

For over four decades poet Larry Fagin has delivered no-nonsense writing advice during private classes held in a setting that is decidedly unacademic: his own New York City apartment.

# The Glass Filter

I WAS LIVING IN NEW YORK CITY, eight months from earning an MFA in creative writing, when a friend suggested I take a class with the poet Larry Fagin. She said it would salvage an education from what we mutually agreed was a broken program. I'd stopped attending fiction workshops a month before, unable to sit through abstract critiques from a professor who either hadn't read submissions or didn't have time to write meaningful comments. Many of my classmates seemed more interested in explaining what they thought literature should or shouldn't be, instead of investigating the problems a particular story presented. The blanket support the program offered seemed more damaging than helpful to most of us—especially those, including me, who simply needed to be told that our manuscripts were lousy and our best bet for writing something of substance would be to throw them out and start over.

The school allowed graduate students to take one extension class per semester at no extra cost. I was paying my own way—working two jobs, plus a work-study gig in the audiovisual department—and was bent on getting my money's worth. I was also exceptionally lost as a writer, trapped in a web of clichés, meaningless abstraction, and just about every pitfall a young writer can stumble into. So on a chilly Tuesday night in September 2003 I joined thirteen other students for the first session of Fagin's class Experimental Poetry.



BY PORTER FOX

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The poet was sitting at the far end of a rectangle of tables when I walked in—handouts, briefcase, scarf, and jacket heaped beside him. He waited for us to take off our hats and gloves and open our notebooks before addressing the group.

“None of us will ever be famous,” he said.

The woman to my right set her pen on the table. The clock ticked. Fagin looked cheerfully around the room, then assigned our first exercise: Make a list of five questions about writing. As a fiction student I already felt out of place, so I watched in dread as Fagin picked up my list first and read it aloud:

“How do you have a successful writing career without selling out?” Then he said, “Career.... Carrreeeeeer. Kho-rreeeahhrrr. Korea.”

The class laughed. Fagin read my next question: “What do you need to know to be a great writer?”

“Everything!” he said gleefully.

For the next two hours he talked about ego, distraction, inspiration, Kenneth Koch, Michelangelo Antonioni, alien abductions, foot traffic in the East Village, the beginning of the end of the world in 1973, cats, strangeness, the Naropa Institute, and Jack Kerouac. He spoke slowly, choosing his words, always angling toward a larger idea—that writing is hard, there’s some magic in it, you can’t control the magic, once a work is in print it’s no longer yours. And when you give up the illusion of success

(he also called it “verticality”), you have a better chance of creating something interesting.

Some of Fagin’s anecdotes referred to his time with Jack Spicer’s circle of poets in San Francisco and later with the second generation of the New York School of poets, among them Ron Padgett, Ted Berrigan, Bill Berkson, and Aram Saroyan. He’d published most of them in his magazine and small press, *Adventures in Poetry*, starting in the late 1960s, and was very active in the downtown writing scene. He codirected the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s with Anne Waldman from 1971 to 1976, and founded Danspace, the dance program at St. Mark’s, in 1975 and directed it until 1980.

Fagin has authored or coauthored fifteen books of poetry—most recently, *Complete Fragments*, published this past spring by Cuneiform Press. Despite being a voluminous writer who overlapped several literary circles, he somehow managed to keep a low profile relative to most of his peers. As for his reputation among them, Allen Ginsberg, who lived down the hall from Fagin’s apartment for two decades, once said, “I don’t know of a better editor and teacher of poetry or prose.”

He doesn’t pull his punches in the classroom, and by our second meeting two students had dropped out. The following week—after a rant on academic brainwashing—there were ten of us left. Two weeks later, when we finally began working in earnest on our manuscripts, seven students remained, each of whom had canceled obligations on Tuesday nights so as not to miss a moment of the class.

