He is the opposite of a child prodigy—a writer who has reached his creative and intellectual zenith in his ninth and now tenth decades of life. When David Ferry, Ph.D. ’55, won the National Book Award for Poetry in 2012 for his collection *Bewilderment* at 88, he was almost 30 years the elder of the four other nominees. Three years after that award, he is now finishing his translation of the *Aeneid*. In fact, Ferry said on a chilly, snowless January morning, he finally finished reading the *Aeneid*—for the first time—just a few weeks earlier.

That Ferry—who has translated Horace’s *Odes* and *Epistles*, and Virgil’s *Eclogues* and *Georgics*—doesn’t read these works before sitting down to render them into English often surprises his readers. He had only a passing acquaintance with Horace before tackling the *Odes*, and had never read the *Eclogues* or the *Georgics*. He’s quick to insist that he’s not really a Latinist—by which he seems to mean it’s not his field (his dissertation was on Wordsworth) and he doesn’t read the language fluently, though he appears far more comfortable with Latin than he lets on. Maybe having less Latin makes him more attuned to English flow—less preoccupied with fussy literalism, and capable of drawing a sinuous and simple music out of ancient verse:

*Time takes all we have away from us;*
*I remember when I was a boy I used to sing*
*Every long day of summer down to darkness,*
*And now I am forgetting all my songs;*
*My voice grows hoarse; I must have been seen by a wolf*

Virgil, *Eclogue* 9

But he rejects this notion. “[John] Dryden obviously knew Latin extremely well,” he points out, referring to the seventeenth-century English poet’s celebrated translation. (Apart from Dryden’s *Aeneid*, he has tried to avoid reading others’ translations of the Latin poets; thus, he hasn’t read their works in full until he has finished translating them himself.)

A professor emeritus at Wellesley, Ferry answers the door at his home in Brookline, Massachusetts, looking the part: he wears a tweed jacket over a turtleneck sweater and corduroy trousers, glasses perched on his nose. He is tall, only barely bowed by age, and it is easy to imagine a younger, swifter version, bookish and lanky, crossing a New England college quad. His voice is gravelly and confident; he speaks slowly and measures out his thoughts with care—it’s a voice born for poetry readings. The kitchen, where he offers toast and tea, seems new; he hasn’t been here long. He lived in Cambridge for almost half a century with his wife, Anne, until she passed away in 2006; now he lives next door to the family of his daughter, Elizabeth, an anthropologist at Brandeis. The walls are decorated with large prints of pictures taken by his son, Stephen, a photojournalist working in South America and New York City.

*Bewilderment* is a book of elegies, many for the loss of Anne. In it, Ferry has raided all his past translations of master poets, as well as some of his own past poems, to set alongside the poems that came in the wake of his wife’s death—to find company in the afterlife. He casts himself as a mythological adventurer through the underworld, channeling the voices of poets past (including the ancients, but also the Anglo-Saxons and Wyatt, Rilke, Cavafy, Montale) until their translated voices blend into his own. The wall between translation and composition breaks down: “I can’t clearly tell the difference between translating and writing a poem of my own,” he explains, “because in a way, I’m writing a poem of my own when I’m translating. Everybody is.” But even though legions of poets, as far back as Catullus, have woven translations into their books, the passages Ferry curates come together with a fierce expressive urgency: finding in another poet, writing in a different language, a text that voices what he most needs to say himself, the way a musician might need to play a certain score, or a dancer perform certain steps. Alan Shapiro, a poet and close friend who teaches at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, says *Bewilderment* “deals with the most devastating losses. So the challenge of the losses he had to deal with forced him to up his game, so to speak. He always did this, but never quite to the same extent: it’s like he’s calling in all the forces of the past to help him come to terms with the loss of his wife and the way that she died.”

“What am I doing inside this old man’s body?” Ferry asks in
“Soul,” early in *Bewilderment*. “I feel like I’m the insides of a lobster, / All thought, and all digestion, and pornographic / Inquiry, and getting about, and bewilderment...” It’s a poem where he seems to speak as himself, but also as many others: if there is a Latin predecessor to this poem, it would be some passage from Ovid—age as metamorphosis into some strange creature, sloughing off one’s armor as the tender inner life hardens into one last enormous exoskeleton. His poetry seems almost too soft to touch; his biography, too. “I’m aware of and embarrassed by my ways / Of getting around, and my protective shell,” he writes:

Where is it that she I loved has gone to, as
This cold sea water’s washing over my back?

