

## Faculty Profile: Gary Lenhart

by James Washington, Jr.

Gary Lenhart was my first Dartmouth instructor. It was spring 2017, MALS 239: Poetry, and during the initial class he shed the customary professor title like one removes a too-tight tie. The study and writing of poetry were underway with *Gary* at the helm.

At first, Gary looked to me like a hybrid of *Yes* front man Jon Anderson and Harry Potter's Dumbledore. Two exceptions applied: he had a less stratospheric voice of the former and more abbreviated chin hair than the latter. Either way, he has an aura of wisdom that's true and Dartmouth will be the lesser with his retirement at academic year's end.

Perhaps some *Clamantis* readers remember the highly successful commercials of professional two-sport phenom Bo Jackson: "Bo Knows!" Well why not "Gary Knows!"? He has covered a heap of turf by publishing six books of poetry, two books of essays about poetry, and has been editor of several books and literature magazines.

Recently, I met with Gary at the Salt Hill Pub for some suds. From that conversation, I gained a heightened appreciation of how all-in for poetry Gary has been since an early age. How much would you risk to live as a writer? Maybe drive a taxi? Live the austere and sweat out college tuition payments? Gary has done this and more for the love of words.

There's a great poem written by Phillip Levine, "What Work Is". It's gritty and told from the perspective of a man "shifting from one foot to another" in a long line of men, standing under a light rain of heavy uncertainty. Somewhere ahead in line, the narrator is mistaken in thinking he sees his brother but instead it's another whose grin:

does not hide the stubbornness,  
the sad refusal to give in to  
rain, to the hours of wasted waiting,  
to the knowledge that somewhere ahead  
a man is waiting who will say, "No,  
we're not hiring today," for any  
reason he wants.

The poem goes on to place hard labor and what we know as the liberal arts face to face. Deeper into the poem, the narrator's brother isn't in the line at all but instead is

home trying to  
sleep off a miserable night shift  
at Cadillac so he can get up

before noon to study his German.  
Works eight hours a night so he can sing  
Wagner...

I thought of Levine's poem as I read Gary's *The Stamp of Class – Reflections on Poetry and Social Class*, a book of critical essays about the intersection of poetry and social class. It's a good read and speaks to me of Gary's being dialed-in with humanitarian insight. If you read the book, be sure not to skip the preface which details what loss is including, at age six, the death of his father to a concrete truck's overturn. The preface also contains an example of blessed happenstance. When Gary was thirteen, an English teacher swapped his "commercial" curriculum high school registration card, as intended by his mother and step-father, for one that led him to the liberal arts and college.

In MALS 239, Gary had a knack for linking our workshop discussions to quotations of other writers. More often than not, these quotations worked as constructive criticism and guidance for revisions. His notes on our submitted poems were both incisive and written in museum ready penmanship style. Who knew, a human font master!

When I asked Gary which writers or mentors have influenced his work, his response was consistent with my classroom observations. It began by reference to another:

Lewis Warsh wrote a poem titled "Everyone you've ever been with for a moment." That's the way I feel about influence; it comes from all directions. Somehow while a college student I found a small book store in Albany, NY which stocked small stapled poetry books on a back shelf. I was early inspired by books I found there (writings) by Leroi Jones, Robert Creeley, Diane di Prima, and Ed Dorn. In the U. of Wisconsin library, I found books by Ron Padgett and Ted Berrigan. I moved to New York City after graduation and worked briefly for Allen Ginsberg, then became friends with Kenneth Koch, Lorenzo Thomas, Eileen Myles, Ted Greenwald, and Bernadette Mayer. But I've been reading poetry for 60 years, so that's but a smattering of influences.

Said another way, life was Gary's teacher before he fully settled in with the academy.

I didn't begin teaching until I was almost 40. I've since taught at a range of institutions, including Mercy College, Long Island University Brooklyn campus, Columbia University, Vermont Community College, New Hampshire Community College, Johnson State, and Dartmouth. **Ed Dorn said that you can't teach anyone to write poetry, but you can provoke them to write poems** (emphasis mine)—if they have a lively and provocative mind. At Dartmouth I've most enjoyed working with individual students and with small classes. It's a luxury that you often don't have at colleges that are strapped for money. But it's only when you get to know a student well that you can gauge how serious they are about what they're doing—and that doesn't mean that they will become

lifetime poets. Some of my favorite students have gone on to become journalists, teachers, or coaches.

I hope that my presence in Gary's classroom wasn't what drove him to retirement. In addition to MALS 239, I audited another of his poetry workshops. Over the many times I've emailed him, I've included attachments of my newly written poems. And guess what? His comments come back with the old school mannerism of when unexpected guests knock at your door. "Come in," I imagine him saying. "We'll make room for you at the table and in conversation."

Both times I signed on for Gary's poetry workshops, the class composition was diverse in age, race, geography, gender and thought—to name just a few measures. I strongly suspect that his teaching reputation helped cultivate this diversity. At a minimum he brought us respectfully to engagement, reflection, kindness, challenge and wonder. He taught what he lived. He taught by being generous in sharing the best of what was inside him.

When I asked Gary, what's next? Of course, he brought another voice to the response, his mother's:

I'm looking forward to doing what I want to—which is a variant and intensification of what I've been doing all my life, reading and writing. I recall telling my mother that I was bogged down with fifty essays that I had to read over a weekend. She replied, "Isn't it nice that they pay you to read? You always liked to read."

Maybe mother knows best. But "Gary Knows," too!