

# Into the Archives

*A second look at my first intimations of genius*

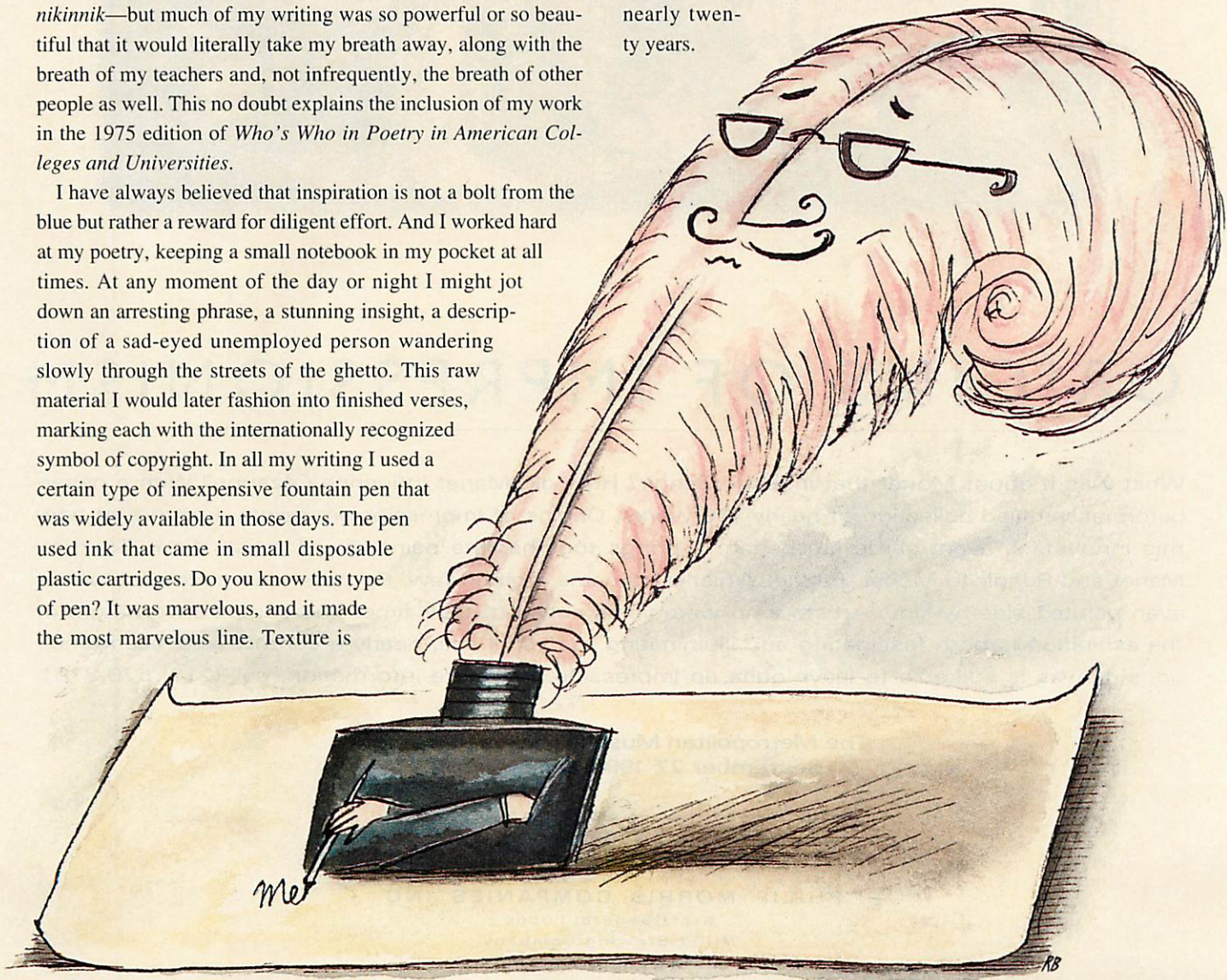
**I**T will come as a surprise to many, but up until the time I was twenty-one or twenty-two, I was known primarily as a poet. Indeed, those most familiar with my work during those years believed that I would one day take my place among that handful of writers of verse who can without exaggeration be classified as “major” or “great.” My published oeuvre was small—poems of mine had appeared in *Helicon* and, once I was in college, *Kinikinnik*—but much of my writing was so powerful or so beautiful that it would literally take my breath away, along with the breath of my teachers and, not infrequently, the breath of other people as well. This no doubt explains the inclusion of my work in the 1975 edition of *Who’s Who in Poetry in American Colleges and Universities*.

