

# *Hearing Voices: Missing David Ferry*

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DAVID FERRY has kept me company, in his friendship and in his poems and translations, for over thirty years. I reach now for his books to steady me in my mourning for him. David's works people my shelves—his *Gilgamesh*; his *Odes* and *Epistles* of Horace; his *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid* of Virgil. And of course the collections of his own poems, too many titles to list, but prominently *Of No Country I Know: New and Selected Poems and Translations* from 1999; and *Bewilderment: New Poems and Translations*, which won the National Book Award in 2012.

Translation and so-called original writing were never separate for David. His own art resonates with the voices of others: not only Horace and Virgil, but also Goethe, Hölderlin, Baudelaire, Rilke, and Montale. Even as he borrowed from them, he fashioned for them haunting versions of his own voice, gently colloquial, decorous, and austere. A principle of friendship and its corollary, unselfishness, guide the work as they guided David's life. He seems to describe himself in this line from the poem "Movie Star Peter at the Supper for Street People": "The style a form of concealment the way style is." David was, after all, a scholar of Wordsworth, and from the English poet he absorbed an aesthetic of voice as a living flow, an illusion of spoken language, adapted to the American vernacular of David's own time and place with its expressive repetition ("the way style is"). Concealment and revelation seem to go hand in hand; brilliant awkwardness, like the broken perspectives in Cézanne, thrusts us into the core of the struggle to see and to feel accurately.

David was an artist of friendship, ever alert to the life force in others, delighting in each person's particular form of being. This was his nature. He gave of himself tirelessly to his fellow writers (not only writers, so let us say, his fellow human beings). But his generosity to writers, over the years, was legendary, and he had a gift of

appreciation for work quite different from his own, and for the work of much younger writers. He was hungry for poems. Right up into his last months, he wanted to hear the poems of his friends read aloud and recited his own in ritual duets over the telephone.

An early nucleus of friendship connects him to *Raritan* and to Rutgers University. At Amherst, as an undergraduate before and after his service in the US Air Force during World War II, David studied with the visionary scholar Reuben Brower. When Brower joined the English Department at Harvard in 1953, he taught "Hum 6," a celebrated course in literature and literary criticism that produced a generation of formidable scholar-teachers, including Anne Ferry, who would marry David, and David's close friend Richard Poirier, who founded *Raritan* at Rutgers.

David Ferry celebrated life even as he lived in stoic communion with death. It makes sense that he translated *Gilgamesh*, a founding Western epic of the encounter with death and the protest against it: the hero, Gilgamesh, loses his intimate friend Enkidu and seeks, and fails to secure, the secret of immortality. "I saw the worm fall out of his nose," he laments, over and over. Virgil's *Eclogues* begin and end with shadow. Meliboeus opens the book, addressing Tityrus (in David's translation): "Tityrus, there you lie in the beech-tree shade." The whole sequence concludes in Virgil's own voice: "Now we must go; the shade's not good for singers, / The juniper shade's unwholesome; unwholesome too / For the plants that need the sunshine is the shade. / Go home, my full-fed goats, you've eaten your fill, / The Evening star is rising; it's time to go home."

Now we must say our farewell to David Ferry, who "goeth to his long home," as it is said in Ecclesiastes. In tribute to David's dignity and clarity and utter lack of sentimentality, I return to one of his poems that remains a touchstone for me, "That Evening at Dinner," from *Of No Country I Know*. The poem quietly, steadily introduces a character, an elderly woman friend in the context of a civilized ritual of American middle-class life, the dinner party. "By the last few times we saw her it was clear / That things were different," the poem begins. We are led, step by step, through a description of the

evening, the choreography of helping the crippled, widowed guest into the apartment, into her seat, into the stoic politesses required by the occasion in this room of bookcases and Venetian blinds. All of a sudden, a chasm opens: “The books there in the bookcases told their stories, /Line after line, all of them evenly spaced, /And spaces between the words. You could fall through the spaces.” This is classic David Ferry: he springs us into a devastating strangeness, a bewilderment (to use the title of another book of his). The poem concludes:

The dinner was delicious, fresh greens and reds,  
And yellows, produce of the season due,  
And fish from the nearby sea; and there were also  
Ashes to be eaten, and dirt to drink.

We humans are not immortal, as Gilgamesh discovered, and as David knew well. But I think this poem, in its stark, unostentatious frankness (and its light echo of the season due in Milton’s “Lycidas”), will live in the English language as long as poetry lives.