

Press release: My Fool's Errand
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“My Fool's Errand,” is a tribute to Dartmouth’s Ramon Guthrie, which will be performed in the Wren Room of Sanborn House on Sunday afternoon, May 25 at 3:00 by Wendell Smith, ’64.

Guthrie was a member of Dartmouth’s French department who taught a legendary course on Proust every year (excepting his time in the OSS from 1943 to 45) from the 30’s until his retirement in 1965. He was also part of the now mythic ex-patriot Paris of the 20s. This is Guthrie on Hemingway in his moveable feast:

The first time I saw him was at Stella's,
rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs. Apple cheeked manchild
right out of Satie’s *Enfance de Patagruel*.
Still married to Hadley. (Stella had just left Ford [Maddox Ford]
this party was to see if she herself
had any friends or if they were all Ford's.)

The last time I saw him was at
Robert Desnos' in the Rue de Seine.
He wanted me to meet the ambulances at Le Havre
and smuggle them across the Pyrenees.
(I kept myself available, phoned every day;
nothing ever came of it.)

By the time he joined the Dartmouth faculty in 1930 (rumor has it that he was nursing Sinclair Lewis through a drunk in Pomfret, Vermont when the French department needed reinforcement and he was handy) he had published two novels and two volumes of verse. He said that writing another novel seemed pointless once he had read Proust. During the 30s he devoted himself mostly to translation and teaching, but after the war he

resumed publishing verse with *Graffiti* in 1959, *Asbestos Phoenix* in 1968 and his masterpiece *Maximum Security Ward* in 1972.

Maximum Security Ward received excellent reviews:

the evocation of one man's stubborn struggle against an extinction ... By turns tenderly lyrical, even sentimental, and blackly better. ... A fascinating work, one of major character, *Maximum Security Ward* is like nothing else in contemporary poetry. – Louis Untermeyer, *Saturday Review*

... a deeply, heartbreakingly American book whose importance will become clearer and clearer as time passes. ... The spirit moving it is unappeasable and romantic, also ironic, rye and down to earth. ... It tells terrible, true stories which convey a depth of outrage at life. – Julian Moynahan, *New York Times Book Review*

But Guthrie was dying of bladder cancer and the complications of its treatment. Although his medical problems had provided the intensive care ward delirium that is the dramatic structure of his narrative, they sapped him of the energy needed to adequately promote his book and as a consequence he has largely been forgotten.

Smith won the Sidney Cox and American Academy of Poets prizes as a senior in 1965 and knew Guthrie through the Thursday Poets, an informal group mentored by Dartmouth's Prof. Belle Letters, Alexander Laing. He thinks that Ramon and *Maximum Security Ward* should become to 20th century American poetry what Melville and *Moby Dick* became to 19th century American fiction in the 1920s. Smith has performed stand-up in clubs and coffeehouses and was a founder of *The Proposition*, an improvisational revue that ran in Cambridge from 1968-73. His poetry has appeared in *Ibbetson Street*, *Constellations* and *The Kansas Quarterly* and elsewhere. He graduated from Boston University School of Medicine in 1984 on the 20th anniversary of his Dartmouth Class.