundit. The reviews, however, were mixed. Though The Alamo remains noteworthy for its epic ambition and technical skill, the poem is generally more interested in ideas and historical detail than in the musicality and character development that can lift a narrative poem above mere plot.

In contrast, Robert McDowell's "A Short History of Farming in the Northwest" draws gravitas from historical events but puts
most of its energy into character development. New and uncollected, this shorter narrative poem represents McDowell's most fully realized work to date. The poem is spoken credibly in the voices of Takeo, a Japanese immigrant in Seattle, and Hiroko, his bride. Despite the Great Depression and the discrimination they meet with in America, Takeo and Hiroko eke out a living from a series of rented farms. Takeo earns his citizenship and buys a farm of his own. Interned during World War II, he survives the experience and eventually finds himself embraced by his American neighbors:

Now that I'm old, my redneck neighbors come
To ask advice about rotation crops,
How they might grow still sweeter onions,
Which markets they should pay attention to.
Basking in their respect, I say what I know,
But I keep to myself the knowledge that I am
The hawk that circles their fields, the mystery bird
They admire and fear. I am the dinner guest
They never really know. (11)

McDowell presents Takeo and Hiroko as rounded characters with their own distinct inner lives, and not simply as types, a feat which represents one of the central challenges of the historical narrative. Though yet uncollected, "A Short History" will likely be one of the works for which McDowell will be remembered.

Hailed as "narrative poetry at its best" by Publisher's Weekly, David Mason's "The Country I Remember," draws on the poet's family history to tell a story that begins in the Civil War and ends in the 1950s. "Country" interweaves blank-verse dramatic monologues in the fictionalized voices of two of Mason's ancestors. Near his death in 1918, Lieutenant John Mitchell reminisces about his war experiences. Captured by Confederate soldiers at the Battle of
Chickamauga, Mitchell was instrumental in helping his fellow captives escape from Libby Prison. Haunted by the war and longing for some kind of promised land, Mitchell moves his family relentlessly westward. Eventually the family settles on a ranch in Washington Territory, but not before Mitchell’s wanderings take their toll on his daughter, Maggie Mitchell Gresham, whose sections are spoken just before her death in 1956:

I knew this fear would always follow me
wherever I went, that I was not real,
that no one really lived who bore my name.
The lamplit face upon the swaying glass
was all that I would ever know of truth.
When Mama snuffed the lamp, my other face
retreated to the land of passing shadows. (Country 4-5)

As an adult, Maggie finds herself unable to settle down. She declines eight offers of marriage, leaves home at age twenty-nine, and lives a relatively self-directed life for a woman of her day, working a series of jobs and traveling across the West.

“The Country I Remember” is most noteworthy for its marriage of lyricism and narrative. The voices of both Maggie and John Mitchell are distinctive and believable, recalling one of Mason’s central beliefs about the poet’s art. In an essay entitled “Other Lives: On Shorter Narrative Poems,” he writes, “Empathy, the act of inhabiting a stranger’s experience, is a civilizing process. It implies connection, community, releasing the poet—who otherwise seems ‘Encased in talent like a uniform’—from isolation” (The Poetry of Life 180). The best narrative poems are those in which the poet imagines him- or herself fully into the skin of a stranger, an act that is “civilizing” for poet and reader alike.
NEWER FORMALISTS: THE NEXT WAVE

In a recent article in *L.A. Weekly* on the Los Angeles poetry scene, Brendan Bernhard declares the times we live in distinctly unpoetic. He writes,

> [E]ven if it's impossible to define what a poetic time might consist of, you have only to turn on your television, or stare into the nobody-home shades of the person in the tanklike vehicle next to you, to sense what an unpoetic time looks like. It looks, surely, like a time in which human beings are being slowly buried under an avalanche of marketing and media. When one thinks of contemporary poetry, particularly in L.A., what comes to mind is not poetry so much as the ad campaign for ABC created by the copywriters at Chiat/Day in Venice. It's those ultrahip scribblers, after all, whose brief, carefully worded messages we're always reading. These, you might say, are the lyric poems of the age. (25)