I have always believed that inspiration is not a bolt from the blue but rather a reward for diligent effort. And I worked hard at my poetry, keeping a small notebook in my pocket at all times. At any moment of the day or night I might jot down an arresting phrase, a stunning insight, a description of a sad-eyed unemployed person wandering slowly through the streets of the ghetto. This raw material I would later fashion into finished verses, marking each with the internationally recognized symbol of copyright. In all my writing I used a certain type of inexpensive fountain pen that was widely available in those days. The pen used ink that came in small disposable plastic cartridges. Do you know this type of pen? It was marvelous, and it made the most marvelous line. Texture is

everything in poetry, I think. At any rate, I thought so at the time.

As for the notebooks, I did not favor any particular brand. I say this with assurance, because those old notebooks—those glowing forges of my imagination—are piled on my desk as I write this. I came across them this morning, while hunting for certain documents of apparent interest to the Internal Revenue Service. I haven’t looked at them in nearly twenty years.

by David Owen

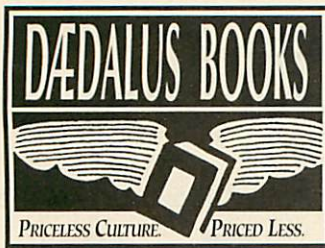




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My fingers tremble in anticipation of turning their age-cloaked pages. Before revealing in their glories, however, let me take a moment to describe my state of mind during the period of my greatest promise.

When I was in my teens and very early twenties, I possessed a sort of frightening sensitivity to various aspects of the human condition. Almost any sight or occurrence—a weeping old woman, a hungry child calling for her mother in the ghetto, the haughty sneer of a conceited cheerleader—could send me into throes of existential anomie. As a result, I often argued with my parents, who lacked even the most rudimentary appreciation of my gift, and whose only reaction when something of mine appeared in *Helicon* or *Kinnikinnik* was to offer uncomprehending congratulations and expressions of pride. Still, I frequently worried that aspects of my own family life and mental state appeared to be mild and ordinary in comparison with those of older writers who were generally considered to be “major” or “great.” I comforted myself with the thought that I would probably become mentally ill at some later date, perhaps after graduating from college. Besides, isn't yearning to be mentally ill *itself* a form of mental illness?

Despite—or, no doubt, because of—my uncertain emotional condition, I won a remarkable number of poetry awards. These included the Virginia Scott Miner cup, the H. J. Sharp award, a handful of less significant prizes, and a gold-colored trophy in the shape of a nearly naked woman with wings. The trophy, which was inscribed “First Place—Free Verse,” I kept on my dresser along with some arrowheads and a baseball autographed by Orlando Cepeda.

Now, let us select one of my old notebooks at random from the pile. This one will do nicely. I have chosen a blue composition book dating from my high school years, with an intriguing helical binding made of wire. When new, according to the legend on its cover, it contained ninety-six sheets and cost forty-nine cents. Roughly two thirds of the pages appear to be missing. Inscribed on the cover is the date 1972 and the designation “Biology I.” I am now turning to the heart of the notebook, to examine the rich ore it contains.

I am skimming now. Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm.

Well. Hmmm. I must confess that I am somewhat surprised. On the other hand, we do not expect the fledgling to sing

with the full-throated ease of the mother or father bird. Besides, the period of my greatest promise came somewhat later, when I was in college. In the pile of notebooks on my desk I now see one whose binding I recognize as French. It is a *cahier* that I bought while studying in Paris, during the summer following my freshman year. Paris!

I am removing the French notebook from the pile. I am turning the pages now.

A thought occurs: We read the notebooks of a great poet *because* of their imperfections, do we not? We study them because we wish to examine the seams and joints not visible in the finished work—to see how the thing is done. For precisely this reason it is to the finished work that we must ultimately turn. Luckily, as it happens, I have also come across numer-

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ous well-preserved copies of *Helicon* and *Kinnikinnik*. What a cascade of mental imagery the unexpected appearance of their covers engenders in my mind! Let me select a sample from the pile.

Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm.

I am sometimes asked to explain how I happened to abandon, during my junior year in college, the writing of poetry for (as it turned out) drinking beer and having sex. I can offer no rational account. For is not poetry a gift that we have no power either to accept or to decline? Yes, it is. I can say only that what is done outside the realm of conscious action cannot be undone within it, and vice versa. Besides, is not the promise of genius, in a very real sense, as lovely a thing as genius itself? It is as precious as the dew on a flower, the sun on a cloud, the smile on the face of a child. My old notebooks and published works—bright strands in the many-hued tapestry of my imagination—do not even begin to tell the story. ☁