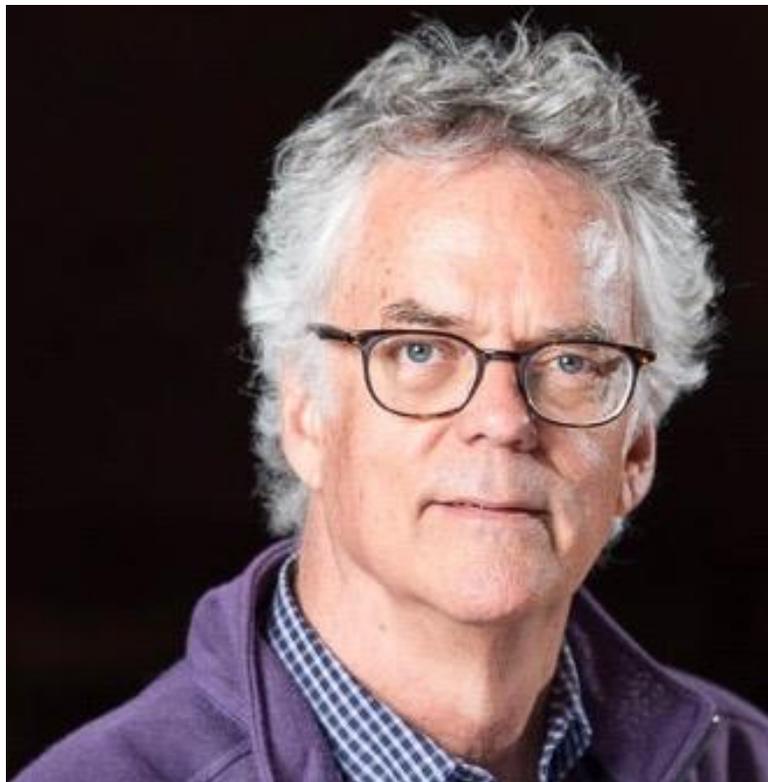




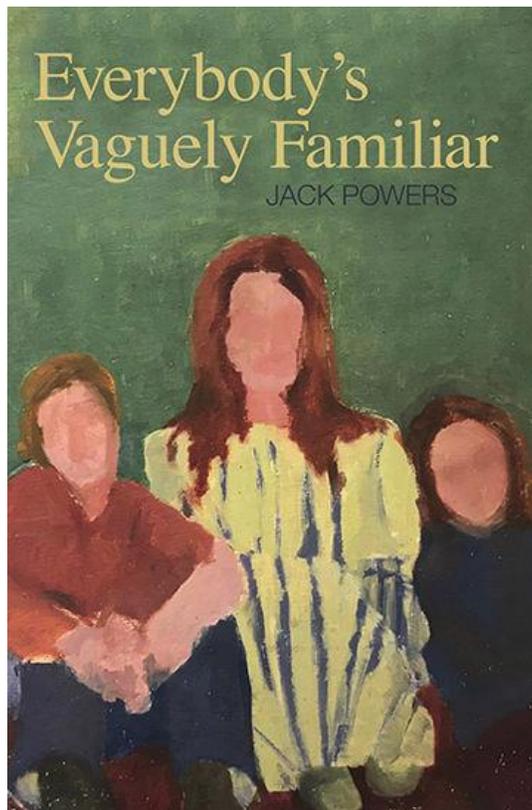
OUR INTERVIEW WITH POET JACK POWERS



**I remember two students in class reading aloud together
their own translation of Rilke's
"Archaic Torso of Apollo."
It was like a prayer.**

Sally from the Norwalk Public Library: Thanks so much for joining us on the Poetry Page today, Jack. You have a poem in our 2019 **Art & Text** Exhibit booklet!

Normally, I don't start our interviews with publishing, but your list of credits is impressive. In addition to the celebrated publication of your collection of poems by **Golden Antelope Press**—*Everybody's Vaguely Familiar*—, your poems in appear in *Poet Lore*, *Barrow Street*, *The Southern Review*, *The Cortland Review*, *The New York Times*, *Rattle*, *The Connecticut Review*. That's quite impressive!



[Golden Antelope Press](http://www.goldenantelopepress.com)

First, please tell us about your experience with **Golden Antelope Press**. I think you had quite the journey with your book!