Fagin’s knowledge of literature, art, and music is expansive and exhaustive. I’d only heard of a fraction of the poetry, fiction, and nonfiction books on his reading list—it was 935 titles long—and couldn’t put down the ones I read: James Schuyler’s *Alfred and Guinevere* (Harcourt, Brace, 1958), Michael Rumaker’s *Gringos* (Grove Press, 1967), and Jane Bowles’s *My Sister’s*

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*Hand in Mine* (Ecco Press, 1978), among others. He emphasized strangeness (not cuteness), the informal, the idea that the writer should keep the reader off balance and never allow the reader to be completely comfortable. He taught that you can save a poem by taking the poetry out of it. “Simple ideas in complex relationships,” was one of his mantras. He spoke of ellipses and the importance of oblique angles. He taught elliptically, too, explaining tension by describing a scene in an Alfred Hitchcock movie. Handouts included a list

of the Ten Best and Ten Worst Jobs in America, letters to customer-service centers, poems by former students, and Japanese children’s poems. Coming from my graduate program, where one teacher couldn’t remember the protagonist of the book we’d been studying all semester—much less our names—I realized that for the first time someone was actually trying to *teach* me something.

Toward the end of the semester Fagin asked if I’d like to study with him privately. He teaches poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and screenwriting to around thirty students either in his apartment or online (which he now promotes on his website, [larryfagin.com](http://larryfagin.com)). In eight weeks he’d already made my MFA experience worthwhile, so the following Wednesday I climbed the stairs at 437 East Twelfth Street, knocked on the door of his tenement walk-up, and stepped into the apartment where he’d been writing, editing, and teaching since 1969.

Fagin was sitting at a circular oak table editing a manuscript when I arrived. He didn’t look up. He pointed to the chair beside him. A few minutes later I handed him a sheaf of poems I’d written that summer—a Hail Mary



attempt to break out of the rut I was in. He looked at the first poem for some time. I waited, uncomfortable, sweating, vividly aware of what a terrible writer I was. He put the poem aside, flipped through the rest, and set them down.

“These aren’t poems,” he said. I nodded. He was right, of course. “They’re stories,” he said. For the next hour he removed line breaks and stitched sentences and paragraphs together. When he needed a line, I gave it to him and he inserted it. When he thought of one, he wrote it in the margin and looked up at me, eyebrows arched. The dialogue was good, he said, but the story line needed to be “skewed.” The reader should be unsure not only of what comes next, but sometimes of what just happened. Halfway through each piece he’d stop and say, “Aha!” and scribble a title at the top of the page: “Which Is More Powerful?,” “My Favorite Things,” “Dans La Manière De.”

By the end of the two-hour session we’d finished one story and had a good start on three others. I read the completed piece as I walked down the stairs. It was short, just a page and a half. A friend once told me that the greatest thing an MFA program can give you is

learning to finish something. For over a year in New York City I hadn’t finished a single story. Yet when I reached the sidewalk, I knew with more certainty than I’d ever known anything that this story was complete.

**F**AGIN is seventy-five years old. As a young man he had Dudley Moore’s narrow features and heavy-lidded eyes. He stood five-foot-eight, wore tailored pants and shirts, and kept his wavy dark hair formulaically unkempt. He is handsome and expressionless in photographs from that time, seemingly looking past the lens at something more interesting. Friends recall how instantly likable he was, with his wild sense of humor and breadth of interest and knowledge. “When he entered a room,” Padgett says, “it was if he might have owned it at some point. And he never left. They had to drag him out.”

His hair is snow-white now and he wears a thin gray beard, still dark under his chin. He wears Levi’s and running shoes almost every day. After nine years of mentoring and friendship, I can say he is the most generous, knowledgeable, and devoted teacher and writer I have ever met. Like Spicer,

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though, he's been known to join ranks with what Horace called the *irritabile vatium*, "the irritable race of poets." He refers to my generation—I was born in 1972—as "pod people" and believes that our lives, minds, writing, and art are programmatic. He can be impatient and curt in the classroom but never spiteful. He laments "the recent death of imagination," but has somehow retained an inexhaustible desire to teach, lead, create, and reveal.

