

LISA STEINMAN, *Kenan Professor of English and Humanities, is a critic and poet whose works include A Book of Other Days, All That Comes to Light, and Made in America: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poets. She is the founder and editor of Hubbub magazine and was a Rockefeller scholar-in-residence at the Poetry Center of the 92nd Street Y in New York City. Steinman feels a coherence between who she is as a person and who she is as a professor: "I work in community arts organizations, I edit a small poetry magazine, I'm married to a poet/bookseller. Many of the things I do don't feel like they're my job, but they all do tend to have this sort of center."*

"I grew up in Storrs, Connecticut, which is a part of Connecticut most people don't know. It's very rural and in fact I find it amusing, having moved to the Northwest, when people say, 'Oh, you're from the urban East Coast.' The town I grew up in had lots of cows, no movie theatre, no big grocery store, no traffic lights except for one where you had to push a button to get it to turn red. I expect that had something to do with my becoming a poet.

"It's peculiar when you look back and see that what you've turned out to be makes a lot of sense. I didn't know what I wanted to be at the time. I had and still have many interests; it's simply that they seem to add up to what I've become.

"All four of my grandparents were immigrants, and my parents needed to find solid professions. My father was a mathematician, but he had gone to Yale as an undergraduate majoring in English. I suspect he might once have wanted to be a writer and my mother a visual artist, but in their day, with their backgrounds, you didn't come from a family of non-English speakers, or factory workers, and decide to run off to bohemia. Still, they both loved literature and there was always literature around the house. There were always books. I learned to read very early, partly because they read to me.

"I also spent a lot of my childhood in a blur, because I'm legally blind without corrective lenses. Because I could read, my parents didn't discover I needed glasses till third grade. I remember when I got my first glasses, I looked up and I thought, 'Oh, leaves *do* show on trees.' I knew you found them on the ground, but I never realized you could look up and see individual leaves. So, quite aside from coming from a very small town, the turning in on one's self turns out to be something one does if one can't see the world.

"I've always loved reading poetry, and I have always loved making poems. I have always done that. I know that for some people, reading poetry is an acquired taste. But there is this odd subset of

people who have somehow always found poetry nourishing, who just say 'yes' to poetic language. And, of course, the more you read, the more you speak poetry. It's almost like a language. Not elitist or esoteric if you've immersed yourself in it, but not the kind of thing you read on airplanes or that you see on billboards—although I suspect advertising is applied poetry, that is, a very succinct use of language, on the level of sound as well as content and image, that hits you all at once. (Of course, advertisements are trying to sell something and poems aren't . . . at least not in an economic sense.)

"One of the reasons I teach poetry is I'm still trying to find a non-embarrassing description of what it is that poems do. What is it in that very strenuous, very precise use of language; when does it become poetry? I don't think that poems carry some sort of universal truth. But I still do think there are good poems and bad poems. Even some poems I don't like are good poems, and I try to find what precisely it is about poetry's use of language that I value.

"Teaching is a very privileged position, in a way. I get to talk with people, especially at Reed College, who love poetry or are fascinated by it, or, even if they're not, come willing to be. I get to spend my time and support myself by talking to people about what I love. That kind of nonalienated labor is not easy to find. I also love ideas, and for me they're very much part of my own poetry, what sparks it, what I hope comes out





of it. I teach other things, too. I love thinking about the world, thinking about what leads to intellectual work, thinking of intellectual activity as work, and Reed College allows that in a very particular way.

"I rarely teach creative writing. I teach reading poetry, which I think always feeds would-be writers. If you look at how another poem works, it can give you tools for expressing your own poetry. Throughout my college career, occasionally people would look at what I was writing and say, 'Ah, you've been reading Yeats.' And it was interesting to me that another writer could look at something that had nothing to do with any Yeats subject and say, just from the way the language sounded, 'You must have been reading Yeats.' And that's the kind

of thing an introductory poetry class can give any young writer. I also think there is no way of telling who's going to become a good poet. People may start with the enthusiasm and not with, say, the craft. And they can gain the craft. Or, people may start with, for whatever reasons, an unerring sense of craft and lose interest. Some of the best student writers may not go on to become writers, because they may find they have other things that they want to give themselves to. But anybody that keeps working has a shot at becoming a real writer.

"I'm not sure I would have as many interesting things to think about without my students. They keep me intellectually alive, sometimes make me go back to ground zero to rethink things. Some

of them are smarter than I am, and they are always incredibly sweet about it, which is what I love about Reed students. I just finished teaching a class with 42 people in it, much larger than normal. And all but four talked throughout the semester. We found a space where we could sit around a fireplace, all 42, and there were very active conversations and whole days where I just faded into the background. Those are the exhilarating classes, for me.

"The emphasis at Reed on students developing their ideas orally, thinking on their feet, occupies a central place in Reed's consciousness. And they work at it. It's in ways like learning how to ride a bicycle. It looks very easy, once you've got it, but you need to start with training wheels and you need to wobble a little bit. And then you can look down and say, hey, I'm riding this bicycle—or doing an interpretation of a poem. In that sense, nothing I could do by standing up in front of a room and lecturing would give them that practice. The conference method really is the best possible way—that and writing papers—for students to become critics and writers.

"Last night I went home and opened a card from someone who went to Reed for only a year and a half, but I've stayed in touch with her for years. I always think of her as a Reddie, and I think she may too. She left to go to art school, and she's done many interesting things as a visual artist—making books as art objects, for example. And I think what she was thinking about in her Reed classes helped inform her art. On the other hand, we often get people who transfer here from technical institutes in the arts, who are looking not just for intellectual stimulation but for that sense of where they fall historically—so they have something to make art about.

"I love the fact that there are Reedies doing many different things. One former student is now a cook, another is a newscaster; there are a couple who make documentaries, and there are a few who are, in fact, poets."