Jack: First, I want to thank you for the invite, and for creating **The Poetry Page**. Writing oftentimes feels like an odd pursuit. **The Poetry Page** reminds me that there are other oddballs out there!

I was very fortunate to find **Golden Antelope Press** through Amy Holman, who was one of my guest poets at Barlow's Poetry Day. She teaches at **The Hudson Valley Writing Center**, and is very knowledgeable about the poetry publishing world. I'd submitted to over 50 publishers (many with contest fees), and was getting very discouraged. Golden Antelope Press was one of nine publishers Amy suggested, and they turned out to be the perfect place for me. Owners Betsy and Neal Delmonico were professors at Truman State, and they now publish about eight books a year so they can really take their time to collaborate and make a beautiful book. They're smart, very supportive, and have great taste. Like poetry journals, book publishers have their own specific tastes, and many are looking for the next big young thing. A coming-of-age narrative poetry collection (especially when the age was 62) is not on that list. I am forever grateful to Betsy, Neal, and Amy.

Sally: That is a great story, Jack, and an important one for poets to hear. You truly persevered, and in your journey found the perfect publisher for your book, and the best fit for you. I think the journey is as important as the outcome, don't you?

Could you now share with us your process of submitting individual poems to literary journals on a regular basis? A poet-friend of mine has set the goal for herself to send out one hundred submissions per year, and she succeeds. Is there any sort of system that you have in place in regards to submissions?

Jack: I tend to go hot and cold on submitting, even though "Submit Poems" is always on my to-do list. But I always try to have a few pieces of hope out there. When a rejection comes back, I try to send out a new submission before the rejections pile up. I'm not sure if I've ever submitted 100 times in a year, but that's a good goal. Lately, I've been trying to keep 15-20 submissions out there in submission-land.

Sally: How do you choose which journals to submit to? There are so many!

Jack: I look at where poets I like have been published, keep an eye out for publishing calls, submit to journals that publish poems. I ask for a few ideas whenever I take a poetry class, and I keep sending to places where I've had some success. I also get emails from *Authors Publish Magazine*, and send to places they suggest that seem like a good fit.

Sally: Are you troubled by rejections, or do you take them in stride?

Jack: I am troubled, but I realize it's the price of admission. They're like little wounds suffered as I march forward, but what's the alternative to marching?

Sally: What advice would you give to poets who are just beginning to submit their work?

Jack: Find a few places that have high acceptance rates (you can find that info at [*Duotrope*](#) or at [*Authors Publish Magazine*](#)), and submit to those first so you can start with a few successes. Then raise your aim. Also look for smaller ponds or groups you're part of to reduce the competition. If you're a teacher, try NEATE or other teacher sites. If you're Italian American, look for Italian American sites.

I know it's time consuming, but I recommend reading a few poems from a journal before submitting. If you like their stuff, you've got a better chance they'll like yours. If you can't understand any of the poems, or if you begin to question why you ever got into poetry, don't bother submitting.

Also, keep a spreadsheet of where you send your poems in case you get an acceptance. If you simultaneously submit, when a poem is accepted by one journal you must inform the other journals. I recommend simultaneously submitting if they allow it. The journals will tell you in their guidelines.

Sally: At what point in your writing life did you realize that your work was ready to be published?

Jack: I had a lot of encouragement from friends in the [Connecticut Writing Project](#), and started out with a few pieces in newsletters and lower stakes publications. When a professor at Sarah Lawrence College took a poem for a magazine he was guest editing, I became determined to see if I could get something published by someone who did not know me.

Sally: What are your thoughts, in general, about publishing?

Jack: Publishing is great when it works, and it's very discouraging when it doesn't. I've sometimes discouraged newer writers from publishing because it's so easy to fall into

measuring success only by publication, and forgetting the joy of the process of just writing for yourself, and maybe a few friends.

Sally: Tell us a little about your website, <http://www.jackpowers13.com/poetry/>. Some writers have websites, and others don't. Why did you choose to create one?

Jack: My website was originally a teacher website with class assignments, and handouts. I added a poetry section and, after I retired, I switched the emphasis to writing. I use Wordpress. I enjoy finding ways to improve it (I just added a page of videos of myself reading). I like to imagine that I have visitors (it's important that I don't visit the data page, and find out otherwise!).

Now, the beginnings— and poetry throughout your life...

