

## Larry Eigner

1927-1996

Larry Eigner was born in Swampscott, Massachusetts, north of Boston. Since childhood he was confined to a wheelchair by cerebral palsy. "For Larry Eigner," Samuel Charters wrote, "the circumstances of his life have given a form and shape to his poetry . . . his life has been spent in a glassed-in front porch of a frame house on a side street in a small Massachusetts town. Through the windows—and through the windows of his bedroom—he follows the world of seasons, the sky, the trees."<sup>1</sup> He was very close to his mother, Bessie, who arranged for his homeschooling, which resulted in degrees from Swampscott High School and the University of Chicago.

Eigner's poetry, which deals with everyday events such as the passing of people and cars on the street, begins with what he calls an "imitation of attention."<sup>2</sup> In the short essay, "Statement on Words," he writes that "abundant moments in various places persist . . . a poem can be essay(s) of things come upon, can be a stretch of thinking."<sup>3</sup> Eigner's method is one of understatement and happenstance, working outward from the small and partial. The egoless discontinuity of his poetry is admired by the language poets; his attention to local detail and integrity of poetic line provides a link to both the Williams tradition and Black Mountain poetry. His poetics however were based in practice rather than theory.

The poet Charles Bernstein describes Eigner's work as "a democracy of particulars, as against the craving for highlights, for the heightened, that is as much a literacy aesthetic as a consumer imperative. For Eigner, this didn't mean a flattening of affect; on the contrary it meant a luminosity of every detail: the perceptual vividness that his work so uncannily concatenates. This acknowledgment of the daily, a series of remarks on the otherwise unremarkable, a sort of poetic alchemy that is not dissimilar to one strain of Jewish mysticism (a strain in which the mysticism dissolves into an active apprehension of the real)."<sup>5</sup> In the poem "p o e t r y," written on November 26, 1974, Eigner defined the art in four lines: "assessments / immediacies / one calculus / in the world."<sup>6</sup>

The first of Eigner's numerous books, *From the Sustaining Air* (1953), was published in Mallorca by Robert Creeley's Divers Press. His other books include *Things Stirring Together or Far Away* (1974), *The World and Its Streets, Places* (1977), *Waters/Places/a Time* (1983), *Windows/Walls/Yard/Ways* (1994), and a collection of short prose, *Country/Harbor/ Quiet/Act/Around* (1978). *The Collected Poems of Larry Eigner* was published in 2010.

After the death of his father, Eigner moved to Berkeley, California, where

he lived on a trust fund established by his brother, Richard. Until his death of pneumonia at age sixty-eight, he was given assistance in his living arrangement by Bay Area poets and friends.

1. Biographical note in Larry Eigner, *The World and Its Streets, Places*, Santa Barbara, 1977, p. 182.
2. "Method from Happenstance," in *areas lights heights: Writings 1954-1989*, p. 6.
3. *areas lights heights*, p. 3.
4. Unpublished letter to Ina Forster, February 11, 1987, <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/eazines/passages/passages5/forster.html>.
5. February 5, 1996, post to the SUNY/Buffalo Poetics site, <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/documents/obits/eigner.html>.
6. *Windows/Walls/Yard/Ways*, Santa Rosa, 1994, p. 53.

[trees green the quiet sun]

trees green the quiet sun

shed metal truck in the next street'  
passing the white house you listen  
onwards

you heard

the dog

through per  
formed circles

the roads near the beach

rectangular

rough lines of the woods

tall growth echoing

local water

1977

Wholes

For a while a year is a long time  
as things increase in their number  
and walls break  
familiarity comes

familiarity of life, which sinks  
to a level of sorts, space  
(empty except for  
the rabbits-hat of things

Before crumbling, the walls streak  
with some tangent of minutes

and life takes on a size

1977

[a temporary language]

a temporary language

as temporary things

and poetry the

math. . of

everyday

life

what time

Of the day is it

lad what

have you

to do with

or gotten

done

1977

[the sun solid]

the sun solid

ground it soaks

what bird took

wing

a minute ago

now there are others

some white stuff

they eat and build

farther

there an ample world

in which

their sounds are quiet

1983

[Out of the wind and leaves]

Out of the wind and leaves

first rustle

the rain straight

down

the wall within

the wall of sound

1983

June 19–September 9 90

the window opening  
no, opened already  
    nothing but the wind

the window opening

no, already opened

    nothing but the wind up

1994

## Kenward Elmslie

b. 1929

Born in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and educated at Harvard, Kenward Elmslie's first experiences as a writer were as a lyricist and librettist. Elmslie has written librettos for three operas, three of which, *The Seagull* (1976), *Washington Square* (1976), and *Three Sisters* (1986) were composed by Pulitzer Prize nominee Thomas Pasatieri. His other librettos are *The Sweet Bye and Bye* (1956), *Miss Julie* (1965; music by Ned Rorem), and *Lizzie Borden* (1965). He also wrote the book and lyrics for the Broadway show *The Grass Harp* (1971), with music by Claiborne Richardson, based on the Truman Capote novel. He wrote the lyrics for "Love Wise," a "top forty" song recorded by Nat King Cole in the 1950s.

Elmslie credits his turn to poetry to hearing Kenneth Koch read his "The History of Jazz" at the Five Spot in 1965, accompanied by Larry Rivers on saxophone. "My guffaw meter went bong," Elmslie says in an interview. "Kenneth transported the zest, the dippy angstlessness of musical comedy into poetry."<sup>1</sup> Elmslie's books of poetry include *Motor Disturbance* (1971), *Circus Nerves* (1971), *Tropicalism* (1975), *Moving Right Along* (1980), *Champ Dust* (1994), and *Routine Disruptions: Selected Poems and Lyrics* (1998). Among the first generation of New York School poets, his work is unique for its carnivalesque diction and theatrical character.

In the early 1980s, he turned his attention to creating performance works in collaboration with visual artists Ken Tisa (*Bimbo Dirt*), Donna Dennis (*26 Bars*), and Joe Brainard (*Sung Sex*), as well as the musician Steven Taylor.

*Motor Disturbance* won the Frank O'Hara Award for Poetry in 1971, the first year that prize was awarded.

A grandson of publisher Joseph Pulitzer, Kenward Elmslie lives in Vermont and Manhattan's West Village.

1. W. C. Bamberger, "An Interview with Kenward Elmslie," *New American Writing* 8/9 (Fall 1991), pp. 181–82.

## Shirley Temple Surrounded by Lions

In a world where kapok on a sidewalk looks like an "accident"  
—innards—would that freckles could enlarge, well, meaningfully  
into kind of friendly brown kingdoms, all isolate,  
with a hero's route, feral glens,  
and a fountain where heroines cool their mouths.