Arts & Humanities

Feeding the Meter

The improbable origins of poet Keith O’Shaughnessy's first book.

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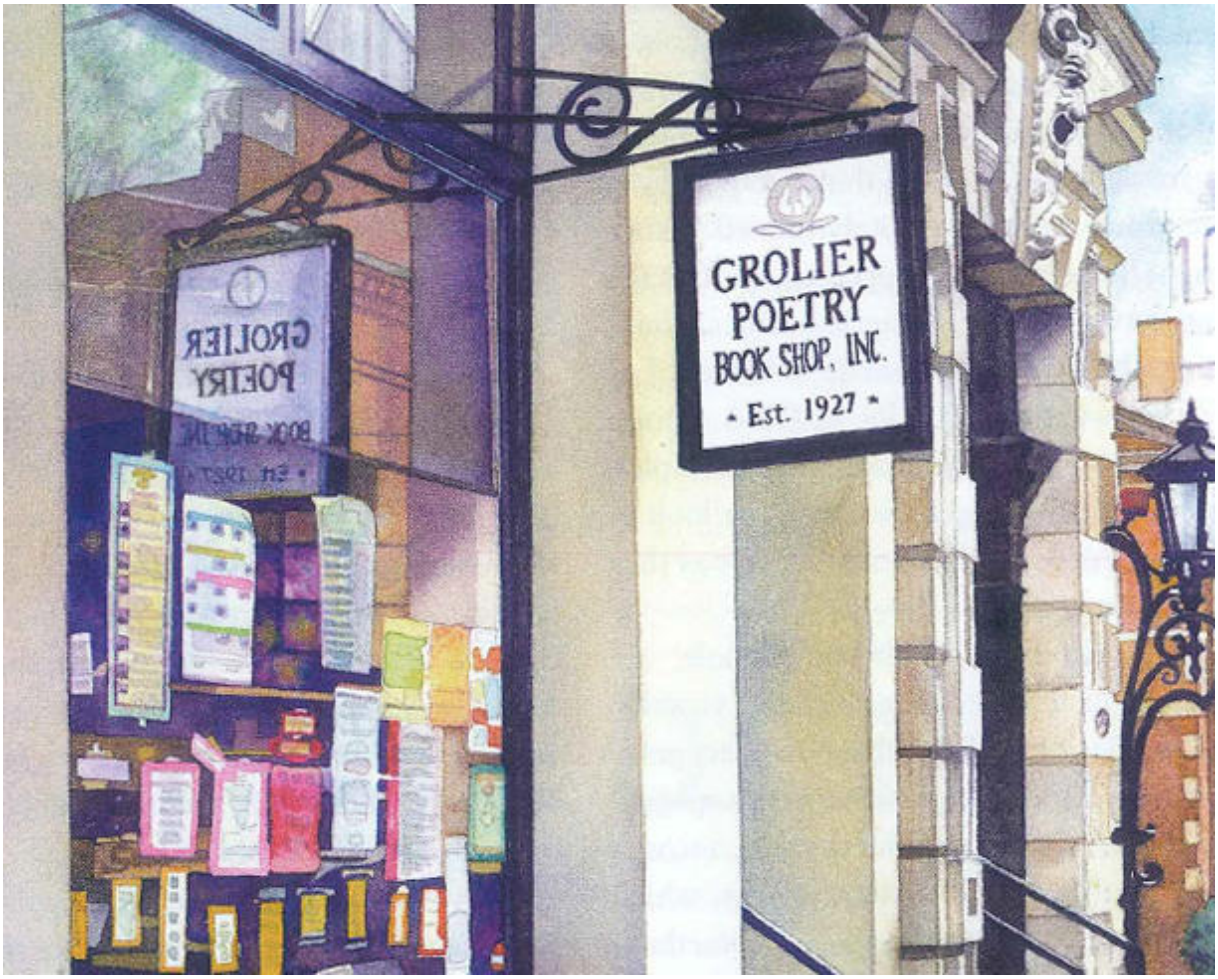

Irena Roman

The blogger Andrew Sullivan recently wrote that, under his editorship, the *New Republic* had once inadvertently published a poem whose last line read, “This is dummy copy.”

“The truly tragic thing,” Sullivan remembered, “is that the only reader complaint we got was from the poet himself.”

Definitions of the verb *publish* include “produce for distribution” and “make generally known,” but in the case of poetry it usually means only the former. Poets know better than to expect their published work to find much of an audience, let alone to provoke any kind of response.

