

poetry project

NEWSLETTER

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 1999 ISSUE #176

\$5

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POETRY BY

David Trinidad



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announcements

Gazing on Marvelous Wonders

In July, the Poetry Project's answering machines, telephones, and modems were shorted out by a bolt of lightning, which is why many of you were unable to contact us through August. We're now happy to report that, although some damage still remains, our answering machine and E-mail are once again in action.

Awake, My Soul!

Congratulations to Ed Friedman and Lori Landes on the birth of their new baby, Samuel Nathan Friedman, born at 2:37 pm on Saturday, August 14th. We wish them many chocolate cigars and infinite clean diapers!

And Let Their Works Praise Them

The Poetry Project welcomes some new staff members. Poet Mitch Highfill, author of *The Blue Dahlia*, *Turn*, and *Liquid Affairs*, will be coordinating our Wednesday Night Series. Poet and performer Regie Cabico, co-editor of *Poetry Nation: An Anthology of North American Fusion Poetry* and the Cyberjay on Gopoetry.com, will be coordinating our Friday Late-Evening Events Series. And Katherine Lederer, editor of *Explosive Magazine* and author of *Music, No Staves*, will be editing

the *Poetry Project Newsletter*.

So I Commend Enjoyment

A new selection of work by poets Theodore Enslin, Mary Burger, Wendy Rose, Garrett Caples, and Jonathan Skinner is now up in the September issue of "Poets & Poems." Prageeta Sharma's essay on "Lunacy and Community at the Poetry Project" is now online in "Features." Also, lots of new additions from summer months to the Tiny Press Center. Go to: www.poetryproject.com

Changes in Poetry Project Membership Benefits and Workshop Fees

Beginning in September 1999, all new and renewing members to the Poetry Project will receive *discounted* admission to our regularly scheduled events, instead of free admission. At most events, members will be admitted for \$3; non-members will be charged \$7 (\$4 for ID-bearing students and seniors). The anticipated increase in revenue, resulting from this change in membership policy, will allow the Poetry Project to (1) continue offering its full range of programs and publications, (2) offer new programming, such as our remodeled and expanded web-site;

and (3) improve membership services by providing more frequent E-mail updates, special mailings, and members-only events. **Those who became members during the 1998-99 season will continue to be admitted free to regular events until their current membership expires.** For a full listing of membership levels and benefits, see the back page of the *Newsletter*. Also, beginning this fall, the annual workshop fee has been increased by \$100. For \$250, one can attend up to six workshops per year, receive discounted admission to regularly scheduled Poetry Project events, and receive a year-long subscription to *The Poetry Project Newsletter*.

Go Forth and Multiply

Astronomy, astrology, celebrity, catastrophe, destiny, romance, navigation, wishes, fortune-telling, constellations. The passage of time. Hemispheres, seasons. Prophecy, heaven, Leonardo da Vinci/ di Caprio. Submission postmark period: January 1-February 15, 2000. Replies by: April 15, 2000. *Outlet Magazine & Double Lucy Books*. P.O. Box 9013, Berkeley, CA 94709.

Announcements continued on page 27...

AN EXPLOSIVE MAGAZINE BENEFIT EVENT

KENNETH KOCH
ELENI SIKELIANOS
TIM GRIFFIN
MICHAEL COFFEY

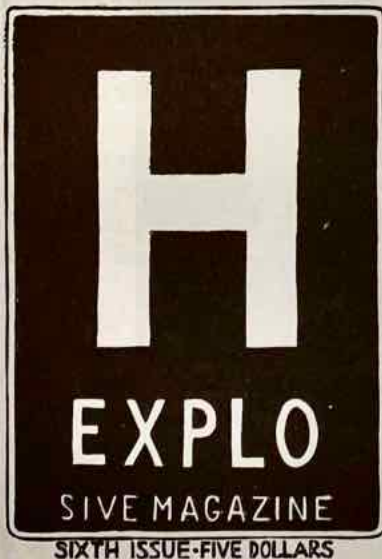
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 29TH, 8:00P.M.

