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Poet, 79, Wins Prize and New Audience

By DINITIA SMITH

CHICAGO - Why did Landis Everson stop writing poetry for 43 years?

The question arose last week, after the Poetry Foundation awarded Mr. Everson its newly created prize for a writer over 50 who has never published a book.

Mr. Everson, 79, quiet, pixieish and a little frail after a cataract operation, answered, smiling, "Imagine, if you had written a letter to a friend in Chicago and you never had an answer, and you kept writing and writing and not getting any answer back, would you keep writing?" No matter. Mr. Everson will now receive the Emily Dickinson First Book Award of \$10,000, with publication of his book underwritten by the foundation.

It was not that Mr. Landis's poetry had been rejected, but rather that, for him, poetry is a communication between friends, not a commercial enterprise. "I wasn't seeing my friends," he said simply.

Those friends were among the poets who became known as the Berkeley Renaissance writers: Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser. Although each poet's work was different, they were rebelling against East Coast formalism - their writing was full of symbolist imagery, colloquialisms, mythological and Biblical references; it was sometimes obscene, sometimes homoerotic. (Mr. Everson is the boy in Duncan's "Venice Poem": "his eye/ is fixt upon the boy's eye - / as if he saw all love was frozen there").

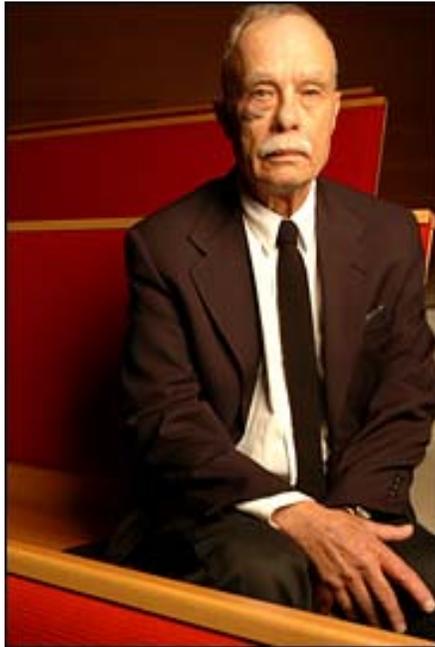
Born in Coronado, Calif., where his father was a naval officer, Mr. Everson attended the University of California, Berkeley, and earned a master's degree at Columbia University. He played a hoax on the English department by writing a thesis on an imaginary 17th-century poet, Sir William Bargothe. (The joke was discovered, but the department accepted his thesis anyway.) Mr. Everson published poetry in some very good magazines: *The Hudson Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Poetry*. After moving to San Francisco, he met weekly with his poet friends who began experimenting with dictated or "serial poetry," unmediated language directly from the poet's mind. But there were romantic squabbles and quarrels over style.

In 1961, the group disbanded. Without his friends for an audience, Mr. Everson stopped writing. He taught, painted, bought old houses and renovated them. He moved to San Luis Obispo, "because I didn't know anyone there," he said.

Around 1994, he ceased renovating houses. He was too old. So he did crossword puzzles, gardened and played with two blue jays that he had tamed. "They eat out of my hand," he said. "I was waiting to die, very patiently, very agreeably, when the phone rang."

It was Ben Mazer, a young Boston poet and editor writing an essay on the Berkeley Renaissance for the poetry annual, *Fulcrum*. Mr. Mazer had traced Mr. Everson and asked if he had any unpublished poems. He did, and Mr. Mazer published them in *Fulcrum*. With Mr. Mazer's encouragement, Mr. Everson began writing again. Mr. Mazer sent his work to journals, and it was accepted, including by *The New Republic*, which published "Coronado Poet."

In "Coronado Poet," which Mr. Everson read at the prize ceremony, he might have been describing himself: "I stay upright," Mr. Everson wrote, "Nothing makes me go down dusty roads to change my style./ I don't believe in love anymore, the foghorn/ blasted it out of me."



Jerome De Perlinghi for *The New York Times*
The poet Landis Everson at the poetry awards ceremony.

Unbeknownst to Mr. Everson, Mr. Mazer submitted his poems for the Poetry Foundation prize. He won, and Mr. Mazer will edit the book to be published by Graywolf Press.

When Mr. Everson heard about the prize, he became depressed, he said. He didn't sleep, didn't eat. "I realized all the fun and games had gone out of poetry; it was becoming professional," he said. But his spirits have lifted. "Without Ben, I wouldn't be writing," Mr. Everson said. "I have an audience."

The Dickinson prize is particularly apt because it comes from the donation to the foundation by the Eli Lilly pharmaceutical heiress Ruth Lilly, 90, who has also written poetry. Her donation was announced in 2002, and it will eventually amount to about \$175 million.



The young Landis Everson in an undated photo.

Ms. Lilly, who was institutionalized for depression, sent poems to Poetry magazine for years, but they had been rejected.

No one at the foundation had met Ms. Lilly, who has recovered from her illness with the aid of Prozac, a drug developed by her family's company. For her birthday in August, however, the foundation printed a private edition of her poems and drawings, and she distributed the collection, "A Little Book," to friends and family at her birthday party. After years of rejection, her work was in book form at last.

Mr. Landis and Ms. Lilly were not the only ones receiving gifts from the foundation. On Oct. 6, at the glittering awards ceremony on the glass-enclosed stage of the Jay Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park, a new \$10,000 award for criticism went to the poet and critic William Logan. "What were they thinking?" Mr. Logan asked. "Critics are insects, as everyone knows, one of the plagues that poets have to bear."

The Mark Twain award for humor went to Tony Hoagland. He also mentioned insects, in a love poem. "If she were a female walkingstick bug she might," he read, "insert her hypodermic proboscis delicately into my neck."

Before the prize ceremony, Mr. Barr gave a rundown of some of the Lilly money expenditures.

He said the foundation, with the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, is conducting one of the largest surveys ever of attitudes toward poetry. The findings will be published in early 2006.

The foundation is building an immense online poetry archive. Together with the National Endowment for the Arts, it sponsored a recitation contest this year for high school students in Chicago and Washington, D.C. Winners received \$1,000 each, and the contest is going national.

The foundation also sponsors Garrison Keillor's poetry radio program, "Writer's Almanac." John Barr, a poet and the foundation's president, said the show "is syndicated to 300 stations and reaches two million listeners weekly." In addition, the foundation, together with the Library of Congress, has an "American Life in Poetry" program that gives newspapers poems and commentary by the nation's poet laureate, Ted Kooser. Finally, it has also underwritten a direct-mail campaign and a redesign for Poetry magazine, doubling circulation to 21,000 since 2003.

J. D. McClatchy, a poet and editor of the Yale Review, said he applauded many of the foundation's initiatives, especially the new essays in Poetry, which contain "a serious dialogue about poetry."

But as for having a humor prize in general, he said, "they seem to be aiming low." "They want their initiatives to be popular and populist," Mr. McClatchy said. "The trouble with money is, it can't make good poetry."