Did you know Robert Creeley had a monkey for pet? If you search *Robert Creeley Monkey* all that comes up is the stoner poem he wrote for Kerouac, "Jack's Blues":

> I'm going to roll up
> a monkey and smoke it, put
> an elephant in the pot. I'm going out
> and never come back.
>
> What's better than that.
> Lying on your back, flat
> on your back with your
> eyes on the view.
>
> Oh the view is blue, I saw that
> too, yesterday and you,
> red eyes and blue,
> funked.
>
> I'm going to roll up
> a rug and smoke it, put
> the car in the garage and I'm
> gone, like a sad old candle.

The poem comes in the first third of Creeley's *Selected*, but you can read it and the letter it's attached to in his new *Selected Letters*, edited by Rod Smith, Peter Baker, and Kaplan Harris. I've always loved the toss-away poems that poets include in letters and it amuses me greatly that this has become a famous poem of Creeley's (mostly, I think, because of its connection to the more ubiquitous writer). I wish more serious poets strived for this poem's looseness. Only two places you can still hear this sort of thing: '90s-style coffeeshops in smaller American cities with food options limited to quiche and dried-out blueberry muffins, and readings featuring Tom Pickard.

So, Creeley owned a monkey. In a letter to Cid Corman:

> We just got a monkey—very lovely little thing, a lady, etc., that way it's simpler to keep up & all. I've always wanted one, it's the kind of thing one dreams abt…anyhow she is very nice. Now of course we worry abt her getting cold & so on—like having another kid. We gave her an old sweater of Tom's last night to sleep on, & she fooled around with it for awhile, then put it on! Too much.

A lady, etc. I've been falling out of love with Creeley since I first read him, part of my slow reversal on what I refer to as *cool* poetry. *Cool* as in *with it* but also as in *chilly*. Think of Eliot, only flipped and hipper: plastic jazz.

This isn't to say Eliot or Creeley isn't getting things done. Or that most art isn't plastic! But for every one of Creeley's direct lines to post-war bohemian thought and experience there's another half-dozen ironic edicts that, like Kerouac's weaker work, discloses another of the era's stunted

desperados. When Creeley's poetry works, it's when he's got the Dickinson thing going on, an oblique metaphysics of the slight. Here's "Here", a short one so you can see what I mean:

> No one
> else in the room
> except you.
> .
> Mind's a form
> of taking
> it all.
> .
> And the room
> opens
> and closes.

There he is, isn't he? What I call the *flutter* in Creeley's poetry, the way room/you/mind/form creates a chain of relations that feels like basic punning polysemy; only, the similarity between the nouns comes from some deeper relation brought to bear through Creeley's famous halting rhythm. The noun of the last stanza might be *room* or *mind*.

The poem also mentions the relationship between *mind* and *form*, an extension of Creeley and Olson's poetics that launched an era: Form is never more than an extension of content. I love the phrase, quote it to students, meditate on it while grilling, but here's all it really means: Write in a way suitable to what you're writing about. Heavy knowledge, when you're a young poet coming out of the fake rigor of writing instruction in the American school system. Heavy knowledge, when you're Creeley and Olson, following Pound and trying to figure out how to write now that poetry can do anything!

But it's an old formula, which Creeley admits in a letter to Mitch Goodman, written a year or so after the famous letter to Olson:

> Here it is in Flaubert's words: "To suppose an idea without form is impossible, and vice versa…" I like that, because it gives both emphasis, i.e., that without form, you have no content, & without content, you have no form, etc. Very fine. And enough? I figure it is. My own emphasis is: form is never more than the extension of content, i.e., I believe it begins so, from that prime: content.

Whatever gets the job done. You can quarrel with the simplicity of the gesture but, to my mind, *form is never more than the extension of content* does the same work as Cage's silent piece: it relaxes the artist and allows them to do whatever work they see as necessary.