311 CHURCH STREET, #4

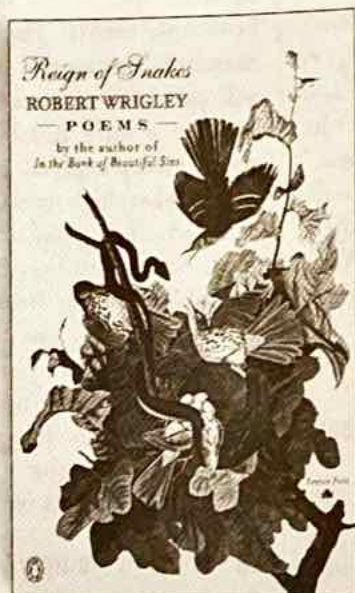
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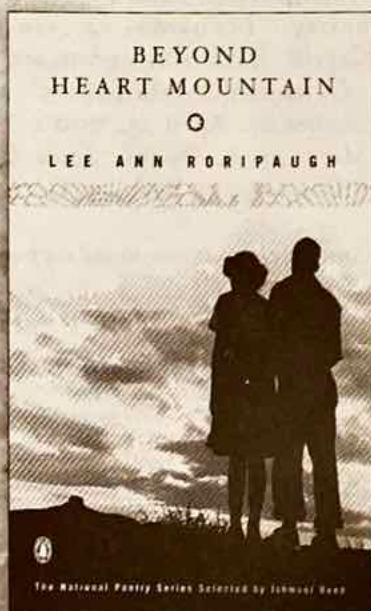
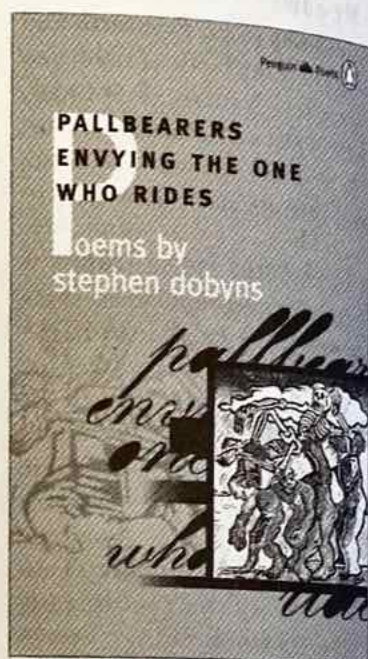
"Reign of Snakes is a thrilling development in Wrigley's poetic... His lucid style has deepened...into a stunning in-turning of language." —DAVID BAKER

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"What lyrical gems...
utterly exquisite."

—LOIS-ANN YAMANAKA,
author of *Heads by Harry*

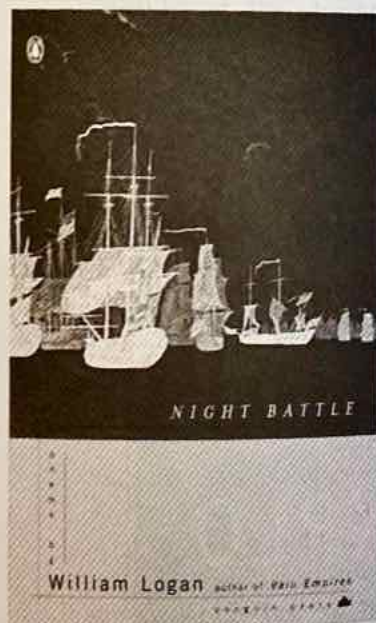
"Ishmael Reed's choice for
this year's 'National Poetry'
series is easy to like...a
fine first collection."

—*Library Journal*

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This fifth collection by award-winner William Logan offers breathtakingly intense poems about language, love, and the loss of purity in a world haunted by angels and the lost souls of great writers.

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regional updates

NAROPA 6/18/99

JARNOT, BROWN, MAYER

by Patrick Pritchett

This week marked the beginning of the Naropa Writing and Poetics Summer Writing Program's 25th anniversary. O star-studded. O gala. O all the stops pulled out.

1.) Lisa Jarnot began the evening by reading from new material, some of which will appear in the forthcoming *Ring of Fire* (Zoland) this fall. What struck me about these poems was the happy use of that much-neglected trope, the apostrophe. Whatever happened to the apostrophe? It was back last night, and better than ever. "O life force of supernalness/of world," began one such apostrophic poem. Call it a "having your cake and eating it, too" poetics, if you must, but the antique diction and slightly bent syntax of this exclamation enables her to simultaneously invoke and undercut. Much could be said about the apostrophe (see Jonathan Culler's essay on same) but for now it seems sufficient to remark that the apostrophic offers a particular way of laying-claim-to—a means for inscribing a bold and yet intimate self-presencing. It's a risky gambit—and quite delicious.

Poems read by Jarnot included a hockey poem dedicated to her brother ("and you hold your icy wrists up to the icy sky"); the heartbreakingly lovely "Brooklyn Anchorage" ("and in my plan to become myself I became someone else"); "Poem Beginning With a Line by Frank Lima"; and the haunting "Psalm After Philip Laman-tia."

