Five Questions: An Interview with Gerald Stern

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Recommended Citation
Abbate, Francesca; Schalm, Karin; Firth, Robert; and Stern, Gerald (1995) "Five Questions: An Interview with Gerald Stern," CutBank: Vol. 1 : Iss. 43 , Article 28.
Available at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss43/28

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Five Questions:
An Interview with Gerald Stern

Gerald Stern: Let’s call this five questions. You can ask me anything you want, but the one thing I’d like to talk about is content.

Karin Schalm: I notice that you often write about cardinals and other common birds.

GS I like common things like wrens, cardinals, sparrows and pigeons because they’re ordinary—because they’re common—and because they’re not, as such, in the realm of the beautiful. They’re like weeds: they’re ignored and they’re omnipresent, a little unacknowledged. That’s what I focus on.

KS You consciously focus on the unacknowledged?

GS Yes. I mean, I didn’t originally do it consciously. And I do it consciously and unconsciously. The other reason is that I don’t really have an enormous knowledge of birds, and so I write about the ones I do know. I was talking during my reading about how in Yiddish they don’t even use the names of flowers. They just say "blumen" which means flower in German or Yiddish. It’s okay to know one thing well compared to knowing a number of things half well.
longer poems, although you’re drawn to writing shorter poems.

GS Actually, the truth is that I started off writing short poems. And I became a kind of minor master of the short lyric. Then somehow, and I don’t think I planned it, the poems got longer and longer—until in my last book, *Bread Without Sugar*, there’s only one poem that’s truly short, the poem called "Chicken with Three Hearts." The others are all two, three, four pages long, though occasionally there’s one that’s one page. And then of course there’s the long poem at the end of that book.

I’ve always been tempted by the long poem, the truly long poem, and in fact I’m just finishing writing a fifty-five page poem. What I want to do now is write fifty poems under twenty lines. I want to do that because it’s a challenge, and as a counternote to the long poems I’ve been writing, and to get into simplicity. I want to get into something very, very simple—a direct emotional statement—because I trust that, and because I’ve already done the other, and because Jack Gilbert’s written a book of short poems and I want to outdo him.

KS Is this on or off the record?

GS On the record. Everything I say is on the record! *And* because I’m reading Greek poets, like Cavafy, who write short poems. To me one of the supreme desires is to write either a long poem (four thousand pages long) or a short poem (twelve lines long). That’s where I really have to be absolutely honest with you.

KS You said you were interested in content. Do
you feel like there’s a difference in content between the fifty-five page poem and the shorter poems?

GS  Definitely.

KS  What is the content of the fifty-five page poem? Do you have a title for it yet?

GS  "Hot Dog." It’s about a woman named Hot Dog. She’s a street person in the East Village in New York. She sleeps outside. She’s a thirty-year-old Afro-American who should be in a hospital. She’s emotionally disturbed and incoherent. She hangs out in the street across from Tompkins Square Park where for years the homeless lived, until they were driven out by the mayor of New York City, the former mayor, Ed Koch. She’s in the poem, Augustine’s in the poem, Walt Whitman’s in the poem, Noah’s in the poem, a black preacher from Iowa City, and myself. These are the characters, though it’s all focused through me, my identity, and my connections; it’s more or less in the first person.

KS  Is there a story line?

GS.  The narrative is implied, though individual sections of the poem (there are about sixteen sections) will often have narratives, or there will be meditations. There is a progression that is philosophic, rather than a narrative that can be described discreetly from outside the poem. The poem is about salvation. It’s about God. It’s about redemption. It’s a comic poem too. In the very beginning, Hot Dog is arrested, and I discover her sitting on a curb on a hot summer day with her hands cuffed behind her. Four or five police cars are there
with their lights going round and two men are arguing over her soul. One of them is Augustine, who's the civilian spokesman for the police, and the other is the spokesman for the homeless—he's on rollerblades; he probably is Whitman. And that's how the poem starts, but it goes through all kinds of things. There's some sad parts and some happy parts, and a lot of people will not like it because it combines the serious and the light. And it's irreverent, and it strays, and it's indulgent—or it might appear indulgent—I don't think it is. And it's solipsistic. But other people will like it because it's extraordinary writing, and because it's totally original, and nothing has ever been done like it in the English language. And because it's honest. It's concerned a lot with Jewish history, with the relationship of Christianity to Judaism, with God, with poverty, with charity. As far as I'm concerned, the truly unrecognized character, though his presence is felt throughout, is Jesus. Though I never talk about him directly.