With its media culture, Los Angeles can seem the epitome of all that is anti-poetic in American life. Postmodern poets have the option of making an end run around popular culture or meeting it head on. As we've seen, one New Formalist strategy has been to make room in poetry for the dross of contemporary American life. Beautifully modulated, classically restrained poems about the Beach Boys or a littered urban beach can feel fresh and startling precisely because of the tension between artfulness of expression and discord of subject matter. Lately, a new wave of Western formalists is exploring this tension more aggressively by writing a gritty urban poetry that often looks unflinchingly at the squalor and chaos of contemporary life. Moreover, in contrast to the first generation of Western New Formalists, the most promising and visible of these emerging Western writers are women.
While the first wave of New Formalists included many important women poets, among them Marilyn Hacker, Marilyn Nelson, Rachel Hadas, Mary Jo Salter, Molly Peacock, and Emily Grosholz, all of these poets hail from the South or the Northeast. (Another celebrated formalist poet, Gjertrud Schnackenberg, was born in Tacoma, but lives and teaches in the East and is firmly associated with the Eastern literary establishment.) Writing both as women and formalists, these poets faced a greater risk of marginalization than their male contemporaries. Despite the inroads made by formalists in the last decade, Western women New Formalist poets still must contend with a culture that considers male experience more universal than female experience and with academic critics who prefer cryptic and experimental work to poems with immediate popular appeal. Finally, they must contend with being geographically distant from the East coast literary establishment. There are, however, positive aspects to being an outsider. As long-time San Franciscan Kim Addonizio (born 1954) puts it, “I’m convinced there’s more self-invention here [in the West] because it’s here I was able to invent myself as a poet” (E-mail, 3 Aug. 2000). Though at least as well known for her free verse, Addonizio is emerging as one of the most interesting young Western poets who employ form and narrative. The recipient of two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, she also has been awarded a Pushcart Prize, the Great Lakes Colleges New Writers Award, and a Commonwealth Club Poetry Medal. In addition to her three books of poetry—The Philosopher’s Club (1994), Jimmy & Rita (1997), and Tell Me (2000)—she has authored a collection of short stories, In the Box Called Pleasure (1999), and has co-authored The Poet’s Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry (1997) with Dorianne Laux. Founding editor and publisher of San Francisco’s Five Fingers Review, she currently serves as a contributing editor of the e-zine ZIPZAP.
Addonizio brings an edgy downtown sensibility to her poems; tonally, her work often is far removed from the cool, classical elegance of poets like Gioia and Mason. Her book-length narrative, *Jimmy & Rita*, is a case in point. In a series of lyric poems that add up to a story, the book depicts the love between a prostitute addicted to heroin and a retired prize-fighter struggling to stay out of prison. No single poem could adequately convey the feel of this volume, which includes prose poems, a concrete poem, dramatic dialogues, and free-verse lyrics. One of these, "The Party," describes how Rita meets Jimmy:

> Need a drink, pretty lady?
> Jimmy slams the refrigerator and turns
to her, grinning.
> Dark hair slicked back, blue eyes,
> St. Christopher medal dangling.
> His sweatshirt with the sleeves
cut off, tattoo on his right bicep—
cartoon devil riding a panther.
> What's your name?
> Slow look from top to bottom.
> Rita closing her eyes
to decide, then opens them
and he's across the room,
his arm around a black girl.

[. . . . ] (15-16)

This poem swiftly conveys Rita's vulnerability and Jimmy's restlessness. The characters in this book are convincing, and their descent into homelessness and separation is riveting and ultimately moving.

Like the poems that make up *Jimmy & Rita*, Addonizio's formal work is both unflinching and tender. Her first book, *The
Philosopher’s Club, contains a section of sonnets in Addonizio's fairly loose iambic pentameter line. The best of these is the lovely “First Poem for You”:

I like to touch your tattoos in complete
darkness, when I can't see them. I'm sure of
where they are, know by heart the neat
lines of lightning pulsing just above
your nipple, can find, as if by instinct, the blue
swirls of water on your shoulder where a serpent
twists, facing a dragon. When I pull you
to me, taking you until we're spent
and quiet on the sheets, I love to kiss
the pictures in your skin. They'll last until
you're seared to ashes; whatever persists
or turns to pain between us, they will still
be there. Such permanence is terrifying.
So I touch them in the dark; but touch them, trying. (46)

Addonizio’s distinctive voice results, in part, from her lyrical treatment of subject matter that initially seems anti-poetic. The poet Gerald Stern has characterized her voice as “[a]bsolutely open, direct, loving, kind, a little sultry sometimes, marvelously self-knowing, [. . .] decently subversive, and iconoclastic” (Addonizio, Philosopher’s Club 9). This iconoclastic feel also results in part from the tension between free verse and iambics that we see in most of her sonnets, many of which are metrically looser than “First Poem for You.” Asked to describe her attraction to form, Addonizio addresses this tension:

My passion for forms has to do with the impulse toward
song, certainly, and with my own deep, even obsessive, need
for order—as well as the equally powerful and contradictory
hunger for transgression. I like pushing the free verse I
write toward the formal, in the sense of cadence, parallelism, and other repetitions; and I have no compunctions about breaking the formal “rules” for the sake of the poetry.