Throughout, Jarnot employed a sly humor and sinuous music to affirm, via the extravagance of excessive signifying, the fundamental joy of being alive and being alive in language, of being a creature of language, of endless pronouncing and its apophatic self-erasure.

2.) Dear Lee Ann Brown: What you did was foolhardy—starting your reading with a singalong of Helen Adam's "I Love My Love." (Steven Taylor on guitar). But it was fun, and your voice was strong, and it was a pleasure to hear that macabre ballad so entuned.

You read from *Polyverse*—there was a lovely poem called "Present Beau for Robin Blaser." It's a form invented by Harry Matthews, whom, you announced with regret, has decided to rename it "Beautiful Inlaw." I agree—that's not as good. Either way, this form uses only the letters of a person's name. Hence:

Rare, rare lobelia rails
a noble nib
robed & born.

And this form, a "Two by Four," invented by—who else?—Jack Collom:

Here we
sit but
where is
our food?

You read a poem for your grandmother, Agnes Wylie, 1902-1999, and for once it wasn't one of those saccharine elegies to a grandparent. In this poem you used a wonderful word—"inflorescence"—which aptly describes your own method: a kind of continual blooming, an exfoliation along the finite lines of a fractal pattern, fragments of petals containing the whole flower, and containing the whole history of the flower, and of its species.

And dear Lee Ann Brown, that's such a good kind of poem to be making. I bet you could walk down the street all day and say "Yes" to every single thing you saw until you said "No" and that would be even better than "Yes."

3.) Of Bernadette Mayer I will try to tell if I can. The second thing she

said was: "If I alarm you, don't be horrified." I forget what the first thing was.

She began her set by reading, "Your Penis Is Homeless," a fire-breathing invective against some poor bastard that was equal parts Juvenalian insult and third-grade taunting (it's hard to tell the difference when they take their hats off). One of the milder examples: "your nostrils resemble the assholes of cops."

Next: "These are dreams, so I'll skip those." And then a series of delightful epigrams:

"Yom Kippur"
I'm dead.
Thank god it's not emotional
here.
Ecstasy, that's another matter.

"Okay, here come the real poems" (This "threat" was repeated several times, only to be followed by more epigrams). But then a "real" poem did come along. It was a long poem about sleep. Or rather, about the anxiety produced by sleeplessness. About trying to woo and coerce sleep. About "the artless lambency of a famous night's sleep." Can't sleep? Try the capitalist method:

I have ownership of sleep. Sleep
is mine.

After the sleep poem Bernadette read a poem written during a single hour in August 1992. Essentially, a meditation on the category of The Hour—one to out-Augustine Augustine. A poem, then, about the endless dilations and contractions of "an hour."

The island is finite—its shoreline is not. And a graph of the mind moving, ceaselessly moving, moving in Bernadette-time, which is post-Einsteinian free-for-all time. Which is "I go to the star and come back and dance on your still youthful head time." Of the subdivision of time there is no end, no, nor any end to thinking about them until your hour is up. Thank you, timely Sister Bernadette.

BARD

by Bill Luoma

Dear Katy,

I attended the Poetry & Pedagogy conference at Bard in late June 1999. I enjoyed myself despite the fact that I am not a teacher of writing and even found myself wondering a lot about how rhetoric or poetics I suppose gets formed and polarized around poetry and how these battles are fairly important when it's really young minds (and less reputations & canon fodder) that are being thrown around. Here brain gue. There brain goo. The sense of people who work in trenches.

At other times I found myself thinking I am lucky not to have to continually come up with (job) watered down catch phrases to describe the poetry I like and dislike and otherwise don't care about and to have to publish "that" type of discourse as if my livelihood depended on it. This thought was a result of listening to a paper by Bob Perelman who gave an interesting list of bland sentences that come out of his mouth when "difficult" poetry is explained to a general undergraduate, graduate and/or hiring, tenure committee audience: "This is a standard academic narrative; the standard remedy is abbreviation."

• So that "To Elsie" of *Spring & All* becomes: "the conflict between democratic diction and high modernist innovation, with cars, immigration, gender and class mentioned."

• "Love Songs to Johannes" becomes: "path-breaking eroticism, perhaps with sidelong comparative glances thrown at 'The Waste Land' and Edna St. Vincent Millay's sonnets."

• *Tender Buttons* becomes: "examples of a literary version of Cubist portraiture... as well as issues of domestic space and lesbian erotics vs. surveillance."

