

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **Archie Randolph Ammons**

**- poems -**

**Publication Date:**

2012

**Publisher:**

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

## **Archie Randolph Ammons (18 February 1926 – 25 February 2001)**

Archie Randolph Ammons (February 18, 1926 – February 25, 2001) was an American poet. He wrote about humanity's relationship to nature in alternately comic and solemn tones.

### Life

Ammons grew up on a tobacco farm near Whiteville, North Carolina, in the southeastern part of the state. He served in the U.S. Navy during World War II, stationed on board the U.S.S. Gunason, a battleship escort. After the war, Ammons attended Wake Forest University, majoring in biology. Graduating in 1949, he served as a principal and teacher at Hattaras Elementary School later that year and also married Phyllis Plumbo. He received an M.A. in English from the University of California, Berkeley.

In 1964, Ammons joined the faculty of Cornell University, eventually becoming Goldwin Smith Professor of English and Poet in Residence. He retired from Cornell in 1998.

Ammons had been a longtime resident of Northfield, New Jersey, and Millville, New Jersey, when he wrote *Corsons Inlet* in 1962.

### Awards

During the five decades of his poetic career, Ammons was the recipient of many awards and citations. Among his major honors are two National Book Awards (in 1973, for *Collected Poems 1951-1971*, and 1993, for *Garbage*); the Wallace Stevens Award from the Academy of American Poets (1998); and a MacArthur Fellowship in 1981, the year the award was established. Ammons also had a school in Miami, Florida, named after him.

Ammons's other awards include a 1981 National Book Critics Circle Award for *A Coast of Trees*; a 1993 Library of Congress Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry for *Garbage*; the 1971 Bollingen Prize for *Sphere*; the Poetry Society of America's Robert Frost Medal; the Ruth Lilly Prize; and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1978.

### Poetic style

Ammons often writes in two- or three-line stanzas. Poet [David Lehman](http://www.poemhunter.com/david-lehman/) notes a resemblance between Ammons's terza libre (unrhymed three-line

stanzas) and the terza rima of [Shelley's](http://www.poemhunter.com/percy-byshe-shelley/) "Ode to the West Wind." Lines are strongly enjambed. Some of Ammons's poems are very short, one or two lines only, while others (for example, the book-length poems *Sphere* and *Tape for the Turn of the Year*) are hundreds of lines long, and sometimes composed on adding machine tape or other continuous strips of paper. His National Book Award-winning volume *Garbage* is a long poem consisting of "a single extended sentence, divided into eighteen sections, arranged in couplets".

Many readers and critics have noted Ammons's idiosyncratic approach to punctuation. Lehman has written that Ammons "bears out [T.S. Eliot's](http://www.poemhunter.com/t-s-eliot/) observation that poetry is a 'system of punctuation'." Instead of periods, some poems end with an ellipsis; others have no terminal punctuation at all. The colon is an Ammons "signature"; he uses it "as an all-purpose punctuation mark."

The colon permits him to stress the linkage between clauses and to postpone closure indefinitely.... When I asked Archie about his use of colons, he said that when he started writing poetry, he couldn't write if he thought "it was going to be important," so he wrote "on the back of used mimeographed paper my wife brought home, and I used small [lowercase] letters and colons, which were democratic, and meant that there would be something before and after [every phrase] and the writing would be a kind of continuous stream."

According to critic Stephen Burt, in many poems Ammons combines three types of diction:

A "normal" range of language for poetry, including the standard English of educated conversation and the slightly rarer words we expect to see in literature ("vast," "summon," "universal").

A demotic register, including the folk-speech of eastern North Carolina, where he grew up ("dibbles"), and broader American chatter unexpected in serious poems ("blip").

The Greek- and Latin-derived phraseology of the natural sciences ("millimeter," "information of actions / summarized"), especially geology, physics, and cybernetics.

Such a mixture is nearly unique, Burt says; these three modes are "almost never found together outside his poems".