That's the long poem. In a certain sense the long poem really doesn't sound much different from the shorter poem in terms of structure. That is, they are on one level manifest, and lucid, and easy to hear and understand. And on another level, they are difficult and even obscure—elusive rather than obscure—I can't help it. I'd like to be as clear as that dandelion right over there. *(He points toward the lawn.)* I don't want to be difficult. I'm not as difficult as many people. My language is simple. I would like to be lucid as possible, but my mind leads me astray, and my heart.

Francesca Abbate: How does the shorter poem affect the content?

GS In a short poem there is almost always one turn,
or two turns, as in a dance. You have a single thing to say, or to do. I just finished—almost finished—a short poem. It’s about twelve or fifteen lines long, and it’s about two bodies of water in New York City below 14th on the West Side. One is the Great Hudson, though I don’t mention it by name, and the other is an underground stream. And it occurred to me that New York City, you know below 14th Street as well as above 14th, must have had dozens of streams like any other place. They’re no longer visible. So it’s that stream I’m looking for. But of course on another level—I realized this after the poem was written—it’s my own underground stream I’m talking about. The poem focuses on the two streams, and in the very end, there’s a preacher looking for water with a divining rod. So the poem really focuses on one thing. That’s one of the virtues of the short poem. A short poem is magic. It’s a song. It’s beautiful if it works. It’s like a puzzle, a great challenge. Though you have one thing to say, the challenge is totally musical. And of course musical does not mean adornment, rather, musical means that you find the right words or the right thing to say. The thing that’s most musical is when you have something to say. That’s why I keep talking about content.

Last week at a conference in Des Moines [the poet, W.S.] Merwin and Lucille Clifton and I were talking about this; Merwin was the one emphasizing content. He said the critics don’t get it. They don’t understand that poets themselves are interested in what they themselves have to say. The critics are frightened by that—it’s too much out of the realm of reference and control. The huge threat is that amateur poets, or bad poets (if there are such things), are interested exclusively in what they have to say. And they think that the poem consists of celebrating, or grieving over, say, the
death of a son, or a mother, or the loss of a lover. And they believe by saying it, that’s enough. That’s not what I’m saying. That’s not what Merwin was saying, or Lucille Clifton. Maybe it’s saying something well. Maybe it’s that simple.

I talked about this the other day, either in a class or at my reading, in terms of an experience I had when I was shot in the neck during a holdup. I couldn’t write about being shot because it became too melodramatic and too self-pitying, but I had to find a way to do it. That’s a great trap, but one does not—in order to avoid that trap—not write. You have to accept the challenge. And one does not hide behind music, whatever music is. I mean mere music, or mere form—whatever that might be.

I think of a poet like, say, Etheridge Knight, one of the great poets of the century. Etheridge’s greatest single poem--I think--is a poem called "Feeling Fucked Up." It’s a magnificent poem, a poem about his beloved leaving him. Now the poem is couched in an old Provençal form, in a Provençal tradition. It starts out "Lord, she done left me"—he’s sad about that—then he curses all the things that are dear to him, as a figure in a funeral who might, out of extraordinary pain, as people used to do, cut himself or herself with a knife. In an orthodox Jewish funeral, cheap neckties are provided, and they’re cut as a kind of surrogate for cutting the flesh. But in his case, he’s doing it in the poem, and he’s cursing all the things he loves. He says "fuck Marx, fuck Mao, fuck smack and red, ripe tomatoes, fuck Mary, fuck Joseph, fuck Jesus—all I want is my love in my arms, so my soul can sing" is the way it ends. I think it’s a great poem. Why is it great? It’s great because of his passion, because of what he’s saying, whatever saying means. I think that’s the case,
though it also is the case that he luckily found a vessel, a container for the poem. Did you ever take an old flowerpot—it’s a classic situation—we have the container and the thing contained, we have the flowerpot and the dirt inside it, and maybe a flower, a "blume." Well, that’s a neoclassical poem. What if you took a little scoop or a little shovel and took the whole mess out—and it still hangs together because the roots are holding it together? Do you have a picture in your mind? Do you see it? Smell it? That’s what a poem is—there’s no container. The container was "dis-contained," "de-contained," but there’s still a container—it’s an implied container. The container is the thing contained. The thing contained is the container. That’s true in Etheridge’s poem, I think.