Which is why Keith O’Shaughnessy ’94CC was so surprised when he came home one day in late 2009, not long after the appearance of his second-ever published poem, “Il Mio Tesoretto,” in *Columbia Magazine*, and found a fan letter in his mailbox. He was even more surprised when he discovered the identity of its author — Ifeanyi Menkiti ’65JRN, owner of the famous Grolier Poetry Book Shop in Harvard Square. “Essentially he praised the poem and said, ‘I want to have your books in my shop,’” O’Shaughnessy recalls. “But I had no books.”

That would change quickly, and dramatically. Over the next year and a half, the prolific O’Shaughnessy published three poetry chapbooks — short, saddle-stapled collections. As they appeared, he passed them along to Menkiti, who read them with growing admiration and stocked them in his store. Then, last summer, Menkiti called O’Shaughnessy and surprised him yet again. “He told me, ‘I’m creating a prize, and you’re winning it.’” *Incommunicado*, O’Shaughnessy’s first full-length book of poems, arrives this month from the brand-new Grolier Press as the winner of the inaugural Grolier Discovery Award.

It’s an improbable story — but then, both of its principals are improbable people. O’Shaughnessy grew up in Princeton, New Jersey, the son of a prominent lawyer, and attended the elite Lawrenceville School and Columbia. Now 40, graying at the temples, and unconventionally handsome, he is finishing his dissertation on Shakespeare at Drew University. He still lives in Princeton, and still dresses preppily, in natty sport coats with pocket squares and colorful scarves. (“He looks like he just walked out of a Scott Fitzgerald novel,” his friend and poetry mentor Rachel Hadas says.) But for years O’Shaughnessy has commuted every weekday to Camden, where he teaches five English courses per semester at Camden County College. He says he feels more at home among its first-generation college students than he does at writers’ conferences or cocktail parties. He used to drink and smoke but doesn’t do either anymore; mostly, he just teaches and writes.

His poetry is as impeccable and sui generis as he is. In *Incommunicado*, he uses the dislocation felt by an American in Mexico as a way of writing about larger estrangements — from language, from others, from one's self. His lines are simultaneously earnest and playful, austere and effusive, direct and multivalent. Sentences can spill across dozens of lines without losing their grammatical coherence or sense of trajectory:

> Into the Sun's *tequila* fever, out of
> the Moon's
>
> *kahlua* lunacy, the blood-drunk
> offerings charge
>
> through the streets' crated barricades,
> neither at *margarita* capes
>
> nor toward *sangria* scarves, but from
> the *absinthe* phantoms
>
> of cowed steer, grazing fat on the ranch,
> while the pricked stampede
>
> drives on, with sheepish oxen, for
> goatish mules, in the mad glory
>
> of brute sacrifice, to its own wild
> feast's malediction.

"I just love the freshness of his writing, the boldness, the inventiveness, the play with language," Menkiti says. "So many poets are tentative, but there's a sense of confidence in Keith's writing. It's very much his own voice, something that has taken possession of him."

Menkiti was born and raised in Nigeria, and came to the United States in 1961 on a scholarship from Pomona College. While there, he received the English department's top prize for a paper about the poetry of Ezra Pound. That made a huge impression on him — that his name, accent, and skin color didn't distract the professors from the merit in his work. "I think that at some level, ever since then, I've associated poetry with integrity," he says. He went on to earn a master's in journalism from Columbia, another in philosophy from NYU, and a PhD in philosophy from Harvard,

where John Rawls was his thesis adviser. Since 1973, he has taught full-time at Wellesley College, but his enthusiasm for poetry has never waned. When he learned that the Grolier, one of only two all-poetry bookstores in the country and a Harvard Square landmark since 1927, was in danger of closing in 2006, he bought it. “It’s a sort of rescue operation,” he says.

He now spends several afternoons a week surrounded by poetry, and it’s rare for a poet he has never heard of to stun him the way that O’Shaughnessy did. It’s even rarer, he says, for him to write a fan letter. “I know myself very well, and that’s out of character for me.”

In the future, he plans to make the Grolier Discovery Award a more traditional open competition, with entry fees and blind judging. “With Keith’s book, we’ve set the bar high for future winners,” he says. O’Shaughnessy is grateful for that sentiment, but even more grateful for the unusual way his book came into being: not by surviving a process of elimination but by speaking to a reader.

“Ifeanyi has some fairly radical views about contemporary poetry, which I tend to share — about how mechanically professional so much of it has become,” O’Shaughnessy says. “I look at the winning books that I get as consolation prizes from those contests, and they’re not even the same species as mine. This manuscript would never win a fair fight in a competition. That’s why I’m so grateful to Ifeanyi. He likes my book for the same reasons I like it.”

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