

The Death of a Poet

By Geoffrey Dunn

A great American poet is dead.

William "Bill" Everson, known during much of his career as the Dominican monk Brother Antoninus, passed away June 3 [1994] at his rustic cabin he dubbed Kingfisher Flat, just north of Santa Cruz on the California Coast. He was 81.

An internationally acclaimed literary figure and printer, Everson served as poet in residence at the University of California at Santa Cruz during the 1970s and early 1980s. He was a mentor not only to a generation of young Santa Cruz writers, but also to a thriving community of handset printers throughout Northern California.

In 1991, Everson was honored as Artist of the Year by the Santa Cruz County Arts Commission. Before an overflowing crowd at the county government center, the buckskin-draped Everson, shaking violently from advanced Parkinson's disease and sipping occasionally from a bottle of Jack Daniels, read from his body of work. "I love you," he yelled to the adoring crowd at the conclusion of his reading. "Now go home!"

Born in Sacramento in 1912, Everson was raised by his Christian Science parents--both printers--on a farm near Selma in the San Joaquin Valley. During the Depression, he attended Fresno State College, but soon dropped out to devote his life to poetry after discovering the works of Robinson Jeffers. Everson published his first book of verse, *We Are the Ravens* in 1935. During World War II, he declared himself a conscientious objector and was placed in a series of work camps in the Pacific Northwest, where he first learned the art of handset printing and where he also completed *The Residual Years*, which brought him national attention.

After the war, Everson joined the San Francisco Renaissance movement of poets and anarchists surrounding Kenneth Rexroth. In 1951, following his second failed marriage, he entered the Dominican Order. Donning the traditional Dominican robe and hood, he was a colorful and widely respected figure in the Beat literary movement for nearly two decades.

In 1969, having fallen in love with his third wife, Susanna Rickson, Everson renounced his Dominican calling. Two years later he took a position at UCSC, where he taught a popular course called "Birth of a Poet" and founded the University's Lime Kiln Press. He also established himself as an important literary theorist with the publication of *Archetype West: The Pacific Coast as a Literary Region*.

Although virtually incapacitated in recent years by the nervous disorder that ultimately took his life, Everson never lost his zeal for the written word. He was at work on an epoch biographical poem, "Dust Shall Be the Serpent's Food," up until his death.

Sources

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