*Complete Fragments* is the first non-collaborative book of Fagin's poetry to be published in over thirty years. The eighty-one prose poems take in philosophy, art, war, jazz, cartoon whales, Chinese emperors, shrunken heads, birds, poetry, identity, time, silence, sex, and death—the last two treated with sarcasm. Some of the poems were written spontaneously, and others deliberately; there are connections and correspondences but little conventional continuity. As David Shapiro says, "Larry Fagin's new work, like fine mosaic, is an essay, a threshold, and something like figures in a landscape blasted apart. Unlike Rimbaud's lush prose poems, which so many try to imitate, these engage in an aesthetic of deflation. They are the art of sinking while remaining solid." From *Complete Fragments*:

#### Unplanned Account

Everyone has a story. The mountain  
threw rocks at me.  
I stood up to it. At the top I built a  
shelf for my record.  
There was enough sky for another  
life, an abutment of  
air. Science itself authorizes blue,  
whoever comes along  
may have some. Up here one can  
appreciate the eye as  
an exposed part of the brain. That's  
Helga, the chick  
who shares my pad. She's not really  
orange, it's the  
reception. We're moving the aerial  
into the hall. I'm an  
emotional guy who lacks a cohesive  
point of view, and

Helga has an eating disorder. She's a  
monist. I can dig  
it. I mean, why did the universe go to  
all that bother?  
Bears drunk on honey wrestling with  
monkeys, elec-  
tric burgundy odd-toed ungulates,  
and the two-headed  
snake—one head for eating and  
drinking, the other  
just for thinking.

Fagin is the antithesis of a name-dropper, neglecting to mention—and sometimes denying—that he played a part in the New York School movement. He talks about the past in a dismissive tone that masks his regret that some people, ideas, scenes, and times are gone. (He quotes from a letter Gary Snyder wrote to Kerouac in 1958: "Where did the great love we put out for them go?") He rarely schedules readings and seems disinterested in how he will be remembered as a literary figure.

So it took a few years, nine to be exact, for me to ask him in any detail about his past. I eventually learned that he was born in New York City—in the Far Rockaway neighborhood of Queens—on July 21, 1937. He lived in a three-story apartment building with his parents and maternal grandparents on the corner of Mott and Frisco. "I've been told that I take after my grandfather," he says. "He was from Budapest and had a wicked sense of humor. He worked for the Roosevelt administration in some minor capacity. He was a ward heeler and sold real estate and insurance. Sometimes he'd visit a housewife during the day, ask her to cook her husband's favorite dish for dinner, then go back that night to sell the guy life insurance."

His father took a job managing a construction firm in Los Angeles in 1942, and the family, grandparents included, moved to Burbank. Fagin's parents were generous and easygoing and, after the birth of his sister, he was left largely to himself. He explored the

neighborhood on his Schwinn with his pals and hitchhiked into Hollywood to go to the movies at Grauman's Chinese Theatre. His gang of roughneck kids wiggled under the electrified fence surrounding the back lots of Warner Bros. at night to play on the fake pirate ships used in the old Errol Flynn movies. Or they'd sneak onto W. C. Fields's property in Toluca Lake and swim in his pool when the great man was on the road.

In 1952, Lou Fagin accepted an offer to work for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Salzburg, Austria, where the family stayed for four years. They lived in a small villa at the foot of the Gaisberg and had a cook and a gardener. Fagin took the Orient Express to boarding school in Vienna and returned home on the weekends. Somewhere along the way he fell in with petty criminals selling black-market cigarettes and tobacco. He bought packs for twenty cents on extra ration cards at the PX, then sold them for seventy cents. At age fifteen he was flush with cash. He spent the money on books, clothes, and travel. That year he read Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, and *Tropic of Cancer*. Posing as an older man with "woman problems," he corresponded with Henry Miller. (Fagin: "What do I do about this girlfriend?" Miller (quoting Basho): "Throw away your crutches! Walk on!") A year later he began writing poetry and short fiction.

Fagin spent much of his late teens and early twenties traveling between Europe and the United States. He enrolled at Los Angeles City College in 1957, where he met poet David Meltzer. In West Germany, he took University of Maryland extension courses and continued to write. The following July he was in Paris, walking in the Tuileries, when he saw a young man carrying a turtle on his shoulder. It was Piero Heliczer, a poet, filmmaker, and proprietor of the Dead Language Press. Heliczer brought Fagin to the famous "Beat Hotel" at 9 Rue Gît-le-Cœur, where he met Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Gregory Corso,

and Peter Orlovsky. For the next few weeks, Fagin shared a tiny room there with two British students who were passing through town. Ginsberg, who became a lifelong friend, introduced him to Tristan Tzara, one of Fagin's heroes, and other poets, artists, and musicians. When he returned to New York City he met LeRoi and Hettie Jones and became friendly with some of the writers they published in their magazine, *Yugen*.