Sally: Did you write poetry as a child, or did it come to you later in life?

Jack: I hated poetry in high school and college, but that's because we just tore poems apart and the teacher as expert-reader told us what they meant. It felt more like a guessing game. But as a desperate young teacher, I went to **Bard College's Institute of Writing and Thinking** to learn how to teach writing. They insisted I write with my students, and they provided great models. Writing essays turned into writing fiction, and that turned into writing poetry. So I'm a latecomer.

I didn't really commit to poetry until the late 90s when my life got so busy that I didn't have time to keep anything more than a poem in my head. Eventually, I went back to **Sarah Lawrence College** for a poetry MFA.

Sally: I know you had that unpleasant and most unfortunate experience in high school, but did you have any other teachers along the way who were particularly encouraging, and who guided you?

Jack: Many. Faye Gage, the Director of the **Connecticut Writing Project** was very encouraging. She challenged me to push myself. I was fortunate to have a number of great professors in the MFA program at **Sarah Lawrence College**: Myra Goldberg, Tom Lux, Joan

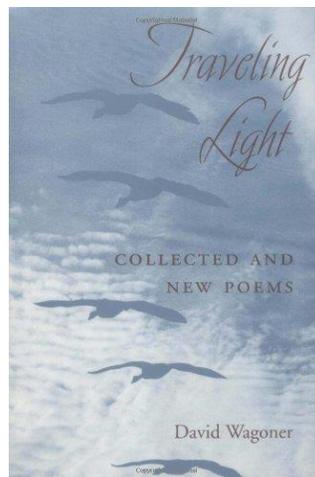
Larken, Marie Howe, Dennis Nurkse. One professor, Mark Wunderlich, began class by saying, "My job is to make you each stranger in your own way," and I stole that to use with my own students. Our strangeness is what we have to offer the world. I later took great courses from Tony Hoagland, Terrance Hayes and Jennifer Franklyn. I love to take classes, and I've been fortunate to have some great teachers.

Sally: You have your MFA in Poetry. Please elaborate on your formal training as poet.

Jack: I was an art major in college, and came into poetry and writing through the backdoor as a teacher. I still feel like there's so much I don't know. But I have learned a lot from **Bard** and the **Connecticut Writing Project**, and from some good classes and workshops at Fairfield University. I studied more formally at **Sarah Lawrence College**; first in fiction, and then in poetry. I went to conferences or took classes every summer at Manhattanville, Sarah Lawrence College, Wesleyan University, The Fine Arts Work Center, Poets House, Sunken Garden, and elsewhere. Looking at this list, you'd think I would have learned more by now! I've been taking classes for the last couple of years at the Hudson Valley Writers Center: poetry with Jennifer Franklin, and now fiction with Beth Hahn.

Sally: What would you say is a major poem that you read that brought you to poetry? A poem that struck you, and made you realize you were a poet. At what point in your life did this happen, if it did happen?

Jack: I remember reading "My Physics Teacher," by David Wagoner at Bard and thinking, *Poems can be funny? I could do that!*

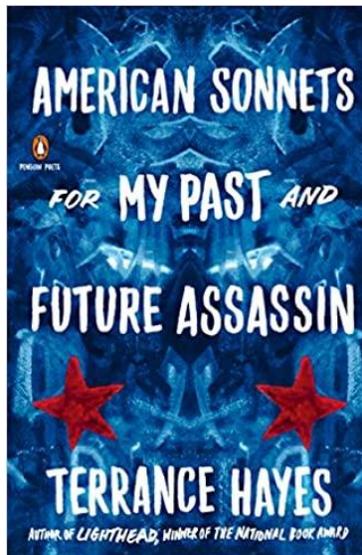


["My Physics Teacher," David Wagoner](#)

But I thought of myself as a fiction writer and essayist until I took a poetry craft course with Joan Larken at Sarah Lawrence College. I took the class because I knew I needed to work on my language (many poems are like mini-lessons on language). We read so many great poems; we read them as writers, and then wrote our own. I started to think, *I could hang with the poets*. I followed that class with another poetry craft class with Marie Howe, and I was hooked. I remember two students in Marie's class reading aloud together their own translation of Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo." It was like a prayer.

Sally: Who are your favorite poets, and why? What are a few of your favorite poems?

