

Jean Claude Sylvester Pollet

Died: December 20, 2008

Sylvester died on Saturday, December 20, 2008 in Ellsworth, Maine. He was 69 years old.

He grew up in Woodstock, New York (the town that gave its name to the 1969 musical event some might remember that occurred 43 miles southwest in Bethel). He attended Kingston High School, where he was in the honor society, on the school newspaper, a staff member for the yearbook, debated, and participated in dramatics. He was also on the track team.

Sylvester graduated with our class in June 1961, but somehow eluded mention in the Aegis. An online obituary on our class website memorializes him as a poet, publisher, editor, teacher, sailor and Buddhist practitioner.

After Dartmouth, Sylvester moved to Maine in 1971, where he lived with his wife Majo Keleshian. In 1985, while living in East Holden, Maine, he earned his M.A. degree in English from the University of Maine in Orono 18 miles away.

He was teaching creative writing at the University of Maine in 1986, and contributed a poem — as his reflection — for our 25th Reunion Yearbook in that year. In its entirety, his poem reads:

Approaching a mountain
not in the window view,
the winning name,
(this “Flying Moose”), more

A particular yellow birch
that takes some finding

and not just that,
which could be pinned
44° 36' N/68° 37' W
just north of Gott Brook

if, that is,
time were too given
(the birch not being there forever,
1939 say, -1978, at least)

but, as I say, it's not just that
approximation in space and time,
there's the matter of leaving tracks,

growing somehow
out of particular granite boulder

and in sufficient numbers

as the deer have, moving through soft snow
in the days of the thaw
and how you can see their tracks now
frozen at the bottom of each hole
3" down, set in blue ice,

how, if you went there soon
you could lift one out & take it home,
or, for that matter,
one of mine.

One can track Sylvester's path through the Maine woods over the years. As noted, he lived in East Holden in 1986, and was still living there 10 years later in 1996 (according to the 35th Reunion Directory). By 2001 he had moved to Ellsworth, 18 miles east towards the coast, which is where he was living when he passed away.

Sylvester won writing prizes at Dartmouth, an anonymous reviewer in the Alumni Magazine reports in a blurb review of one of the first collections of his poetry, "Entering the Walking-Stick Business," (Brunswick, Maine; Blackberry, 1982). The reviewer says this about Sylvester's collection of poems: "... it reflects the landscape and mode of life Down East — spare, laconic, sometimes bleak, always looking you, and the world, straight in the eye. There is celebration and there is mourning, and a tone of voice which suggests someone who deals principally with life's essentials."

For about ten years Sylvester also brought to life the very unusual craft of publishing "chapbooks," which in his case contained poetry. Wikipedia describes chapbooks as "a generic term to cover a particular genre of pocket-sized booklet, popular from the sixteenth through to the later part of the 19th century. ... The term chapbook was formalized by bibliophiles of the 19th century, as a variety of ephemera (disposable printed material), popular or folk literature. It includes many kinds of printed material such as pamphlets, political and religious tracts, nursery rhymes, poetry, folk tales, children's literature and almanacs."

Our classmate Tom Conger recalls that Sylvester's chapbooks — called "Backwoods Broadides" — "came out about every six weeks, on 8.5 x 14 paper, folded twice (nicely separating the columns). He was apparently connected to many contemporary poets worldwide, and got clearance to publish their works, often in their native language (must have driven the typesetters mad), then translated them. He published some pretty good stuff, with the occasional yawner.

But he stuck to it. Finally shut down the operation in order to move on to other endeavors.”

Sylvester published another book of poetry, “Sagetrieb,” in 1992. Both his books are available through Amazon.com. The Alumni Magazine reviewer further notes that Sylvester “has had his work published in many journals and anthologies.”

Sylvester was survived by Majo and children Noelle and Matthew.