Ferry has long had the respect of colleagues and poets: the Poetry Foundation awarded him its lifetime achievement award, the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the year before *Bewilderment* was published. He has published in all the best journals; his Latin translations earned no small praise; and his 1999 collection *Of No Country I Know: New and Selected Poems and Translations* won multiple prizes and distinctions. People are finally writing about him at length in big magazines, and PBS NewsHour interviewed him after the National Book Award was announced.

Still, many casual readers of contemporary poetry might not have recognized his name before *Bewilderment*. It’s easy to forget that Ferry—born in 1924, he turned 91 this past March—is a contemporary of Maxine Kumin ’46, RI ’61 (born in 1925), James Merrill and W.D. Snodgrass (both born in 1926), John Ashbery ’49, Litt.D. ’01, and W.S. Merwin (both born in 1927), and Anne Sexton, BF ’62 (born in 1928). In part, this is because those writers published their most celebrated books in the 1960s and ’70s, at a point when Ferry was a working professor focused principally on teaching. But Ferry may also have been less talked about because he’s hard to fit into the schools, trends, and preoccupations of contemporary poetry. (He professes to be uninterested in these matters.) “David has always marched to the beat of his own drummer,” says Jonathan Galassi ’71, president and publisher of Farrar, Straus and Giroux (FSG), which has published all his book-length translations.

Ferry has spent much of his career perfecting an ability to write in colloquial iambic pentameter, leavened with a sprinkling of anapests (as in the lines from “Soul” above); the diction can come out
sounding a bit like Robert Frost, whose influence he cites gladly. But he is quick to point out that he does write in free verse sometimes, and he insists, “I’m not some kind of neoformalist.” He dislikes being tagged as conservative just because he often writes in meter. He has seldom rhymed since his first book, published in 1960.

Still, he feels he has lived his life as an apprentice to what he calls “the measured line”: one line following another, unspooling on the page. “It’s so much like what you experience in Beethoven and Mozart: the measure, then the line,” he explains. “The game is to keep it continuous. But your experience of it has to be an experience of line endings, measured.” That discipline has made him a perfect translator of the classical Latin hexameter verses of Virgil’s works and Horace’s letters. Poet and critic Dan Chiasson credits those translations with “teaching American poets (I’m one of them) the Horatian tones—the modesty, civility, and gossip; the swift, fly-by-urbanity—that went missing from much of the best American poetry of the seventies and eighties.”

“My criterion is that [the accuracy of a translation] should always be arguable in some way,” Ferry says. “But they can never be the same music.” FSG has published Ferry’s Virgil and Horace translations with the Latin en face, like the Loeb Classical Library texts. The effect, for a reader who knows Latin, is to turn the translation into a performance, highlighting how Ferry chooses to render a phrase, smooth out syntax, hem a metaphor. The Latin language fosters inviolate sentences whose multiple nestings of subordinate clauses can weigh down overly literal translations; part of Ferry’s skill lies in unknotting those, working oxygen into the rich earth of Horace and Virgil. When Virgil writes about beekeeping at the beginning of Georgics 4, a less deft translator might render the Latin too literally, ending up with something like: “At first, a place and station must be sought for the bees, where there is neither an approach for the winds, because the winds prevent them from carrying food back home, nor...” Ferry’s English shares the grace of the Latin, but he creates it by departing intelligently from the original Latin grammar:

First of all, find a protected place for the bees
To make their home, a place that’s safe from the wind
That might prevent them from getting back with their food...

Robert Frost once said that poetry is what gets lost in translation, but Ferry shows that a translation can illuminate a poem like an interpretation. He brings out the patience, sensuality, and affection for detail in Virgil, doing more than any number of journal articles to counter among lay readers a received notion of the Roman as merely a bombastic, militaristic epic bard.

Ferry does not like to make too much of himself. He has an endearing habit of stopping to worry about whether he is talking too much about himself in interviews—“Because you get invited inadvertently to brag, and I don’t like that,” he explains. He’d rather speak impersonally: “I’m always trying—as in poems—to say things that are true for everybody insofar as I can.”

Still, the story of his life starts to unfold eventually. He was raised in Maplewood, New Jersey, a suburb west of Newark, with his father’s extended family scattered across neighboring towns. Robert Ferry was a businessman, first in textiles and later running trade associations. His wife, Elsie Russell, grew up in Norfolk, Virginia. She met Robert when he was sent South on textile business. “She always claimed she fell in love with him when he was playing Schumann’s ‘Träumerei’ on the piano,” Ferry recalls.