And I can think of a number of poets—I just thought about it twenty minutes ago so maybe there are dozens and dozens I didn’t think of—I can think of poems of deep emotion and passionate existence, and statements they have to make. One doesn’t do this all one’s life, every poem is not that. Some poems are sort of in-between times. I am thinking of Berryman’s "77 Dream Songs." The poems that move me most are poems about Delmore, his dear friend Delmore Schwartz—where he says, "Have you heard the news? Delmore is dead." Why is that different than any other poem that Berryman wrote—hundreds of poems that he wrote—some of them indulgent, some cute, some boring, some name-dropping, some beautiful—"Have you heard the news? Delmore is dead." Ah—I mean, your whole body grows cold with terror. Paul Goodman, who I think was an extraordinary poet, more so than an educator and a novelist, wrote a poem—I’m trying to remember the name of it—his son fell off
Percy Mountain in New England, and he wrote a kind of very traditional poem, an extraordinary elegy to that son, and another poem of his called "The Lordly Hudson," a poem about the Hudson River. Sylvia Plath’s "Lesbos" or "Daddy." Muriel Rukeyser’s—what is that poem? It’s the poem about a roach—"St. Roach." It’s because of the subject that she was driven to the poem. It’s a poem where she blesses roaches. Hayden Carruth, who sort of committed suicide and then came back to life, read a series of poems about three or four years ago—one is called "The Crucifixion." It’s an extraordinary poem about Jesus and the two thieves; and it was Hayden’s personal experience that makes that poem—as with Bishop’s "The Waiting Room." These are the poems I look at.

And I have here. . . I have here in front of me (he says in a Nixon voice) Jack Gilbert’s new book called The Great Fires. It just came out, and I was going through it quickly this morning. Here’s a very short poem of his. I’ll read it to you, then just talk about it. It’s an utterly simple poem, called "The Lives of Famous Men." Is there a book called The Lives of Famous Men?—there should be—this poem is ten lines long. Now of course Gilbert’s late poems celebrate his stubborn isolation, his poverty, his detachment from other things, his loneliness, his loyalty to the ideal of existence, life, and love. And his memory of certain people is part of that. So there is, in the poem, to some degree, a kind of indulgence or romanticization of the self. And some people, in criticizing his poems, talk often about the coldness of them, that they don’t let other people in. I’m going to let that argument go for the moment and just read the poem: "Trying to scrape the burned soup from my only pan"—hear 'my only pan,' okay, he’s telling us here that he’s poor, poor with
only one pan—but you can buy a pan for a quarter; I mean if you shop at a flea market you can buy forty pans—all right, I don’t want to get into criticizing my dear friend Jack. (He reads the rest of the poem.) So he’s alone, he’s in the country, he’s getting water from the well. What makes the poem work is not the self-pity or the silliness. What makes the poem work is the madness, the turn in the middle of the poem, it seems to me, where he suddenly views himself not with self-pity but with total objectivity and detachment. "I go out to get more water"—for the soup—"from the well and happen to look up through the bright stars/Yes, yes, I say, and go on pulling at the long rope" That’s totally about Jack. That’s totally content, and yet, we could argue—one of you might want to argue—if he just said it, it wouldn’t be a poem. It takes fifty years to be able to focus; I couldn’t agree more. That’s where the art is, and now I’m going to reverse myself and say "the art is everything."