After graduating from the University of Maryland, Fagin moved to San Francisco to study literature at San Francisco State College. For the next four years he lived in a series of rooms and small apartments in North Beach. He reconnected with Meltzer and met Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, Richard Brautigan, and others. For a while he lived at 444 Columbus Avenue, across the street from Gino and Carlo's Bar, where a group of poets, including Spicer, gathered nightly. One afternoon Fagin was studying Peter Robinson's Chaucer in a booth, when Spicer, from an adjacent table, asked what he was reading.

"Troilus," Fagin said.

"Read from it," Spicer replied.

After nodding along with the verse for a few lines, Spicer recited a column and a half from memory. He asked Fagin to drop by the bar that night to meet some poets. Fagin did, and continued to do so for the next three years.

"Spicer's circle wasn't just a forum for Spicer," Fagin says, "but he was the most compelling person there. The bar talk was mostly gossip, baseball, and occasional literary references." He began to read the authors Spicer recommended: "Chaucer, Pope, early editions of Tolkien, Raymond Chandler, some science fiction, and all the Oz books."

Spicer wore white socks with his suit, sat in a corner booth, sipped brandy, and listened more than he spoke. "His thoughts on writing were straightforward," Fagin says. "It's very difficult to write a good poem. Beauty gets in the

way. Poets get in their own way." Spicer was a reluctant mentor, but proud and possessive of the group's work. When George Stanley moved from San Francisco to New York for a year, Spicer shunned him. "He didn't want poems to even cross over to the East Bay," Fagin says.

Spicer's letters in *After Lorca* deeply influenced Fagin's own poetry, especially the passages on writing: "The perfect poem has an infinitely small vocabulary." It took three years for Fagin to show Spicer his work, which by then had achieved the sparse, precise lyricism that Berrigan admired when he described the poet "whose formal concerns are powerful, whose elegance is self-effacing, and whose conclusions, however disastrous, are always accepted."

### The Skeleton

The skeleton has his own  
bathing suit

He enjoys swimming and being  
in the world

The xylophones are playing  
peacefully

The skeleton is dancing  
on the beach

We respect his frugality, neatness  
patience, tact

He's not just another  
skinny person

Spicer was a heavy drinker most of his life and by his last public reading, at the Berkeley Poetry Conference in 1965, he was in serious decline. At the conference, Fagin met Berrigan, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Lewis Warsh, Ed Sanders, and others whose work had been collected in Donald Allen's influential anthology *The New American Poetry* (Grove Press, 1960). When Spicer died on August 17, the poets at Gino and Carlo's dispersed. Fagin flew to London, where

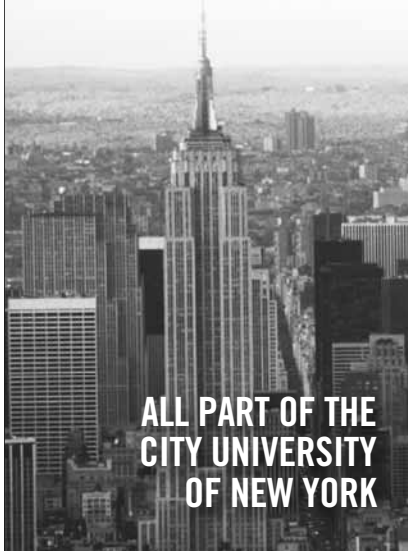
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his parents were living, then traveled through Europe. He ran into Waldman and Warsh at a party a year later. They'd been living in New York City's East Village and convinced him that it was the place to be. In the fall of 1967, Fagin packed his things and moved back to New York for the last time.

**I**'d never thought much about how teachers learned to teach, in the same way I never wondered how parents or priests learned to do what they do. They seemed ordained: To question how they got their post would be to question your faith in them. So I was surprised when I asked a fellow student how Fagin got such great results from his students—he'd just placed two in Bard College's highly competitive graduate writing program—and he told me that Fagin learned to teach from the best.