This problem was enacted when the critic Lynn Keller delivered a paper, posing two models of reading/composition: centrifugal and centripetal. The centripetal model

pulls everything in and is basically a closed text; centrifugal tends outward and is open. She posited that Edward Hirsch's new book *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* represented the closed model, then put up Joan Retallack's *Icarus Falling* as a model of the open. There was a break in the talk and Jackson Mac Low asked me to bring him his water bottle. Luckily I happened to be wearing a t-shirt that said i love the topaz man (with nipple enhanced picture of fabbio precursor) on the front and i love topaz romance books on the back. My shirt made an intervention at the conference that said Lynn, I don't think the opposition between centripetal and centrifugal is interesting, but your reading of Retallack is and seems like one of the few pedagogical moments of the conference.

Talking with Lynn after her paper I said "I wish there hadn't been so many uncritical valorizations of the experimental/avant-garde." I don't remember what she said to that, but I do remember she said she was nervous about the off-campus education discussion (see below) because she wanted the classroom to be the central place for poetic work and discovery to take place. I told her I thought she was probably a good teacher.

In the afternoon it was often announced we could have juice and cookies in the foyer. It was during these moments that I felt myself to be squarely inhabiting America. American conferences don't serve alcohol until, at the earliest, "cocktail hour," but usually you have to wait until dinner. Compare this to France's 11:30 AM "scotch time." Americans, as we learn from Ben Franklin's visit to English factories, should not drink ale at break time.

In American venues we also see the phenomenon of event packing in that there is no time between events to rest and, as Cecilia Vicuña put it, to heal the dendrites. She also reminded us that the *siesta* in Spain was going bye-bye due to the new euro. Certain types of work are best accomplished, and we need only look at American world domination to demonstrate this, when a pre-ordained schedule is executed

according to plan. That being said, there were a few moments of randomness and conscious attempts to bring this into a discussion of how poetry gets made, and here I am thinking of Bob Perelman's and Michael Davidson's comments regarding their off-campus education, that real learning about poetry takes place in bars and at readings and at informal talks in living rooms. There was a certain sense of nostalgia about their comments, as if that off-campus culture they described was rare in their current lives, and for them I imagine the conference itself became a substitute for this lack. I myself went to the conference for this very reason. I knew some of my friends were going to be there. Well, I crashed the conference because my girlfriend was one of the organizers.

It was during Perelman's talk, the "procedure" panel, that I asked about Bob's education (he thought I asked about "Bob's agitation") and whether he could describe some procedures for creating or being involved in off-campus poetry "scenes," as the few comments I had heard up to this point regarding this extra-curricular activity seemed to suggest that poetry was something that happened to oneself spontaneously upon entering a bar. He replied that talks and bars were good, but that it was hard work. Lyn Hejinian also said it was hard work. There's that phrase again.

Mytili Jagannathan mentioned Writer's House at U. Penn as a place where that kind of randomness has been cultivated, and Louis Cabri made similar remarks, viz that if "you" have a physical space that can be brought to bear serially (get people to show up at) and, if you have some cash, things will take care of themselves. Juliana Spahr—while acknowledging the importance of the interesting things that have been emerging from Writer's House and how it seems to be at least partially responsible for hooking people up in Philadelphia and adding energy to the local communities (witness recent spilling out onto streets)—wanted to counter this landed model with a landless one, where books, mags, and readings exist as collabo-

native venues. Her point being not oppositional, but supplementary, in that there are not that many places in the world where enough people would actually go to a physical space on a regular basis so that the threshold level of erotic randomness that facilitates the exchange of poetic energy could be reached if not overcome. Actually, Juliana didn't say all that.

Aside from the papers and working groups and questions and answers, there were some good moments of on-campus late-nite drinking (the Bard cops smile at you and seem to want you to have fun on their watch), a dinner with Robert Kelly who is fun in a naughty way, a trip to the quarry, and a party at Emilie

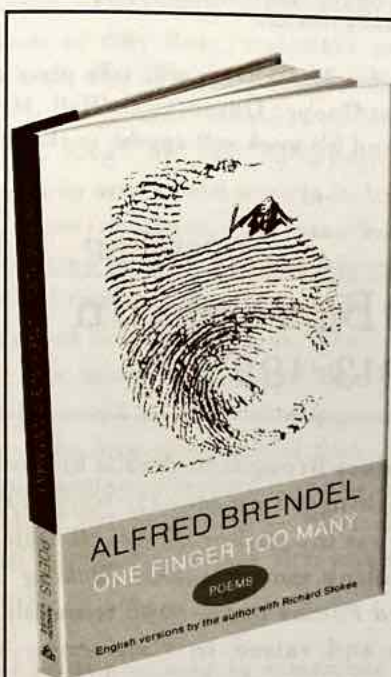
Clark's house in whose yard a field of fireflies was busy tearing the veil off the continuous. Is such a display truly random?