KS The content and the form?

GS Yeah, but then I’m not separating them. Remember the flower pot? Huh?

KS What question are we on?

GS I don’t know, this is question two or three or something.

Robert Firth: I have a question about that Stevens poem, the Stevens poem about the jar in Tennessee.

GS Oh, yeah, how’s that go? Like nothing else in Tennessee . . .
RF He puts the jar down and somehow the jar—everything that surrounds the jar becomes.

GS . . . surrounded by woods, by that wilderness. But you know, that’s a complicated poem, really, because it’s a poem about history and culture and archaeology, and civilization, and human efforts to make that—it’s about what art is, by making a line, and another line, or a word and a counter-word, (Oh, there’s that dog I love) or a dance and a counter-dance. It’s a beautiful poem. It’s allusive. Yeah, that’s an interesting thing. I don’t know if that poem is an illustration of what I’m talking about. I mean, it’s a lovely poem, and I love that poem, I think it’s a great poem, but I don’t think it’s a poem about content in the sense which I’m talking about it. A Stevens poem that is a poem about content is one of his late poems, where he says—finally, after fifty years of writing—in his great last poems, he says—"the mind"—because he’s been writing about the imagination all his life—he finally defines it; he says—"The mind and the imagination are one." When he says that—I mean, buildings are falling down, rivers stop flowing, dogs stop barking, because he finally was able to say it in utter simplicity. And that’s another example of content—it doesn’t have to be a fascinating story or a beloved leaving you or suffering alone on a hillside.

KS I want to go back to Jack Gilbert.

GS Okay, go back to Jack Gilbert.

KS . . . and look at you guys in your twenties in Europe. Maybe you could tell us a story or two about
you and Jack hanging out in Europe.

GS Man, I could tell you a thousand stories, and they would all be glorifying me—no, that’s not true. You notice in that particular photograph (the cover of Gerald Stern's book The Red Coal) how the people in the background are dressed. They’re wearing—the women are wearing—formidable undergarments, shoulder pads, hats, white blouses, the men have suits, dark suits, white shirts and ties, umbrellas—and Jack and I are, not out of posing or anything, dressed in old clothes the way we dressed then, and I guess, dress now.

Jack went to Europe first, and I followed him about a year and a half later. He and a group of others had a scheme—I don’t totally understand the scheme—it was a scam, rather than a scheme. They lived close to the borders of three different countries—Italy, Switzerland, and France, I think. And they were able to make a minimal amount of profit from discount, from trading, you know, Swiss francs for French francs for English pounds, and back, and lived for nothing for a couple of years in a castle. And then—we were on our way over, I and Dick Hazley, who died last year, were on our way over from Pittsburgh to join them in the castle, and we got a postcard from Jack—"We’ve been ruined. The pound has been devalued." (Laughter) Isn’t that wonderful, coming from a twenty-three year old poverty-ridden bug? "We have been ruined. The pound has been devalued"—it had gone down to two dollars and eighty cents.

Then we all went to Paris, and we lived there, and what I did—well, we all did the same thing—we wrote privately in the morning, we took long walks, and we met over dinner and spent the evenings together.
reciting poetry to each other and talking about ideas. We never exchanged our poems with each other, we never workshopped poems. Later I did a little of that, and Jack did, too. Jack loves workshops—he’s very good at it. But we didn’t do that with each other. We were very, very private, very private with our time, with our poetry.

And those were glorious times. I was on the GI Bill, and I was getting seventy-five dollars a month, which was a fortune in money then because you could live in France on about a dollar a day the way we lived. I was also in the black market, and I was a kind of racketeer in a minor way. I bought and sold passports, and typewriters. I traded money and made another hundred dollars or so a month, so I was rich.

KS How was that time different from the army and what you were doing then? Could you say something about that?

GS About the army?

KS Yes.

GS I hated the army. The army’s stupid.

KS Did that help plant a seed for your political behavior later, or were you political before?