Around the time Fagin moved back to New York City, the Academy of American Poets created a program called Poets in the Schools, which brought guest writers to the city's public school system. Koch participated, then headed up a more intensive class the following year at P.S. 61 on East Twelfth Street, funded by Teachers & Writers Collaborative. Koch's book about teaching at P.S. 61, *Wishes, Lies and Dreams* (Chelsea House Publishers, 1970), launched the program into the national spotlight, with reviews in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Newsweek*, and *LIFE*, and an interview with Barbara Walters on *Good Morning America*.

State arts councils across the country started hiring poets to work in schools, and in New York City many of Fagin's peers began teaching. Fagin's first gig was with Bill Zavatsky at the Brooklyn Children's Museum in 1967. "The kids' poems were generally more exciting than most adult poetry being published, and that's probably still true," Fagin says. "We had a captive crew of seven- to ten-year-olds and started developing ideas like 'ingredients'—which were five words the kids had to use in a poem or in a story. We gave assignments, but we

also improvised a lot. Kids came up with some startling images and offbeat ideas. And every kid was published in magazines paid for by the school districts."

Fagin taught in all five of the city's boroughs off and on for eighteen years, usually sitting in on three forty-five-minute classes one day a week. The pay was seventy-five dollars a day—enough to live on back then, he says. He wrote a teachers guide with Padgett called "Book of Methods" in 1972, then a study of catalogue verse, *The List Poem* (Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1991).

In 1975 Ginsberg and Waldman asked Fagin to teach at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics was still uncredited and semi-improvised. There were dirt roads in Boulder then and no malls. Some of the poets lived in the venerable but (at the time) down-at-the-heels Hotel Boulderado, where faculty stayed up most of the night gossiping and gabbing about poetry, Buddhism, and teaching. (Though he never took Buddhist vows, Fagin considers himself a Buddhist—a "fellow traveler," he says.) In addition to Ginsberg and Waldman, the faculty included Burroughs, Corso, Fagin, Michael Brownstein, and Dick Gallup, as well as a rotating list of guest teachers: Creeley, Whalen, Robert Duncan, Clark Coolidge, Bernadette Mayer, Jack Collom, and Anselm Hollo.

Fagin spent every summer and a few winters in Boulder for the next ten years. He married Susan Noel, whom he met at Naropa, in 1980. When they returned to New York full-time a few years later, he brought what he'd learned to a growing roster of private students. "What had been missing for most of my students was one-on-one, in-depth personal attention. That kind of close study isn't available in a university setting. So I began 'piano lessons,' working with individuals of any persuasion and any age. What I tried to develop ultimately came down to mirroring my students.

"Most writers have been taught to write poetry and fiction the way it appears in books and magazines. Too

often what's left out is the most valuable thing of all: daily speech, how we actually talk. A lot of what passes for imaginative writing, especially poetry, is dominated by words and phrases the writer has never once said aloud. So it becomes literature. That language can be stuffy, brittle, false, unless it's counterbalanced by or mixed in with something more supple, offhand, *spoken*, strange. How do you teach strangeness? At least you can point it out."

I visited Fagin once a week during my last year of grad school. His apartment was always in a state of controlled chaos. Books, manuscripts, galleys, letters, and bills sat in neat stacks on the kitchen counter. The building was constructed in 1894; the paint was peeling and the pipes hissed. In the living room, three bookshelves held art books: Uccello, Kline, Guston, Watteau.

He edited on paper with a Blackwing 602 pencil. On his computer he used 10-point Adobe Garamond Pro font (14-point for titles), double spacing for the draft, and a 1.2-line spacing for the final copy. ("Single spacing makes me sick," he says.) He read slowly, tapping each word with the pencil, making check marks, question marks, and suggestions in the margins. He crossed out anything resembling sentimentality, melodrama, confession, or name-dropping. Modifiers lived on shaky ground. Metaphors were doomed.

He treated my stories like physical things during our sessions, speaking about them in medical, psychic, even Jungian terms. He said it was difficult for the writer to get any distance from himself. He spoke about myopia as if I had actually contracted it, instructed me to marinate a finished story for a few weeks "like a flank steak." He quoted Spicer's belief that Martians dictate poems from outer space and that a writer is like a radio: You need to fine-tune yourself, keep the airwaves clear of static (egotism) for the message to come through. He said that one of the hardest skills to learn is telling the difference between "what's in your head and what you put on paper," and prescribed read-

ing assignments that were so precise they seemed like drug prescriptions—and the results were often as transformative. I wasn't a true believer, though, until I lost a manuscript he'd edited and I asked him to edit it again. I found the original a month later and was amazed to see more than seventy-five identical line edits on both copies.