The house was filled with music as he grew up; Robert took on extra work as a church musician during the Depression, and often rehearsed singers from New York, desperate for work, through full oratorios at home. Ferry describes his father as a kind but not openly emotive man—a tacturnity that he evokes in his poem “Ancestral Lines,” remembering his father playing Schumann’s enigmatic song “Warum?:

And the nearest my father could come to saying what
He made of that was merely to say he didn’t,
Schumann didn’t, my father didn’t, know why.

Ferry was not especially literary or bookish as a child. He went to a good public high school, on the track leading to college. He insists, “I wasn’t a jock,” but was not yet writing or reading at length. He took only a little Latin, focusing mainly on French, which he still reads fluently. He remembers occasional encounters with poetry at official church and town occasions: how in Maplewood in the 1930s, they read William Cullen Bryant’s elegy “Thanatopsis” aloud every Armistice Day. (Ferry is probably one of the last poets alive for whom a civic reading of “Thanatopsis” was a formative event, and who can quote from it by heart. At one point, he also recites at length from Pope’s Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot.)

But it was as a freshman at Amherst that Ferry experienced “a perfectly clear vocation” to poetry as he was working on an essay for an expository writing class taught by Reuben Brower, whom he calls “vocationally, the most important person in my life.” (Brower would become Cabot professor of English literature at Harvard in 1953.) The assignment was simple: to write about two poems by Robert Frost, “Once By the Pacific” and “Spring Pools.” Ferry was looking at them carefully, reading the lines of iambic pentameter aloud, when he stumbled over a line that sounded different:

...it looked as if / The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff...

“Lucky in”: the two words step out of the meter, an anapest taking the place of an iamb for the first time in the poem—like a quick apprehensive shudder, as if the speaker were looking nervously back to the safety of land in the face of the crashing ocean waves. That a writer could use the sound of words and the structure of meter to make a point, to evoke a feeling—that was the moment when he realized, This is what I want to do! “I’m really surprised by it,” Ferry recalls.

At the end of his freshman year in 1942, he was drafted into the army. He spent the war in northern England; those years gave him time to read. He wrote a note to Brower from overseas thanking him for changing his life; decades later, Brower—by then an old friend—returned the note. Ferry was touched. He returned to Amherst after the war and finished his English degree; he wrote his senior thesis on Wallace Stevens.

He then enrolled in the doctoral program at Harvard, where he found that the coursework and research mattered less to him than the colleagues and the teaching. There were a few memorable courses—he studied eighteenth-century literature with Walter Jackson Bate—but Ferry found just as much to learn from teaching, which gave him a chance to read, reread, and think through poems, one line at a time. He almost ended up writing his dissertation about William Congreve’s verse dramas—“It was all about sentences, all...
About lines—but switched to Wordsworth, a project that eventually turned into his first and only book of criticism, The Limits of Mortality.

By 1952, three years before completing his doctorate, Ferry had begun teaching English at Wellesley. As the resident Romanticist, he was able to teach and read Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the others at length; he had the freedom to teach Shakespeare, Milton, and nineteenth-century poetry as well. Most important was the introductory poetry class. “I mainly wanted to turn people on about lines of poems!” he says—to create for others that moment of insight he’d had writing about Frost at Amherst under Brower. Teaching the poems kept giving him more of those moments, too—small realizations about the machinery of syllable and syntax at work in making meaning, line by line, in Wordsworth, in Shakespeare, in Stevens. He was at work on revising his dissertation, and also on the poems that would turn into his first collection, On the Way to the Island. The Kenyon Review published his very first poems in 1955, another group in 1957, and the book appeared in 1960. Ferry now says he thinks only about half the poems are any good (“and that half is very good!” he says, laughing); still, writing in Poetry in 1961, James Wright described it as “light lyric which suddenly flares with poetry because of the depths of feeling which are deftly, and yet inevitably, exposed.”

