

downtown Long Beach Farmers Market where my cauliflower poem was inspired a month before. Marvin Malone and I talked about cauliflower per se, how in my poem the cauliflower, because I had wanted to make an objet d'art of it rather than eat it, could not have fulfilled its purpose in life. "Raison d'être," I tossed into the conversation, always glad for a chance to speak French. The Subject, my god, was *Cauliflower* with this Learned Man. "Exactly," he said, "raison d'être." Enough said.

This scholar, gentleman, and scientist, this admired editor-publisher and poet and artist, had not only read my cauliflower poem top to bottom and accepted it for publication in his also-admired magazine, but he had actually given great thought to it, even more than I, merely its writer, had. And it will never again, for me as a poet, be as good as that.

Our lunch arrived and we ate. Marvin Malone pushed through his pasta with his fork, looked at me, smiled, and said, "Just checking for cauliflower."

—Joan Jobe Smith

Long Beach, CA

## A PORTRAIT OF THE EDITOR AS A ROCK

There was this rock, sticking up out of the ocean. It had been there forever. Sometimes the waves were choppy and other times the sea was calm—it made no difference to the rock. It was rock steady. All kinds of little creatures clung to the rock under the water line: crabs, starfish, anemones, coral—all beautiful and harmless. It was a great rock, and they were happy just being there. A few of the bigger crabs climbed up on top and basked in the sunshine. Years went by but the waves didn't wear it down any. It was a hell of a rock.

That's the image that comes to mind when I think of the late Marvin Malone, editor of the long-lived, highly respected little magazine the *WORMWOOD REVIEW*. The man was an institution, and his mag was (and remains) a monument.

Malone put out *WORMWOOD* steadily from the early 1960s until his recent death: 144 issues, counting the last regular issue completed by his daughter Christa. A remarkable run for a small press magazine. He knew what he liked, and he knew what was

good, and when a poem was both good and he liked it, in it went. One of the great things about WORMWOOD was that it was not at all cliquish. New writers could get into it just as easily as experienced writers. Another way of putting that is to turn it around and say that it was just as hard for seasoned poets to get in as for anyone else. Even if they had a reputation. Malone would only take poems that delighted him, that amused him. He seemed—judging from my own successes (few) and failures (many) in submitting—to have preferred poems that use humor, witty images, and playful language. But it had to be done extremely well. Nothing dull or forced or lame or corny. Nothing pretentious. Nothing too ponderous or melancholy. And it had to look effortless. You could have gone nuts trying to write to his tastes. The best course seemed to be to just write what you wanted and send it in, and expect most or all of it to get bounced.

No doubt what made Malone such a fine editor was that he was not afraid to reject stuff. He probably even rejected some of Bukowski's lesser work (something I could not have done, no matter how bad it was). Buk wrote a lot, and some of it was bound to be crap, given his drinking. I can picture Bukowski with a hangover, finding some doggerel pages on the floor next to his old shoes and shoving them into an envelope addressed to Malone, and two weeks later they come back with one of Marvin's little notes written in red ink, saying, "Many thanks, Hank, but these just don't hit the mark. Maybe next time."

You could not second-guess Malone as an editor. Bukowski probably figured this out early on and sent Malone everything. A few times, I sent Marvin a batch of poems that I felt were all strong, but for one poem that seemed so weak I threw it away, and then at the last minute I fished it out of the trash and included it anyway. And I'll be damned if Marvin didn't always take the trash-can poem and reject the rest! People would tell me it was my best poem yet, an absolute gem. So Malone was right.

The secret of Marvin's success as an editor was that he only took a writer's very best work. Nobody's second-rate stuff got into WORMWOOD. So you were always competing against yourself, not against other poets. This was a very tough situation. There were times I read poems in WORMWOOD that didn't seem as good as poems of mine that Marvin had rejected. But, admittedly, the rejected poems weren't my very best work. We poets are monsters of ego, and this type of relativistic editorial standard drove us to the brink of despair. Tough luck. The only

solution was to write better stuff, and not take the rejections personally.

I'll never forget Marvin's generosity: the times I sent him a draft of something I was writing, and he promptly responded with very helpful comments and corrections. Thanks, Marvin.

A big part of being a rock was that Marvin was not a flake. He was reliable, consistent, dependable. WORMWOOD didn't change very much during the four decades it spanned; it started out high and stayed there. And yet, the poetry was always new, engaging, as fresh as the produce in the market. Graphically, WORMWOOD had a classic appearance: simple and uncluttered. Marvin found a look that worked for him and he stuck with it. Every time you opened an issue, you knew it was going to be good from front to back, full of work by noteworthy poets: Steve Richmond, Gerald Locklin, Ronald Baatz, Fred Voss, Lyn Lifshin, to name a few. Every issue, it seemed, also included some new names—poets you hadn't read before—who were good, and deserved to be there.

Something else worth mentioning is Marvin's professionalism. He was nonjudgmental about the personal lives of the poets he printed—their problems, failings, character flaws. He dealt with poets one poem at a time—everything else was extraneous. And that's what they needed: to have their work judged, not their personalities.

This is a good place to say that I owe a great debt of gratitude to the late Leo Mailman, who couldn't use some stuff I'd sent him for his own mag and passed it on to Marvin back in the 1970s. That's how I got started in WORMWOOD. It was from Leo, and Gerry Locklin, and John Kay, that I first heard the opinion that WORMWOOD was the best poetry mag in the world. We wouldn't know until later just how true that was.

The finest rock in the sea.

It's a wonderful thing to be associated with. I count myself lucky to have been in WORMWOOD over the years. I consider the poems Marvin published as my best work—the few good ones that got through.

—David Barker

Salem, OR