But then there's the tough-guy aspect of Creeley's work. I don't *just* mean his machismo—like every dude from that era his idea of freedom means *freedom for hip dudes*. Because of this, even when the work is most rapturous—like in the poem above—you're often saying to yourself, *yeah, but do you just mean your mind (and the ones that are just like yours)*? I often get the sense that when people tell me they like Creeley's poetry, it's because of poems like "Ho Ho":

I have broken
the small bounds
of this existence and
am travelling south

on route 90. It
is approximately
midnight, surrogate
earth time, and you

who could, can, and
will never take anything
seriously will die
as dumb as ever

while I alone in
state celestial shoot
forward at designed rate,
speed at last unimpeded.

I get that sense because this poem evokes the mood, tone, and ego of almost every American poem in existence at the moment. *I am writing this to prove to you, dum dum, that I have had a thought or experience that all right-thinking people should have or should acknowledge. Agree with me, learn from me, or suffer the consequences.* The title makes clear that Creeley is at least half in jest; to me the jest is that of a rolled and whipped locker room towel.

Any artist has good and bad days, but this an old formula adapted for the leather jacket set. Our era has multiple versions. Here's Creeley's chill wind with the poetry professor in mind. *Epigram 30,* from Stephanie Burt's new translations of and riffs on Callimachus:

Bunting I like, but not Olson, or Bernstein, or Pound;
    I'm tired of flashy long poems
that mean whatever anyone wants them to mean.
I'm also tired of crowds,
    hate the Met as I hate Times Square,
and won't see movies everyone else has seen.
As for you, Lusianias,
    I wanted to get to know you. Then I heard
how many others have known you, and how well.
Tomorrow, in fact, I suspect
    you'll show yet another young man
why he's just the one for you, and how you can tell.

Bunting I like, Olson, *and* Pound. *I'm* tired of flashy poems that mean *only* what they mean. Doesn't matter whether you're a magazine poet, a popular avant-gardist, a Southern formalist, or some grad student who just discovered you can make a poem with random search strings of words. Don't misunderstand: I'm not saying *but what is meaning anyways*. Nor am I advocating the tedious

work of those chasing after theory. All I want is to apply Jonas Mekas' advice for filmmakers to poets: We need less perfect but more free poetry.

When you read through the Olson/Creeley letters, it's clear they were pursuing something close to Mekas' advice. The real joy of the ten volumes isn't the famous letters, it's seeing all the little tossed off paths that present the actual work of poetry: just farting around by yourself with some books. And then sending those farts to your friends. Sixty years on, I'd argue that Creeley and Olson's *breaking free* of Pound's influence, just as Pound's *breaking free*—or re-evaluating—of the European influence, has become, simply, a style to be perfected. The avant-garde as stodgy old person. What else can we free ourselves from? At the end of his life, Creeley found long lines:

> My friends, hands on each other's shoulders,
> holding on, keeping the pledge
> to be for one, for all, a securing center,
> no matter up or down, or right or left—
>
> to keep the faith, keep happy, keep together,
> keep at it, so keep on
> despite the fact of necessary drift.
> Home might be still the happiest place on earth?

One last quibble. The editors explain in their introduction that they have elected to "maintain a minimum of editorial interference."

> There are no excerpted letters, also no editorial headnotes to sections, and no editorializing about which letters stand out for whatever reason. We have kept Creeley's famous dictum that "form is never more than an extension of content" in front of us while making decisions on the presentation of these letters and have allowed this to guide us at the micro- as well as the macrolevel.

What this means is: there are section headings, but otherwise you're swimming in the deep end of a dude whose letters—especially the early ones—might as well have been transcribed by one of the chickens he's always bragging about having kept on his farm in New Hampshire. Even the introduction is slight; it suggests that you pick up two different books to get a fuller sense of Creeley's biography before reading the letters. C'mon. The editors have done brilliant work with their selection—it really gives you a sense of what a writer's life at that time must have been like on a day-to-day basis. And I understand the two things guiding their decision: 1) what press wants to publish letters anyway and 2) anyone picking this book up is probably already immersed in the history necessary to grok the essential details. Still, it's aggravating, and after reading the brilliant notes to the recent Davenport/Kenner letters, it's difficult to understand why there's so little help for even the well-intentioned reader. Arguing that it's what Creeley would have wanted feels lazy and pompous, no matter the good will of the editors. Their introduction to the footnotes: "We tend to privilege allusions that cannot be readily identified with an Internet search engine." Get ready to look up a bunch of stuff!