There were also some excellent readings. I don't think I had the occasion to say to myself or to a friend behind closed doors "that" reading sucked, which is odd because there were 16 readings. The first nite we heard Michael Davidson, Harryette Mullen, Lyn Hejinian, Bob Perelman, & Ann Lauterbach. The next day we heard Edwin Torres and Anne Tardos read and discuss their work. That nite, we heard Caroline Bergvall, Robert Kelly, Jena Osman, Joan Retallack, Juliana Spahr and Cecilia Vicuña. Saturday afternoon we went to a very hot little chapel and heard Bernadette Mayer (she said *chubacabra*) and Jackson Mac Low (he said *security strawberries*), and at nite were treated to a sound painting conducted by Walter Thompson, with members of the conference making noises at his fingers' behest.

As for the papers, I can't make the claim I made above. What I tended to find lacking in the papers were actual pedagogical procedures that could be employed to illuminate "difficult" works in general and/or procedures that would pertain to particular works. I mean even I have some tricks I use when I'm invited to a poetry workshop to read my work and discuss. I just didn't come away from this conference with a sense of how these people do their jobs, their work.

Perhaps this was because I didn't attend the working groups, but rested dendrites instead. These working groups consisted of a leader guiding six to ten people thru various "peter elbow-like" reading and writing exercises using "difficult" source texts. The general feeling I got from people who did participate was that they were too tired to really put any energy into it and thus did not enjoy it and did not learn. My unscholarly opinion is that it might have been more interesting to have made the working groups rather than the papers the focus of the conference. That said, I was happy to have attended Poetry & Pedagogy: The Challenge of the Contemporary: a four-day symposium in the form of a collaborative investigation, as I had fun with friends and met some interesting people.

Love,
Bill



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Rudy Burckhardt 1914-1999

The following is a slightly amended version of a notice that appeared in the August 13th edition of the London *Independent*.

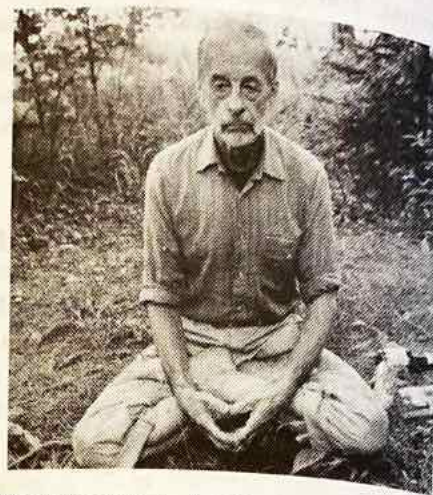
Photographer, filmmaker, painter, collagiste, poet, writer—and long-time friend of the Poetry Project—Rudy Burckhardt, died this past August at his summer home in Maine (bidding *adieu* to his loved ones and walking into the adjacent lake he affectionately called "our pond"). He was 85 years old. "A jack of all trades and master of several," as John Ashbery once put it, a quintessential artists' artist, Burckhardt had, for over three generations, (since his arrival in New York, in 1935, from his native Switzerland), been a key presence, famously diffident, famously under-appreciated, quietly and unostentatiously, for over half a century, avoiding the glitz (and the fame of his contemporaries), doggedly getting on with the work. His achievements ranged far and wide, over an extraordinary span of years. Through his lifetime friendship with poet and dance critic Edwin Denby (1903-1983) he became intimately involved (both as observer and participant) at the very beginnings of a nascent post-war New York avant-garde.

If the art world had a conscience, it was he—poet and patient witness—of the day-to-day, of the quotidian, laureate of unpretentiousness. His humility and old-fashioned gentleness were significant and defining features.

His was something rare—a friendly art. His collaborations with poets were legion; among them, film collaborations with John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Alice Notley, Ron Padgett, David Shapiro, and books with Edwin Denby, Vincent Katz, Simon Pettet.

Belatedly—in February 1987, he was fêted with three simultaneous New York exhibitions—a show of photos (at Brooke Alexander), a show of paintings (at the Blue Mountain Gallery), and a film retrospective (featuring over 60 of his short films) at the Museum of Modern Art. Ten years later, in 1997, he was the subject of a full-scale retrospective (held at the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, in Valencia, Spain, and organized by poet Vincent Katz).

His images of New York City—the work that he is, perhaps, currently, best known for—are among the most fundamental and enduring taken this century. His position in the pantheon (as if he aspired to such immortality!) seems assured.