(E-mail, 3 Aug. 2000)

When Stern praises Addonizio for being “absolutely open,” he is talking, in part, about her willingness to write frankly about private subjects. More openly confessional than the work of most formal poets, her poems nonetheless steer clear of sensationalism, in large part because they strive toward the universal within the personal. As a result, her poems claim for women’s experience the same kind of centrality and universality that male experience has long assumed.

Another distinctly urban woman poet, Chryss Yost (born 1966), was raised in San Diego, and takes freeway culture as a given. “Escaping from Autopia,” the title villanelle of Yost’s 1998 chapbook, reprinted in LaJolla Boys, describes L.A.’s freeway culture as “E-ticket crack.” The poem’s narrator, a self described “Miss Highway,” drives out of Los Angeles with the intent to escape, but struggles against the force of habit, and ultimately longs to be one of the “candy-coated pack” of commuters who can’t cross the yellow line. Here the commuting life is emblematic of a safe conformity that is at once stifling and comforting (LaJolla).

Like Addonizio, Yost has married formalism to confessionalism. In her rhymed sestina, “Advice for Women,” she uses form to write about an experience that is usually private and always feminine:

Keep focused on the ceiling and you might
not bite your cheek too hard at the trespass
of cold metal sliding in. And you’re right
to feel so pale and exposed (no mas-
ter of your body now!) Clinical light
keeps you composed here, but beyond the glass
window, in the lab next door, a glass
dish cultivates the worst in you. You might
give up the God you heard about in Mass
for antioxidants. There's time to right
your wrongs, and settle scores, before you pass
like breath remade as clouds by winter light
in sharp still mornings. Fluorescent light
rains down on you like blue-white sun in glass
test tubes, like luminescent dynamite.
The gossiping of cells is like a mass
of schoolgirls, watching in the hallway, right
before you stumble. Make small talk to pass
the time. Forget the test, of course you'll pass.
They look for microscopic faults with light
that radiates right through the you on glass.
They'll set aside the parts of you that might
grow into something more. They might amass
more samples, to be sure that you're all right.

Because of course you are. Even if, right
after she turned twenty, my aunt passed
on, mossy black inside her like a mite-
infested paper-white narcissus, glass-
forced to root in a window's filtered light.
Too many women in this family, mass-
acred by cancer rushing them en masse,
as they stood stunned, slashing left and right,
killing and leaving the rest afraid. Passed
on like a recipe, along with light
blue eyes, fears as strong and old as sea glass.
I want to be like them; I fear I might.
For now, breathe lightly as the forceps pass.
A mass is a mass, no more . . . Later, write
about the fate that might be held in glass. *LaJolla*

The poem takes a surprising turn in its penultimate stanza, when its narrator finds herself unable to block out her terror. At that point, the poem’s pretext—a worldly narrator offering advice to a second-person auditor—reveals itself as a false front. As the terrified first-person narrator appears from behind the mask, this poem cleverly enacts and then abandons the struggle for self-control and psychic distance. The last two lines hearken back to another poem about self-mastery, Elizabeth Bishop’s “One Art.” In contrast with Bishop’s narrator, who orders herself to admit, in writing, to her own sorrow, Yost’s narrator commands herself to regain self-control by turning her fear into art.

“Advice for Women” gains much of its energy from the tension between its carefully controlled form and its subject matter. In allowing her first-person narrator to confess weakness, and in addressing a subject this personal, Yost is writing a more confessional verse than that embraced by many New Formalists who have deliberately steered away from the thinly veiled autobiography of most mainstream poetry. In place of self-revelation, poets like Gioia and McDowell generally strive for control and psychic distance—the very qualities longed for by Yost’s anxious narrator. Though “Advice for Women” advocates self-control, the poem opens up and finds its true voice when the speaker loses her restraint. While engaging the particulars of the narrator’s experience, Yost describes an experience—the internal exam, with the fear of betrayal by one’s own body—that has been shared by many women. This poem demonstrates that skillful confessional writing can strike a universal chord.