As far as topics often addressed by Ammons, those of religious and philosophical concern are visited in his works as are many scenes involving nature, almost in a Transcendental fashion. According to Daniel Hoffman, who wrote a book review on Ammons, stated that his work "is founded on an implied Emersonian division of experience into Nature and the Soul," adding that it "sometimes consciously echo[es] familiar lines from [Emerson](http://www.poemhunter.com/ralph-waldo-emerson/), [Walt Whitman](http://www.poemhunter.com/walt-whitman/) and [\[Emily\] Dickinson](http://www.poemhunter.com/emily-dickinson/)."

Eserleri:

*Ommateum*, with *Doxology* (1955)  
*Expressions of Sea Level* (1964)  
*Corsons Inlet* (1965)  
*Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1965)  
*Northfield Poems* (1966)  
*Selected Poems* (1968)  
*Uplands* (1970)  
*Briefings: Poems Small and Easy* (1971)  
*Collected Poems: 1951-1971* (1972)  
*Sphere: The Form of a Motion* (1974)

Diversifications (1975)  
The Selected Poems: 1951-1977 (1977)  
Highgate Road (1977)  
The Snow Poems (1977)  
Selected Longer Poems (1980)  
A Coast of Trees (1981)  
Worldly Hopes (1982)  
Lake Effect Country (1983)  
The Selected Poems: Expanded Edition (1986)  
Sumerian Vistas (1987)  
The Really Short Poems (1991)  
Garbage (1993)  
The North Carolina Poems (1994)  
Brink Road (1996)  
Glare (1997)  
Bosh and Flapdoodle: Poems (2005)  
Selected Poems (2006)

## **An Improvisation For Angular Momentum**

Walking is like  
imagination, a  
single step  
dissolves the circle  
into motion; the eye here  
and there rests  
on a leaf,  
gap, or ledge,  
everything flowing  
except where  
sight touches seen:  
stop, though, and  
reality snaps back  
in, locked hard,  
forms sharply  
themselves, bushbank,  
dentree, phonline,  
definite, fixed,  
the self, too, then  
caught real, clouds  
and wind melting  
into their directions,  
breaking around and  
over, down and out,  
motions profound,  
alive, musical!

Perhaps the death mother like the birth mother  
does not desert us but comes to tend  
and produce us, to make room for us  
and bear us tenderly, considerately,  
through the gates, to see us through,  
to ease our pains, quell our cries,  
to hover over and nestle us, to deliver  
us into the greatest, most enduring  
peace, all the way past the bother of  
recollection,  
beyond the finework of frailty,  
the mishmash house of the coming & going,  
creation's fringes,  
the eddies and curlicues

Archie Randolph Ammons

## Autonomy

I am living without you because  
of a terror, a farfetched  
notion that I  
can't live without you

which I must narrow down & quell,  
for how can I live  
worthy of you, in the  
freedom of you limber engagements,

in the casual uptakes of your  
sweetest compliances  
if stricken in your presence  
by what your absence stills:

to have you, I school myself  
to let you go; how terrible  
to buy that absence  
before the fragrance of any presence comes:

but though I am living without  
you, surely  
I can't live  
without you: the thought of

you hauls my heavy  
body up,  
floats me around,  
gives my motions point, just the thought.

Archie Randolph Ammons

## Called Into Play

Fall fell: so that's it for the leaf poetry:  
some flurries have whitened the edges of roads

and lawns: time for that, the snow stuff: &  
turkeys and old St. Nick: where am I going to

find something to write about I haven't already  
written away: I will have to stop short, look

down, look up, look close, think, think, think:  
but in what range should I think: should I

figure colors and outlines, given forms, say  
mailboxes, or should I try to plumb what is

behind what and what behind that, deep down  
where the surface has lost its semblance: or

should I think personally, such as, this week  
seems to have been crafted in hell: what: is

something going on: something besides this  
diddledeediddle everyday matter-of-fact: I

could draw up an ancient memory which would  
wipe this whole presence away: or I could fill

out my dreams with high syntheses turned into  
concrete visionary forms: Lucre could lust

for Luster: bad angels could roar out of perdition  
and kill the AIDS vaccine not quite

perfected yet: the gods could get down on  
each other; the big gods could fly in from

nebulae unknown: but I'm only me: I have 4  
interests--money, poetry, sex, death: I guess

I can jostle those. . . .