RUDY BURCKHARDT, Self-Portrait, 1985. Gelatin-silver print. Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

A memorial service for Burckhardt will take place on November 2nd at 7:30 at Cooper Union/Great Hall. More tributes to Burckhardt and his work will appear in the next issue of the *Newsletter*.

—Simon Pettet

James Broughton 1913-1999

Filmmaker and poet James Broughton died at his home in Port Townsend, Washington on May 17, 1999 at the age of 85. Broughton was the author of several collections of poetry, including most recently *Packing Up For Paradise: Selected Poems 1946-1996* from Black Sparrow Press. Born and raised in California, his introduction to the avant-garde began during the 1930s when he visited New York for the first time with hopes of becoming a playwright. During the 1940s he returned to San Francisco where he met Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Duncan, Madeline Gleason, Michael McClure, and Helen Adam, and became an active presence in the beginnings of the San Francisco Renaissance. Broughton also became a crucial figure in the world of experimental filmmaking, gaining the notice of Maya Deren and Jean Cocteau early in his career, and influencing a younger generation of filmmakers, including Stan Brakhage. His memoir, *Coming Unbuttoned* (City Lights Books, 1993) provides a fascinating view into his journey through the seminal artistic and spiritual communities of the mid-20th century in the United States and Europe. Memorial services were held for Broughton in Port Townsend and San Francisco in June. He is survived by his longtime companion Joel Singer.

—Lisa Jarnot

Ann Mikolowski

1940-1999

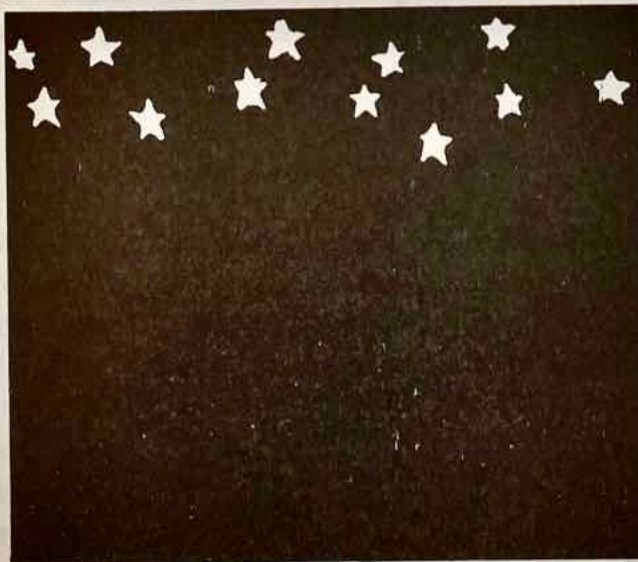
There is a dent in the fabric

Ann Mikolowski
painter

of miniatures of poets, musicians, and artist friends, of so large landscapes, of pen-and-ink drawings composed of thousands of tiny dots, visionary artist with a sense of humor, one of Michigan's greatest treasures, typesetter, collaborator, mother, co-founder (with her husband Ken) of The Alternative Press—publishing works by artists and writers in broadsides, postcards, bumper stickers, bookmarks and chapbooks, respected by critics, collectors and curators both here and abroad—is gone away. On August 6th Ann succumbed to breast cancer. Even though she had been ill for some years, her death felt a shock. Ken Mikolowski will be sending out a 2000 calendar because Ann already had done the drawing for it. I can imagine receiving it in the mail and thinking for a clear, bright second—"Wait, she's still alive!" But it will be further proof that she's still with us in her works.

For those who want to remember Ann with a memorial contribution, the family suggest sending to the Community Supported Anthroposophical Medicine Hospital Fund, 2385 South Huron Parkway, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104

—Maureen Owen



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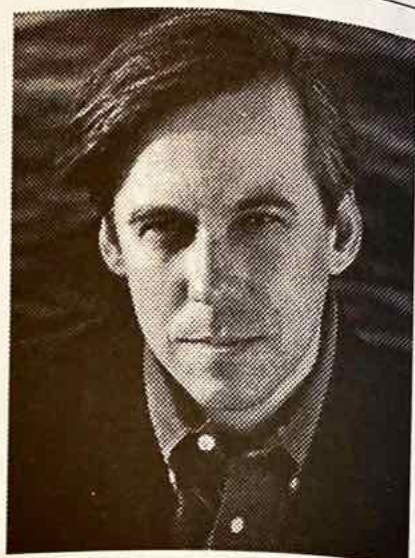
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An Interview with DAVID TRINIDAD

by
Douglas A. Martin



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DAVID TRINIDAD WAS BORN IN LOS ANGELES in 1953 and raised in the San Fernando Valley. He received his B.A. in English from California State University, Northridge, where he studied poetry with Ann Stanford. Trinidad's first book of poems, *Pavane*, was published in 1981.