GS I was political before. The army provided a little bit of distance and time for me to make up my mind to write and to be alone, and it’s the first time I really left Pittsburgh. I discovered that what I wanted to do was not to become a lawyer, but to become a writer or thinker or bum; something like that. I was
stationed in places like Baltimore, New Orleans, Washington D.C., and I would go to bookstores, and, you know, meet different kinds of people than I had before. It was important, for a couple of years, it was very important to me. And I also—and I don’t want to talk about that right now—spent six months in the guard house, when I was in the army. That was—stimulating—and I learned a lot about people and about betrayal, and lying and the function of the state.

RF Maybe this goes back to what you were saying about long poems, about writing long poems, and I don’t remember exactly what you said, but in the reading, you read a poem where I think you ended up talking about Horace at the end.

GS Yes, yes, that was called "First Day of Spring."

RF Something about the third loss or the third separation.

GS Yes, yes, yeah, right, exactly.

RF That really struck me somehow. I was curious about the connection between writing a long poem where you’re interested in the idea of redemption, but also the sort of poem you read the other day, how you ended up talking about Horace—and there’s a real note of sadness and isolation at the end of that.

GS Well, there’s a sense of giving up and redemption at the same time, you know. You write differently in your late sixties than you do in your late twenties. And in fact, I have a poem called "Steps" that’s about giving up. There’s a kind of joy in giving up—I mean,
I do it in that poem in terms of steps, climbing steps; at a certain point you can’t take one more step, your legs are made of lead. Everyone here has had that experience. But this is the end of the poem you’re talking about. (He reads from Bread Without Sugar.) "I am sitting/in Arizona, the moon is full, so check/the twenty-first of March 1989./I was reading Horace tonight"—so I bring him in to create a new element technically because I wasn’t satisfied with the other elements, and this will be the final element, and will reconcile and finally, so to speak, explain what happened before. At least, that’s the pose, the aesthetic pose."I was reading Horace tonight, who never/wrote by porch light"—the implication is that I am writing by porch light, because they didn’t have electricity of course—"maybe a dish of oil/outside Brindisi"—where he had his summer home. "Ah, the stricken soul./he sat till midnight, waiting for a girl"—now the form changes here in the poem. Up until this point there’d been a three stress line, and now it’s almost an iambic line. "He sat till midnight waiting for a girl/who never came. I love"—I’m talking about Horace now—"his sense, he knew/where the ludicrous lay, he hated/quackery"—then--"I wonder/if maybe in the palace he had seen"—because I had just seen, you see—"a bromeliad"—a flower—"once and touched the drooping flower-/the rubbery claws; I wonder if he talked/to a passing fox." Now, this part of the poem is about a woman whose name is Fox, so I make her the passing fox, and of course, the word fox has other meanings and connotations—"about the frogs that lived in those leaves"—that’s what Fox told me about these bromeliads—"how it clings to palm trees; I wonder..." And this is the third of the three, the litany of three—"I wonder/if March twenty-first was when the plum tree bloomed/in
Tivoli"—where the summer gardens were in Italy—"if he had also seen/hundreds of butterflies"—as I did, you see—"in those branches, if he/lay down and wept"—as maybe, by implication, I am doing—"in spite of his careful mind"—and, by implication, my careful mind—"if that is the third suspension, the third abandonment." Now I never say what a suspension or an abandonment is, but there's a fulfillment I see there, and a completion, and a kind of, maybe not so much a redemption but a realization—which is just as good—maybe, because it gives you knowledge rather than salvation—which, in a way, I value more highly, or just as highly. I don't know whether that happens just linguistically or whether it actually happens, but as I read it, I don't have to define what the third suspension or the third abandonment is. I just have to name it, that there is such a thing that can become in your mind symbolic of anything you want to call it. You know? I don't know if I'm answering all the things you asked, though.

RF I'm not sure what my question was, exactly.

GS Okay, we'll leave it. We're done?

FA,KS,RF Yes, thank you.

GS So, finis?

Missoula, Montana

March 1994