Archie Randolph Ammons

## Design

The drop seeps whole  
from boulder-lichen  
or ledge moss and drops,

joining, to trickle,  
run, fall, dash,  
sprawl in held deeps,

to rush shallows, spill  
thin through heights,  
but then, edging,

to eddy aside, nothing  
of all but nothing's  
curl of motion spent.

Archie Randolph Ammons

## Eyesight

It was May before my  
attention came  
to spring and

my word I said  
to the southern slopes  
I've

missed it, it  
came and went before  
I got right to see:

don't worry, said the mountain,  
try the later northern slopes  
or if

you can climb, climb  
into spring: but  
said the mountain

it's not that way  
with all things, some  
that go are gone

Archie Randolph Ammons

## Gravelly Run

I don't know somehow it seems sufficient  
to see and hear whatever coming and going is,  
losing the self to the victory  
    of stones and trees,  
of bending sandpit lakes, crescent  
round groves of dwarf pine:

for it is not so much to know the self  
as to know it as it is known  
    by galaxy and cedar cone,  
as if birth had never found it  
and death could never end it:

the swamp's slow water comes  
down Gravelly Run fanning the long  
    stone-held algal  
hair and narrowing roils between  
the shoulders of the highway bridge:

holly grows on the banks in the woods there,  
and the cedars' gothic-clustered  
    spires could make  
green religion in winter bones:

so I look and reflect, but the air's glass  
jail seals each thing in its entity:

no use to make any philosophies here:  
    I see no  
god in the holly, hear no song from  
the snowbroken weeds: Hegel is not the winter  
yellow in the pines: the sunlight has never  
heard of trees: surrendered self among  
    unwelcoming forms: stranger,  
hoist your burdens, get on down the road.

Archie Randolph Ammons

## Hymn

I know if I find you I will have to leave the earth  
and go on out  
    over the sea marshes and the brant in bays  
and over the hills of tall hickory  
and over the crater lakes and canyons  
and on up through the spheres of diminishing air  
past the blackset noctilucent clouds  
    where one wants to stop and look  
way past all the light diffusions and bombardments  
up farther than the loss of sight  
    into the unseasonal undifferentiated empty stark

And I know if I find you I will have to stay with the earth  
inspecting with thin tools and ground eyes  
trusting the microvilli sporangia and simplest  
    coelenterates  
and praying for a nerve cell  
with all the soul of my chemical reactions  
and going right on down where the eye sees only traces

You are everywhere partial and entire  
You are on the inside of everything and on the outside

I walk down the path down the hill where the sweetgum  
has begun to ooze spring sap at the cut  
and I see how the bark cracks and winds like no other bark  
chasmal to my ant-soul running up and down  
and if I find you I must go out deep into your  
    far resolutions  
and if I find you I must stay here with the separate leaves

Archie Randolph Ammons

## **In Memoriam Mae Noblitt**

This is just a place:  
we go around, distanced,  
yearly in a star's

atmosphere, turning  
daily into and out of  
direct light and

slanting through the  
quadrant seasons: deep  
space begins at our

heels, nearly rousing  
us loose: we look up  
or out so high, sight's

silk almost draws us away:  
this is just a place:  
currents worry themselves

coiled and free in airs  
and oceans: water picks  
up mineral shadow and

plasm into billions of  
designs, frames: trees,  
grains, bacteria: but

is love a reality we  
made here ourselves--  
and grief--did we design

that--or do these,  
like currents, whine  
in and out among us merely

as we arrive and go:  
this is just a place:  
the reality we agree with,

that agrees with us,  
outbounding this, arrives  
to touch, joining with

us from far away:  
our home which defines  
us is elsewhere but not

so far away we have  
forgotten it:  
this is just a place.

Archie Randolph Ammons

## Poetics

I look for the way  
things will turn  
out spiralling from a center,  
the shape  
things will take to come forth in

so that the birch tree white  
touched black at branches  
will stand out  
wind-glittering  
totally its apparent self:

I look for the forms  
things want to come as

from what black wells of possibility,  
how a thing will  
unfold:

not the shape on paper -- though  
that, too -- but the  
uninterfering means on paper:

not so much looking for the shape  
as being available  
to any shape that may be  
summoning itself  
through me  
from the self not mine but ours.

