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## Issue 10: Originality in a Digital Culture

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### Refreshing An Interview with George David Clark, Editor-in-Chief of *32 Poems*

by Tara Robbins Fee and Samuel B. Fee

The editor of [32 Poems](#) and author of *Reveille*, George David Clark's recent poems appear in *AGNI*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The New Criterion*, *The Southern Review*, and elsewhere.  
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Abstract: Tara Robbins Fee and Samuel B. Fee interview George David Clark, the Editor-in-Chief of the journal *32 Poems*. Clark discusses originality in poetry and a wide range of poetic influences.

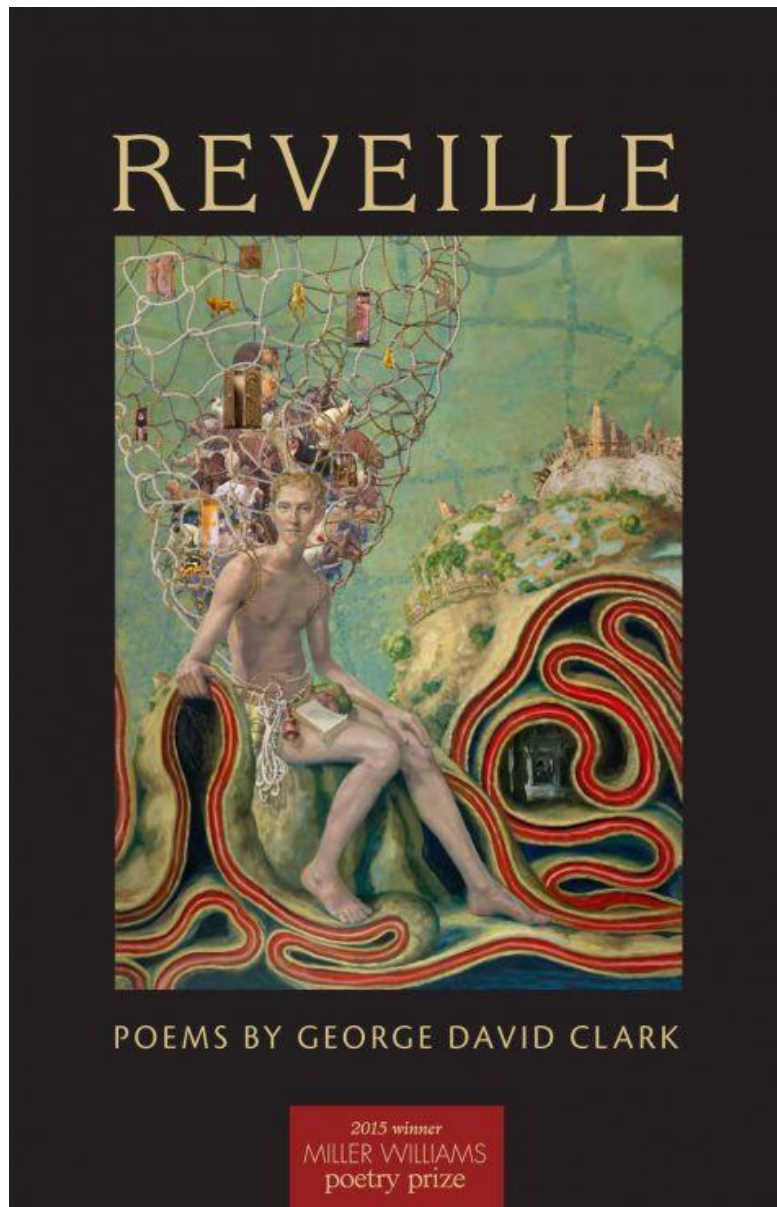
Keywords: poetry, 32 poems, originality, creativity, George David Clark

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George David Clark is Editor-in-Chief of the journal [32 Poems](#) and Assistant Professor of English at Washington & Jefferson College in Washington, Pennsylvania. His book of poems, [Reveille](#), won the Miller Williams Poetry Prize from the University of Arkansas Press in 2015.



Tara Fee and Sam Fee: David, we are so grateful to have you speak with us because we know that for both poets and editors, the concept of originality is a freighted one. The Romantic poet William Wordsworth’s affirmation of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings ... recollected in tranquility” is sometimes misunderstood to define the poetic process as a passive yielding to inspiration. But Wordsworth himself emphasized the contemplation the poet would

bring to the act of recollection. Your own book, *Reveille*, gestures in its very title to the significance of discipline and form for the poet. How do you see commitments to these elements—originality, inspiration, discipline, and form—coming together in your poetry and in the poetry you're most excited about today?