Jack: I love Tony Hoagland, Kim Dower, Larry Levis, Denise Duhamel, David Kirby. My most recent and as yet unpublished collection, *Still Love*, found inspiration in Terrance Hayes's *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*.



I recently read Jane Kenyon's "Let Evening Come" again and was just as wowed as I was the first time I read it.

Same with Naomi Shihab Nye's "A Valentine for Ernest Mann." I love Billy Collins, but I write terrible poems if I write after reading him. It looks so easy when he does it. There are so many great poets writing today.

Sally: In your Art & Text bio, you state that you were a teacher by profession, but have recently retired? Could you tell us about your teaching career?

Jack: I retired a year ago last June after teaching for 38 years at **Joel Barlow High School**.



I taught special education, English, math, and directed the Writing Center. It was a great place to work. My bosses always encouraged me to go out and learn new things, and bring them back to share. I was the assessment guy, and then the writing guy. The last few years, I was the emotional intelligence guy; or, more accurately, I was one of three or four teachers learning and sharing new ideas. And in special ed., each new student pushed me to learn something new. It was a lot of fun, and I worked with so many great people who taught me a lot. I think I may have timed my departure perfectly. I miss the kids and my colleagues, but the piles of papers and IEPs, not so much. And I get exhausted just thinking about teaching in what my friend Tim called a hybrid schedule dual cohort synchronous virtual learning environment!

Sally: While teaching, how did you find the time to write? Do you—and did you always—have a set schedule for writing? Or do you—and have you always—allow inspiration to catch you?



Jack: While teaching, I wrote with my students. I wrote during the summer, or whenever I had a few minutes. I learned early on that I needed deadlines and feedback to make the time to write, so a few fellow Connecticut Writing Project teachers and I started a writing group in 1986. We've been meeting monthly since. Norwalk resident Del Shortliffe is the only other original member, and Bill McCarthy (another Norwalk resident) has been with the group for at least ten years. Some years that group was all that kept me writing. Waiting for inspiration rarely works, but if I'm writing regularly, I increase my odds by having a pen in my hand when inspiration arrives. When stuck, I fall back on free-writing, especially some of the techniques I learned from Diana Goetsch in her *Intensive Free-writing* course. That helps me stay open to surprise.

Sally: Now that you are retired, would you call yourself a fulltime writer? A poet never retires! Are you happy for more time for writing? How has retirement changed your writing, and your writing life?

Jack: I'd call myself an aspiring fulltime writer. I get up every morning and write for a couple of hours. Most of it's crap, but occasionally I stumble onto something. This gift of time is a huge change, and I'm trying to take advantage of it.

Sally: You also write essays, and short stories. Please share with us how you maintain a balance between the three genres.

Jack: I don't. When I first retired, I tried alternating days between writing poems and revising a novel, but I wasn't very efficient at either. Gradually, the poetry took over. When I finished my new poetry manuscript, I switched to just fiction. I'm taking a short-fiction course with Beth Hahn.

Sally: How important is poetry in your daily life?

Jack: I've never thought about that. I get a poem each day from *Poets.org*, and another from *Rattle*. Though I probably only love one in ten, it's worth the search. Good poems work like jokes for me. There's an aha! moment that's almost like a laugh. And even some of the poems I don't love get me thinking. Poet friends share poems they love and often I start researching a poet after I come across a poem I love. Good poems are little nuggets (or big nuggets), little gifts that go beyond the pleasure of reading them to make me think about a moment or a place or even an issue in a different way. They're like brain supplements.

Sally: Do you feel it is important to instill poetry in children? Why?