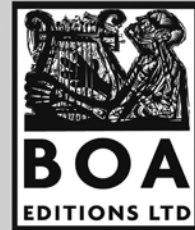
Fagin's lessons went beyond writing. We talked about art, film, history, philosophy, sports, and human relationships. Every few weeks he'd call to ask if I wanted to go to a movie or an art exhibit. We started a cineclub at my apartment with a half dozen other students and watched movies by Hitchcock, Ford, Ozu, and Cocteau—after pizza and a short lecture.

His relationship with some students was reciprocal. I installed a new air conditioner in his bedroom and invited him to a Red Sox game at Yankee Stadium, where he refused to stand for the national anthem and almost got us into a fight. I fixed doorknobs and windows in his apartment and counseled him through problems with his computer, cordless phone, bank, and remote control. Throughout, he constantly urged me to read more, think harder, write harder, and broaden my frame of reference.

"Some people equate the far left with the middle of the road," he says. "They can't tell the difference anymore. But I keep pushing the left because that's where all the surprise and excitement and strangeness is. You can't mandate strangeness, but it can be recognized in other people's writing."

**T**HERE is a glass filter between teacher and student that refracts information toward what a student needs. What I needed was to write something real, and to do that I needed real criticism, models, and a teacher I could trust. Every story I sent to literary journals before I started working with Fagin had been—justifiably—rejected. Two years after I started private lessons, every piece I sent out was published.

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In the fall of 2010, Fagin and I flew to Paris to see some of the old haunts he'd described to me. We went to Jardin du Luxembourg first, then took the Metro to Polidor, a favorite of James Joyce, Miller, and Ernest Hemingway. We were up early the next morning to drop by 9 Rue Gît-le-Cœur and then the old Surrealist café, Les Deux Magots. We found tiny Square Rapp, with its beautiful art nouveau lattice that afternoon, then went to a park bench near the Eiffel Tower where his wife once drew a portrait of him.

We stayed up late that night, talking to the new owner of Hôtel du Nord—where Marcel Carné made a film of the same name in 1938—now a chic bar near Canal Saint-Martin. Later still, we climbed out our hotel window onto a tiny balcony and looked at the moonlit roofs of the fifth arrondissement.

A few months after we returned to New York, Fagin looked down at a page in a book, saw the word *also*, and couldn't figure out what it meant

or how to say it. He underwent several tests that winter and in the spring had a stent implanted in an artery. When he was released from the hospital, he said he wanted to go to the ocean. We drove to my aunt's house in Hampton Bays, walked on the beach and cooked salmon on the grill. The next day he spent the morning working on his *Complete Fragments* manuscript. His plan called for eighty-one poems and he was on number seventy-nine. When I returned to the house, he'd finished the eightieth.

Later that winter we laid out a proof of the book's cover in Microsoft Word. I'm not a designer and had no idea what I was doing. He'd had me "freak" images onto countless chapbook covers over the years, though, so I inserted a drawing by Glen Baxter, and he placed the title. Then we jostled it around—"Stop moving so fast!"—until he held up his hand. He looked at the image for a moment, leaned close to the screen and said,

"Well, *that's* perfect!" Save. Print.

The galleys arrived from Cuneiform via e-mail last December. Fagin forwarded them to me and I read them late one night in bed. The poems were different from his earlier work. They were lyrical and sweeping. The humor was still there; so were the ellipses and strangeness. I stayed up for hours and read slowly. The experience was like deciphering a dream, with bits of recognizable information and giant leaps in between.

Fagin began making last-minute changes until, after two weeks, he was happy with the layout. Still, it had been three decades since his last book of poetry and he was apprehensive about the blurbs and some of the prepublication publicity. It was funny to hear him wonder aloud about how the work would be received. In an ironic twist, I realized that it didn't matter. The book was merely a book. There were poems in it. They came from outer space and no longer belonged to him. ∞



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