George David Clark: This subject has been on my mind a great deal lately as my creative writing students have begun drafting for our workshop. On the first day of class they're all amped up to write, but then we start addressing the challenges of technique and the first deadlines loom and suddenly their best ideas dissolve beneath the pressure of their pencils on the page. They don't ask it so eloquently, but I think a lot of their questions these past few weeks have been versions of this one you've just given me. In class, they're looking for quick tricks to get the words moving, but maybe here I can give a more thorough answer.

I am persuaded that the muse can be seduced. You don't win her attentions with flattery and you can't bully yourself into her favors, but she really does enjoy being courted. What's more, though her affections are promiscuous, she clearly smiles on some writers more than others. She prefers certain types and two of her favorites are the diligent suitor and the charismatic outlaw.

The diligent suitor shows up on the muse's doorstep at the same time every evening. He's brought her flowers and he carries a notebook and pencil with which to sketch her and record the things she thinks of. He may be humble and deferential, but he doesn't merely take dictation. They dialogue. Each asks questions of the other. They may even argue sometimes. Eventually, the suitor learns that that he can coax her laughter with a certain joke. It doesn't work every time, but more often than you'd think. He can get her singing if he hums a couple bars of her favorite songs.

I suspect Hopkins was this type of suitor. Louise Glück, Robert Frost, James Merrill, Kay Ryan. Certainly Richard Hugo. In *The Triggering Town* he shares a rule he set for himself early in his career: every time he made a sound he particularly liked, he would come back to that sound in three to thirteen syllables. So, as he described a waterfall, he'd use the word "cascade." If his focus had remained on the scene, he might have rendered the spray of the water in the air or the local birdsong, or who knows what. Instead, he let the pleasure of an interesting sound lead him to the word "suicide" and from there into a metaphor that would deeply surprise even him, its author. That was the muse picking up the song from Hugo's humming. When I write in this way, I sometimes feel that the muse is really only another name for form.

The charismatic outlaw, on the other hand, compels the muse's attention by crashing his motorcycle through her flower bed and parking in the grass. When she asks who he is and tries to shake his hand, he kisses her on the mouth. He says things that scare her, things that make her blush. Before she knows what's happening, she is on the back of his chopper with her arms around his waist. He'll take her somewhere beautiful—a dirt road high above the city as the sun sets—then he'll run out of gas on purpose.

John Ashbery writes in this vein. Sylvia Plath. Elaine Equi. Frank O'Hara. It might be tempting to think that the shocks these outlaws give us are the result of flaunting form and discipline, but that's not quite the case. Really they're after an order of a stranger sort. It's the stress of pioneering form that invites their particular imagination to perform. Not the circus tiger's cage, but the flaming hoop the creature leaps through. While their relationship with traditional structures, subjects, and sentiments can seem combative, the best outlaws develop and complicate the systems they confound. Frederick Seidel, Paul Celan, and Marianne Moore all belong in this group. Walt Whitman, of course, but Emily Dickinson too. There's a younger poet, Malachi Black, who's doing terribly interesting things with the sonnet right now. Instead of loosening lines and discarding rhyme and meter to shed the sonnet's music and simplify construction, he has tightened the form into roughly four-beat lines, and he has added interior rhymes to complicate the poem's echoes. In his hands, a sonnet feels awfully wild.

Sam Fee: So form becomes a vessel for inspiration, rather than a set of constraints on it?

George David Clark: I suppose my point may be that the muse smiles on these paramours because each of them attends to form (critiquing it, adorning it, wielding it one night like a hammer, one night like a sword) with thoughtful discipline. Many of my favorite writers play both roles. Elizabeth Bishop is the diligent suitor when she writes "The Moose," but, one poem later in *Geography III*, she is the charismatic outlaw with "12 O'Clock News."

None of this is too helpful to my students at the moment, but if they stick with creative writing, I have faith that they will develop their own relationship with the muse, one that they will learn partly from studying others and partly from trying to catch her attention with their own original talents. It will take discipline though. It will mean a dynamic relationship with form.

Tara Fee: How do the poets with whom you work tend to view the influence of other poets? Do they feel what Harold Bloom famously called *The Anxiety of Influence*, or are they more comfortable with the relationships among their work and the work of others?

George David Clark: Most contemporary poets do seem comfortable with the influence exerted on them by others. Flip through the latest issue of *Poetry* and it seems like half the poems you encounter tout their influences in epigraphs. I have a poet friend who responds to any praise I give his work by citing its source. If I tell him I loved a particular metaphor, he notes that he got the idea from Lorca. I celebrate a rhyme and he tells me that I've heard it before in Larkin. Contemporary poets love quoting Eliot that "good writers borrow, great writers steal."