Ferry met Anne Davidson when she arrived at Wellesley’s English department to teach in 1956. Born a New Yorker, she had graduated from Vassar in 1951 and studied for her Ph.D. in English at Columbia under the seventeenth-century specialist Marjorie Hope Nicolson; she wrote on John Milton (the dissertation would become a book, Milton’s Epic Voice, in 1963). She and Ferry married in 1958; beginning that year, she taught sixteen- and seventeenth-century English literature at Harvard for eight years, but spent the majority of her career as a professor of English at Boston College. She wrote seven ambitious and engaging books, all on poetry, including The Inward Language, on the Renaissance sonnet; The Title to the Poem; and By Design: Intention in Poetry, released posthumously. Anne Ferry’s poetic scholarship complemented and furthered her husband’s poetic practice: “Like mine,” he says, “her work is almost always in one way or another about lines.” They had a literary marriage, a working marriage—both teachers, both writers, he a poet, she a critic. Anne appears in some of his poems—quietly, to the side, as if in cameo—and always in his dedications, often with epigrams. In dedicating his collection Of No Country I Know, he writes simply, “For Anne,” and then translates a brief excerpt from the sixteenth-century collection of Scottish poetry known as the Bannatyne Manuscript:

My married heart shall never turn from her
Unto another so long as my five wits
Shall last, whose whole consent is given to her
Until death’s rage shall cleave me to the root.
So shall I love her ever, in spite of what—
Soever circumstance can do to us.
God grant I go to the grave before she goes.

A long interval fell between Ferry’s first book and his second, Strangers, published in 1981. He was young, he was married, and when On the Way to the Island appeared, so did the couple’s son and then daughter. They lived in a house in Cambridge on Ellery Street that they bought after Anne left Wellesley; Margaret Fuller had been its first renter, and Emerson once came to chat in the living room. Ferry was writing during these years, but very slowly—a poem or two a year, he reckons. But he always thought of himself as a poet by vocation. “I don’t know what else to say except that I was busy,” he says. “A lot of the writing I was doing was commenting on papers. And that was a terrific part of my life, writing comments on people’s papers about poems.”

Both books included a few translations of others’ lyric poems. But it wasn’t until he was approached by William Moran, Harvard’s longtime professor of Assyriology, that he considered translating anything longer. Their children knew each other as teenagers; the Ferrys and the Morrisons ended up close friends. He wrote about Moran’s health troubles in old age, wracked by Parkinson’s, in the poem “Brunswick, Maine, Early Winter, 2000.” Moran wanted to see if Ferry might be able to make poetic English out of the Epic of Gilgamesh. He gave Ferry a word-for-word translation of the opening passage of the epic—“where the goddess Ishtar hits on Gilgamesh and Gilgamesh turns her down”—and the poet started to smooth it out, to turn it into real English. It felt stilted at first. But he realized that breaking it up into two-line stanzas of iambic pentameter—a kind of marriage of blank verse with heroic couplets—gave it life and drive. It isn’t quite translation, he disclaims: “I call it a really dodgy word: a rendering.” The rendering ended up being published by FSG after Ferry’s Wellesley colleague Frank Bidart, A.M. ’67, introduced him to Jonathan Galassi; it appeared just before Ferry’s third book of poems, Dwelling Places.

He might have stopped translating there, but his Gilgamesh caught the eye of the classicist Donald Carne-Ross, then at Boston University; he asked if Ferry would be interested in translating a few of Horace’s odes—and eventually, the poet decided to translate them all. He asked for help from Wendell Clausen, Pope professor of the Latin language and literature and professor of comparative literature emeritus; by the time Ferry was nearing the end of the Odes, Clausen suggested that he might enjoy translating Virgil’s Eclogues. Knowing them only secondhand through English pastoral, Ferry said yes. Then, with the Eclogues done, his curiosity brought him to the Georgics. He contacted Lane professor of the classics Richard Thomas for help, and Thomas—who had just finished a two-volume commentary on the Georgics—oblided. The help of all the consulting classicists shows in the translations themselves, which often reflect the most recent academic understanding of the poetry. His genially erudite introductions also manage to condense a good deal of scholarship into a small space.

Thus within just a decade, Ferry found that he had wandered into translating some of the most substantial texts in Latin literature—texts that had badly needed a poetic rather than literal-minded hand attending to them. Fellow poet Peter Campion...
praised Ferry’s Georgics in a review for Poetry: “Hearing such genuine poetry through our current drone of Translationese feels like [a] shock...It’s alive!” At Harvard, Richard Thomas now uses Ferry’s version of the Georgics as readings in his General Education course on translation: “I’ve found the way he uses his own poetic brilliance to give a version of the original [is] a good way of talking about the difficulty of translation,” he writes in an e-mail. “That poetry is untranslatable is of course a truism, but a poetic version gets you talking about the ways in which that might not be entirely true.” Ferry describes the process as “the English itself inventing ways of reading, as best it can, the original.” He cites an example from one of his German translations, of Rilke’s “Song of the Drunkard.” The poem ends in German with “Ich Narr”—which Ferry translates as a single blunt word: “Asshole.” “That, I take it, is a close translation,” he insists. “It could also be argued that it’s not...But I think it comes closer to the tone of the Rilke than a literal ‘I, fool.’”