It was followed by *Monday, Monday* in 1985, *Living Doll* in 1986, and *November* in 1987. In the early eighties, he was associated with the writers who frequented Beyond Baroque Literary/Arts Center in Venice, California. This group included Dennis Cooper, Amy Gerstler, Benjamin Weissman, Jack Skelley, and Bob Flanagan. In 1988, Trinidad moved to New York City. He received an M.F.A. in Poetry from Brooklyn College two years later. While at Brooklyn College, he studied with Joan Larkin and Allen Ginsberg. His recent books include *Hand Over Heart: Poems 1981-1988* and *Answer Song*. In 1996, he edited *Powerless*, the selected poems of Tim Dlugos. Trinidad has received grants from The Fund for Poetry and the New York Foundation for the Arts. He currently teaches poetry at Rutgers University, where he directs the Writers at Rutgers series, and is a member of the core faculty in the M.F.A. writing program at The New School. His next full-length collection of poems, *Plasticville*, will be published by Turtle Point Press in March, 2000.

M: I know you collect Barbies, but do you collect other toys? The poem "Essay with Movable Parts" in your new collection, *Plasticville*, features some new characters, such as Liddle Kiddles.

T: For many years I collected vintage Barbie dolls. I also collected Liddle Kiddles (or at least a certain kind of Liddle Kiddle: the tiny dolls that came in perfume bottles and actually had different scents), troll dolls, board games, Disneyana, Plasticville (model train) structures, miniature theaters, vintage Yardley makeup (from the mod era), and so forth. I recently let go of much of what I collected. It was very satisfying to collect, as an adult, the things I couldn't afford or was forbidden to have as a child.

M: When you are writing a poem like "Essay with Movable Parts," how are you joggng your memory?

T: I do a certain amount of research. Collecting, I think, is a form of that. Having the actual objects I wanted to write about was a big help. A doll, for instance, can embody all the mystery and silence and sadness of childhood. "Essay with Movable Parts" is, for the most part, a collage; the found material I worked with seemed as loaded as the objects I was collecting at that time.

M: How did you decide which poems to include in *Plasticville*? I found myself missing a couple I've seen you often read lately, one about lip gloss and one about *The Late, Late Show*.

T: I'd always wanted to write a book of poems in chronological order, and was finally able to do that. *Plasticville* contains the poems I wrote between 1992 and 1997. Early

on I decided the title would be *Plasticville* and that helped shape the book as I wrote it. The poems you mention were written after completing *Plasticville*. They'll be part of a new manuscript.

M: The *Plasticville* poem I'm most moved by is about Marilyn Monroe. One detail, her diary, touches me in a way I haven't been before, makes her more human. Is this true or false?

T: I wrote "Something's Got to Give" after reading a book called *Marilyn: The Last Take* by Peter Harry Brown and Patte B. Barham. It's all about Monroe's final days. The diary is mentioned; I don't know if it's really true. I liked the tabloid quality of the book, wanted my poem to have that too.

M: Do you keep a diary? Or do you write those entry dated poems on days when there's a particular poetic resonance for you?

T: I've never been able to keep a diary going for very long. I find it frustrating. I want to put it all in, capture everything, and that just doesn't seem possible, especially if you're busy living the life you want to record. But I love the form. I of course read *The Diary of Anne Frank* when I was in school, was touched by it. In college I absolutely devoured the diaries of Anais Nin. I find the simplicity of Dorothy Wordsworth's journals quite beautiful. I was attracted to the sense of dailiness and intimacy that certain New York poets fostered. Jimmy Schuyler, Joe Brainard, and Alice Notley all have wonderful diary poems.

When I published Alice's *Sorrento* in the mid-eighties [Trinidad was the editor and publisher of Sherwood Press in Los Angeles], I got to know it by heart in the process of typesetting and proofreading it. I admired how casual and charming it is. So I guess the idea of writing a diary poem was in the back of my mind. My diary poem "November" wasn't really planned; it came out of a series of daily writing exercises. It just grew and grew and became this large piece. It was very exciting: someone would say something or something would happen and I'd think, "That's perfect for the poem." I couldn't wait to get it down on paper. And I couldn't wait to see what would happen next. It felt like I really *lived* that poem.

M: "The Boy" is the poem of yours most anthologized. Is it a particular favorite?