I worry though, that our relationship with our models is rather superficial. We have an incredibly wide pool of influences to draw from, but in most spots the water is only a few inches deep. A puddle, not a well. From our essays, interviews, and syllabi, it seems that the poets of my generation read mostly our contemporaries. Perhaps we feel at ease with their influence because we are able to borrow surface styles and subjects without having to critically engage the perspectives that inform them. It requires less imagination, less readerly charity, less personal humility, to steep ourselves in the world view we already assume. Certainly social

media has not encouraged depth, but it's there, on Facebook and Twitter, that we bask in the reflective glow of influence. Our favorite writers are our "friends."

We should feel more anxiety about the influence of the latest trends, the "it" poets of 2016, than the dominating precursors that Bloom imagines. If we read outside our own century or outside our native language, we encounter models we are forced to interrogate, dissect, rebuke, digest. They pose less threat of rendering us derivative, because they cannot be regurgitated in a contemporary American idiom. This was the kind of stealing Eliot had in mind—Eliot who so loved Dante, Laforgue, Herbert, Shakespeare. He wasn't only stealing from the Imagists.

Sam Fee: The journal you edit, *32 Poems*, publishes—in addition to its 32 poems—online prose features such as interviews, reviews, and a marginalia section in which writers are invited to meditate upon others' poems. We're fascinated by how these features, especially the marginalia, situate the poems as part of an ongoing conversation among writers and readers. How did *32 Poems*' commitment to this sort of work evolve?



George David Clark: Within a year or two of the journal's founding, the editors, John Poch and Deborah Ager, were using the *32 Poems* website to promote their authors' recent books and to share news about the development of the magazine. From the beginning they hoped the print journal could function as a focal point for a community of poets who were underserved by other publications (especially those writing shorter lyrics with great attention to rhythm). For that community to cohere, they knew they needed to move beyond the page. In their vision, publication shouldn't mean the conclusion of the poem's life, so they championed their authors to reprinters and the annual "best of" anthologies. They hosted readings and maintained a presence at the AWP conference along with many other book fairs, festivals, and writers' retreats.

Perhaps most importantly, John was willing to wrestle with the poems he accepted. Rather than merely selecting superior work without comment (as the overwhelming majority of poetry editors do), he had the boldness and the critical acumen to ask for even more: a new title, some clarification of syntax, the excision of a superfluous stanza, recapitulation of a stray idiom, etc. He gave this treatment to even the nation's most famous poets and almost without exception they loved him for editing with such deliberation and painstaking attention to detail. With poets like Brigit Pegeen Kelley, Heather McHugh, William Logan, and Alicia Stallings lauding their relationship with the journal, *32 Poems* gained a reputation for great editorial attentiveness. Even now, anytime I am representing the journal in public, I meet poets who tell me what a thrill it was to work with John Poch, even when he wound up passing on their work.

John had trained my own editorial practice for several years before I inherited the journal in 2011, and I was committed, as he and Deborah had been, to enforcing a demanding aesthetic and to creatively extending the life of our poems in any way I could. Our Contributors' Marginalia series began as an experiment that following year when I invited the poets of issue 10.2 to respond to a fellow contributor's work. At first, I imagined these pieces would be way for us to share a selection from the print journal with our online audience and encourage new subscriptions.

But a couple of surprising things happened in that first incarnation of the series. First, two poets who had never met selected each other's work and then discovered they both lived in San Francisco. They soon connected in person and one wound up hosting the other in a local reading series he managed. Second, several of the responses we received functioned less as the explications/admirations we had requested and more as intimate narratives of the reading experience. We quickly realized that the project could offer as much to contributors as it did other readers. By the following issue, we broadened our invitation and encouraged contributors to respond to each other's work in any way they felt led. Nowadays we get explications, craft studies, original poems, audio recordings, manifestos, and anything else you can imagine. This week we are publishing a series of fantastic questions ("What if hell is a studio in Burbank?") triggered by an elegy for Johnny Carson. It's been incredibly rewarding to step away from the

issue after publication and turn things over to the contributors. I get to discover the poems anew as their responses come back.

*32 Poems* does feel like a community to me these days, and there is nothing in my professional life that gives me more pleasure. I look forward to our national events all year for the opportunity they afford me to connect in person with poets who I've come to know online through their poems and our editorial correspondence. I can tell they look forward to meeting each other as well, especially those they have responded to in the marginalia series. This February, like last, we'll be throwing a party/reading on the first night of the AWP conference and expect to draw a couple hundred of poets and readers to enjoy each other's fellowship and hear some gorgeous poems read aloud.

And yet, hosting this community requires a great deal of work for which none of our editors, myself included, are compensated financially. John and Deborah were never paid for their labor either, but course releases and institutional funding for the journal's special events allowed them to invest their time into building community a bit more easily than we do now. We have a backlog of ideas for developing *32 Poems* beyond the page, but these days it is difficult to balance what we would like to do against the other demands on our time and resources.