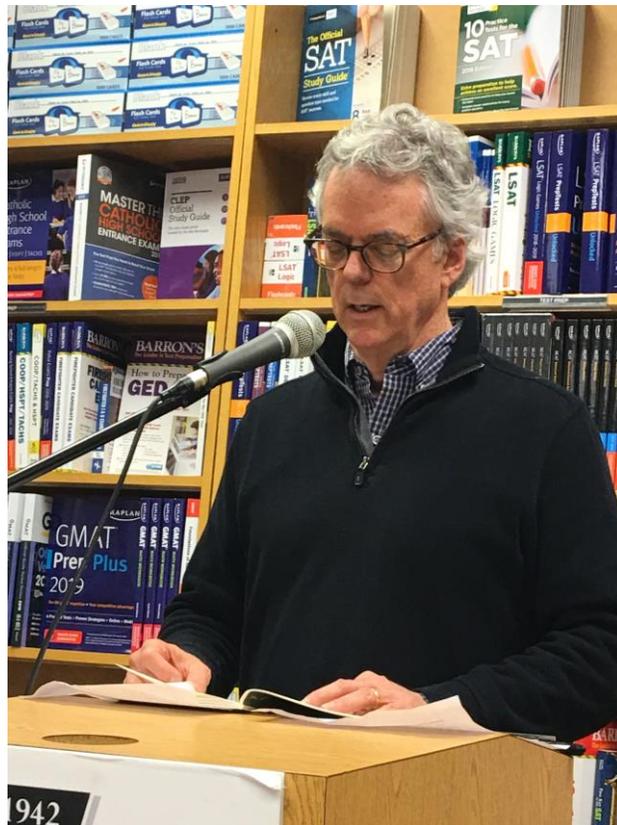
Jack: I hope children can find poems they like, can see their lives in poems, and see themselves as creators as well as consumers. I'm not sure I love the word "instill." I wanted to help my students discover poetry as a source of joy and challenge and connection. Like all good literature, poems can help them see into lives different from their own, and find connections. Plus, they're fun to write!

Sally: Please share with us a little about your interests outside of poetry!

Jack: I live in Fairfield with my wife, Anne; our golden retriever, Charlie; and our ragdoll cat, George. Our three kids are scattered down the east coast: Zak, a teacher in Philadelphia; Will, a software engineer in Washington, DC; and Erin, a pediatrician in Atlanta. I live vicariously through their adventures. I also do a lot of yoga, walking and cycling, and I'm enjoying a chance to read voraciously again since I retired. I used to love to travel, and hope to do that again someday.

Sally: If there is anything else you would like to share with us, please do! We are so happy to be talking with you on the Poetry Page!

Jack: I think you know everything now. The mystery is gone. Thanks for asking!



Now, three of Jack's poems...

LAST ACT

I laughed with my doctor at his patient who said,
I want you to be my last doctor, imagining him checking that
off his list of last barber, last mailman, last mechanic –
a dark laugh that ended in a shared sigh at his audacity.
And ours. At 65, I've started thinking about my last dog,
my last house. I figure I could have ten good years left
before the marbles go. Time enough if used well
for one last act. One new start. But no time to lollygag.

My yoga teacher says, *Breathe. Just be.*
My writing teacher says, *Cut 'lollygag.'* Instead I look up
synonyms and linger in the *shilly-shally* of now,
the *dawdle*, *crawl*, the *tarry*, *drag* and *lag*,
the assonance of *last act*, of sound slowing time, laughing
at *marbles* and *audacity*, of planning a *last* anything.

Jack Powers

BONEHEAD

My mother signed notes in my high school lunch bag,
Love, Bonehead, long after we could talk of love.
She laughed at the sound of the word, the cartoon image.
And Love elevated Bonehead to a tender ache
that reached across the gap from weary mother to leery teen.
She hated lousy and meal, but to her bonehead
sounded gentler than idiot, dope, moron, cretin – although
dope acquired a softness when my father,
deep in his dementia, asked, after a long day of song
and cake and tears from my five year old, Whose birthday is it?
And my mom, a skeleton herself after a year and a half
of waking to find him dressed in three polo shirts
on damp July nights or hiding the markers so he'd stop
writing names on the photos of the grandchildren, said,
It's Will's, ya dope, and we all laughed at the exhausted
appropriateness. Too tired for Bonehead, she took it
up a notch and we all appropriated the word to use
when loved ones wore us down to the bone.

Jack Powers

OLD

A thousand yawns from now
when I am a bent question mark
and the children are busy living

and a push of a buzzer
summons the night nurse,
I will drag my oxygen tank trolley

resistant like a leashed mutt
across sticky linoleum
to peek between drawn blinds

and squint to find Orion,
the Big Dipper and Polaris
and remember a beach in Rhodes

where stars littered the sky
like luminescent river stones
so close

we could pluck them
from the heavens,
offer them to each other

and the universe
seemed – like our lives –
to roll on forever.

We had few questions
and the sky seemed full
of answers, some hurtling
like arrows into the future.

Jack Powers

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