In contrast with the edgier sensibilities of poets like Addonizio and Yost, emerging poet Leslie Monsour (born 1952) often works in a classically restrained style reminiscent of Timothy Steele.
Author of two chapbooks, *Earth’s Beauty, Desire, & Loss* (1998) and *Indelibility* (1999), Monsour was a student in Steele’s 1987 UCLA Extension course, where she found her voice when she began writing in traditional forms. She says, “I’ve found that I’m a great fan of symmetry. I always have been. Symmetry is a natural phenomenon of life. It is not artificial [. . .]. Of course, in applying symmetry to poetic expression, the real trick is to come up with a design that also achieves clarity of meaning. It is my conclusion that formalist poets make a more conscious effort to be understood than their informal counterparts” (Finch, *Formal Feeling* 158).

Monsour, who lives in Los Angeles, has written movingly of the tensions that can exist between a poet and the world. In her sonnet, “Emily’s Words,” for example, Monsour explores Emily Dickinson’s renunciation of marriage and children:

Unsquandered, sure and quiet as a root,
She stayed at home all dressed in pleated white,
And accurately weighed the brain of God,
The sum of acts not carried out. Unwed,
That she not be divided, she stayed whole,
And heard the sound the tooth makes in the soul.

(*Earth’s Beauty*)

Described as “unsquandered,” “unwed,” and, later in the poem, as “ungendered,” Dickinson was, in life, defined by what she was not, but her choice to remain cut off from the world permitted her an unusual freedom, without which she might not have “accurately weighed the brain of God.”

The poet’s quarrel with the demands of the world is addressed again in Monsour’s sonnet, “Parking Lot,” in which a first-person narrator tries, briefly, to see beyond the discord of a strip mall parking lot:

It’s true that billboard silhouettes and power
Lines rebuke dusk’s fair and fragile fire,
As those who go on living have to prowl
And watch for someone leaving down each aisle.
While this takes place, a tender moon dips toward
The peach and blood horizon, pale, ignored.

[. . . .]
I want to stay till everything makes sense.
But oily-footed pigeons flap and chase—
A red Camaro flushes them apart,
Pulling up and waiting for my space;
It glistens, mean and earthly, like a heart. (Earth’s Beauty)

If survival of the fittest is the law of the parking lot, the poem’s narrator clearly is not meant to thrive there. Though the moon is described as “tender,” it is the narrator who is too tender for the modern world. The sensitive narrator must be content with what little serenity she may find in a city of parking lots and billboards.

SOLACE, SENSE, AND PLEASURE

Brendan Bernhard’s prize-winning essay on the Los Angeles poetry scene concludes on a hopeful note. “If these are not poetic times,” he writes, “a growing number of people will turn to poetry for precisely that reason” (25). If Bernhard is right, those who turn to poetry for solace will likely be looking for writing that communicates its ideas clearly and memorably. Unlike many of their contemporaries, most New Formalists write to be accessible. For Westerners like David Mason, this predilection for clarity grows directly out of a sense of being outside a literary establishment that tends to value obscure and cryptic writing. Mason has written:

Growing up in the far northwestern corner of the United States, I usually assumed that culture and the arts existed elsewhere—Chicago or New York or Europe. [. . .] As I
slowly, painfully became a writer, I often felt excluded from the larger cultural debate—the one going on in the magazines and journals I read—because I was provincial, and therefore could have nothing to say that would interest more sophisticated minds. *(The Poetry of Life 11-12)*

If Mason's Westernness felt like a handicap, his consolation was living among non-academics and non-poets who were passionately interested in ideas and books. Mason has written of his father-in-law, an uneducated Scotsman who could recite the work of Robert Burns by heart. Similarly, Dana Gioia recalls his Mexican uncle who committed all of Dante's *Inferno* to memory.

The desire to communicate with ordinary readers permeates the work of the New Formalists. In contrast with much contemporary poetry, Expansive poetry often feels crystalline, immediately accessible. Often, though, there is more than meets the eye and ear: irony and layers of meaning lurk beneath the surface, so that these poems reward repeated readings. The New Formalists seek to produce poems with emotional, as well as intellectual, resonance. The best of these poems do so in language that asks to be memorized and remembered in times of tranquility or distress.

In the dedication to *Sapphics Against Anger*, Timothy Steele addresses his friend Vikram Seth. The dedication reads, in part:

> For years we've traded rhyme and measure,
> And if our poems are books today,
> It is in hopes that others may
> Take from them solace, sense or pleasure.

These lines speak of a higher goal for poetry, one that is shared by all of the Expansive poets of the American West: to restore lost vitality to the art of poetry by producing poems that mean something to the reader, poems that console, enlighten, and entertain.
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