The weave of translations and original poems in Ferry’s collections—which began in Dwelling Places and flowers fully in Bewilderm —creates a sense of wandering among the dead with the help of a channeler, all the more so because he does not switch voice drastically to become Horace or Virgil, Baudelaire or Rilke. Themes from other poems slide into his own: in Bewilderment’s “To Where,” after presenting a translated excerpt from the Aen eid, he casts himself as a kind of Aeneas, carrying his mother and father on his back, searching for Anne. Elsewhere, he writes: “Orpheus, I, stepped back in nameless fear,” echoing against the Orpheus on his back, searching for Anne. Elsewhere, he writes: “Orpheus, I, stepped back in nameless fear,” echoing against the Orpheus myth that he translates just pages earlier:

Alone he roam the Hyperborean North
And wandered along the snowy banks of the Don
Or through the barren frozen fields on the sides
Of Riphaean mountains, in grief for his lost wife
And Hades’ empty promise...

VIRGIL, GEORGICS 4

The book follows logically from all his earlier work, and yet somehow surpasses it. Rather than an impulse merely to invoke a favorite poem, there is an ache to speak through what has been said by others once before; poetic ego dissolves.

Gradually, it emerges that Ferry still keeps a busy schedule. Earlier this spring, he went to Ireland to give a talk and a reading at a Dublin literary festival; he continues to make the circuit around the Boston area, and is of course working on his translation of the Aen eid. From the conversation at his home, he proceeds to lunch with his daughter and son at Matt Murphy’s, a self-consciously Irish pub in Brookline Village. Ferry’s poem “Lake Water” is stenciled around the pub’s walls in a single continuous line, tracing a ring around everyone inside. This is an old Irish tradition, he says: paint your local poet’s verses on the walls of your local pub.

“Lake Water” was first published in The New Yorker in 2008; it’s also one of the poems in Bewilderment. The lake of the title is Lake Waban, on the Wellesley campus, where the weather is wrong for its dramatic time of year:

It is a summer afternoon in October.
I am sitting on a wooden bench, looking out
At the lake through a tall screen of evergreens,
Or rather, looking out across the plane of the lake,
Seeing the light shaking upon the water
As if it were a shimmering of heat. ...

The lines look like iambic pentameter, but they’re actually more flexible (it’s hard to scan “Or rather... lake” without six stresses); they gently undulate and bend, first straining at what the meter will allow (“At the lake | through a tall | screen of | ever | greens”), then snapping back to regularity (“As if | it were | a shim | mering | of heat”). Pastoral tranquility is undermined by the sense that there is something subtly wrong because it is out of season, as the speaker goes on to say:

Yesterday, when I sat here, it was the same,
The same displaced out-of-season effect.

Suddenly a single analogy extends dramatically, and the poem starts to speak of itself:

... The surface of the page is like lake water,
That takes back what is written on the surface,
And all my language about the lake and its
Emotions or its sweet obliviousness,
Or even its being like an origination,
Is all erased with the changing of the breeze
Or because of the heedless passing of a cloud.

The allusions grow denser; the poem calls to mind Catullus (“one ought to write it in running water”), Keats (“Here lies one whose name was writ in water”), Matthew Arnold’s sea of faith, Yeats’s troubled stream. But even apart from that invocation of literary heritage, this long comparison suddenly explains the sense that there is something not right in the day’s being so warm. That warmth is at odds with the poet’s state of mind. He has been inscribing his feelings on the lake as he watched it—the lake that is too calm, too unrippled to preserve emotion or meaning on its surface. It is an elaborate turn of thought: it’s the failure of the lake to hold a memory stable that makes it an appropriate metaphor for his current troubled state of mind. Everything is painfully temporary, vulnerable to the lightest of touches—that “heedless passing of a cloud.”

On the walls of the pub, the poem ends there. But the published version adds one final stanza. It describes the loss of life as a loss of meaning, a kind of erasure:

When, moments after she died, I looked into her face,
It was as untelling as something natural,
A lake, say, the surface of it unreadable,
Its sources of meaning unfindable anymore.
Her mouth was open as if she had something to say;
But maybe my saying so is a figure of speech.
What Ferry says about verse at large comes back to mind: “The game is to keep it continuous. But your experience of it has to be an experience of line endings, measured.” It’s just as he says about his own life: writing poetry has been a matter of one line after another, meaning unfolding bit by bit, even as it also disappears behind him.

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