Archie Randolph Ammons

## **Rivulose**

You think the ridge hills flowing, breaking  
with ups and downs will, though,  
building constancy into the black foreground

for each sunset, hold on to you, if dreams  
wander, give reality recurrence enough to keep  
an image clear, but then you realize, time

going on, that time's residual like the last  
ice age's cool still in the rocks, averaged  
maybe with the cool of the age before, that

not only are you not being held onto but where  
else could time do so well without you,  
what is your time where so much time is saved?

Archie Randolph Ammons

## Rogue Elephant

The reason to be autonomous is to stand there,  
a cleared instrument, ready to act, to search

the moral realm and actual conditions for what  
needs to be done and to do it: fine, the

best, if it works out, but if, like a gun, it  
comes in handy to the wrong choice, why then

you see the danger in the effective: better  
then an autonomy that stands and looks about,

negotiating nothing, the supreme indifferences:  
is anything to be gained where as much is lost:

and if for every action there is an equal and  
opposite reaction has the loss been researched

equally with the gain: you can see how the  
milling actions of millions could come to a

buzzard-like glide as from a coincidental,  
warm bottom of water stuck between chilled

peaks: it is not so easy to say, OK, go on  
out and act: who, doing what, to what or

whom: just a minute: should the bunker be  
bombed (if it stores gas): should all the

rattlers die just because they rattle: if I  
hear the young gentleman vomiter roaring down

the hall in the men's room, should I go and  
inquire of him, reducing him to my care: no

wonder the great sayers (who say nothing) sit  
about in inaccessible states of mind: no

wonder still wisdom and catatonia appear to  
exchange places occasionally: but if anything

were easy, our easy choices soon would carry  
away our ignorance with the world-better

let the mixed-up mix and let the surface shine  
with all the possibilities, each in itself.

Archie Randolph Ammons

## **Small Song**

The reeds give way to the wind  
and give the wind away.

Submitted by Jim McCarthy

Archie Randolph Ammons

## Still

I said I will find what is lowly  
and put the roots of my identity  
down there:  
each day I'll wake up  
and find the lowly nearby,  
a handy focus and reminder,  
a ready measure of my significance,  
the voice by which I would be heard,  
the wills, the kinds of selfishness  
I could  
freely adopt as my own:

but though I have looked everywhere,  
I can find nothing  
to give myself to:  
everything is

magnificent with existence, is in  
surfeit of glory:  
nothing is diminished,  
nothing has been diminished for me:

I said what is more lowly than the grass:  
ah, underneath,  
a ground-crust of dry-burnt moss:  
I looked at it closely  
and said this can be my habitat: but  
nestling in I  
found  
below the brown exterior  
green mechanisms beyond the intellect  
awaiting resurrection in rain: so I got up

and ran saying there is nothing lowly in the universe:  
I found a beggar:  
he had stumps for legs: nobody was paying  
him any attention: everybody went on by:  
I nestled in and found his life:  
there, love shook his body like a devastation:  
I said  
though I have looked everywhere  
I can find nothing lowly  
in the universe:

I whirled through transfigurations up and down,  
transfigurations of size and shape and place:

at one sudden point came still,  
stood in wonder:  
moss, beggar, weed, tick, pine, self, magnificent  
with being!

Archie Randolph Ammons

## **The City Limits**

When you consider the radiance, that it does not withhold itself but pours its abundance without selection into every nook and cranny not overhung or hidden; when you consider

that birds' bones make no awful noise against the light but lie low in the light as in a high testimony; when you consider the radiance, that it will look into the guiltiest

swervings of the weaving heart and bear itself upon them, not flinching into disguise or darkening; when you consider the abundance of such resource as illuminates the glow-blue

bodies and gold-skeined wings of flies swarming the dumped guts of a natural slaughter or the coil of shit and in no way winces from its storms of generosity; when you consider

that air or vacuum, snow or shale, squid or wolf, rose or lichen, each is accepted into as much light as it will take, then the heart moves roomier, the man stands and looks about, the

leaf does not increase itself above the grass, and the dark work of the deepest cells is of a tune with May bushes and fear lit by the breadth of such calmly turns to praise.

Archie Randolph Ammons