T: I think several others—"Meet The Supremes," "Monday, Monday," "Movin' with Nancy"—have been anthologized as much as "The Boy." They're among my favorites; they haven't lost their sheen. Many poems fall away, just don't seem as important as they did when I wrote them. Others continue to have a hold on me. "The Boy" is one of my earliest poems. It has been anthologized a number of times, so I keep being drawn back to it. The sexual desire in it still feels immediate to me, real, true. For poetry readings, I find I choose, again and again, particular poems. "Monday, Monday," for example, or a sonnet called "At the Glass Onion, 1971." Sexual desire is the theme, more or less, of both; or the desire for—yet fear of—sex,

romantic love. I guess that ambivalence is still alive in me, and that's why I keep revisiting those poems.

M: There is such honesty to your work, like dedicating a book to a person whose name is used inside. Did you ever struggle with this disclosure?

T: I did struggle with it at first. It's something that, after a point, I really wanted to do. When I was in college, I thought that poems had to lift one's life out of the ordinary, elevate it into some kind of universal or mythic sphere. I could refer to someone as "you" in a poem, but I could never use someone's first name. I'd always responded to the specificity in Sexton's and O'Hara's poems. O'Hara has a poem called "October 26 1952 10:30 O'Clock"; in one of her poems, Sexton says it's "2 o'clock on a Tuesday/ in August of 1960." The idea of placing yourself in time like that really appealed to me. Later, the work of Dennis Cooper and Tim Dlugos and Jimmy Schuyler had a huge effect on me. At that time it seemed daring to include, in poems, actual song and movie titles, names of rock groups and movie stars, brand names, the names of real people in your life. I saw this as a way of making my poems more personal, more honest. There was great freedom there.

Once I gave myself permission to name names, as it were, I never censored myself. One friend I included in my work later turned on me, saying I'd made him look like a "mindless queen," which wasn't my intention at all. I wrote a number of poems about Ira [Silverberg, with whom Trinidad lived]. He always liked the poems, but

felt uncomfortable if he was in the audience when I read them out loud. I once wrote some poems about a young man named Carlos, whom I was dating, and who turned out to be a little shit. A woman I knew encouraged me to change his name in the poems. "Why give him the satisfaction?" she said. I couldn't, wouldn't. It would be like lying. Plus the sound of his name was an integral part of the poem.

M: Your book *A Taste of Honey* is a collaboration with Bob Flanagan. Can you talk a little about how this unlikely pairing worked?

T: Bob was scheduled to give a reading at Beyond Baroque and because he didn't have a lot of new work, he asked a few of us to collaborate with him. I believe Amy Gerstler and Ed Smith also wrote poems with him for that event. The poem Bob and I wrote, "A Taste of Honey," got so many laughs we decided to write another one for a reading I was to give at Beyond Baroque the following month. That second poem also went over quite well. So we decided to keep going. We wrote a total of twelve poems together, one a month for a year, and published them as a chapbook. Later we wrote a thirteenth, "13 Ghosts," which was never published.

We let the first poem dictate the pattern for all the rest: thirty-six lines per poem, ten syllables per line. We alternated lines, sometimes giving each other suggestions, and always pushing and pulling, goading and provoking. Bob might not like where I was going, so he'd yank the poem back, usually with something crude or

outrageous. Then I'd tug it back my way with something corny or pop. It was a lot of fun. We'd phone each other with our new lines, often leaving them on each other's answering machine. That was before E-mail.

M: Your reciting of William Burroughs' "Cold Lost Marbles" at the *Word Virus* reading was a highlight for me, presenting a side of the machine that drove him one often overlooks. How did you find the piece?

T: I asked Ira, since he co-edited *Word Virus*, what he thought I should read. He suggested "Cold Lost Marbles" because it was a poem. I liked it, so decided to go with it.

M: Your poem "Pavane" is reprinted in the recent *Blood & Tears* anthology honoring Matthew Shepard. How did this come about?

T: I was asked by the editor to submit something. I was upset by Shepard's horrible murder and I tried to write a poem specifically for the project, but couldn't. The deadline was approaching so I looked through my work to see if I had something that might fit. "Pavane," a poem I wrote in 1980, when I was grief-stricken over the sudden death of my best friend, the poet Rachel Sherwood, seemed appropriate. I was pleased that it was printed in Matthew Shepard's honor.

M: Was it a conscious decision to contribute mostly early work to *A Day For A Lay: A Century of Gay Poetry*?

T: That was strictly the decision of the editor, Gavin Dillard. I was sur-

prised that he chose mostly early work, but happy that—how did Dickinson put it—my poems still "breathe."

M: You are also an accomplished editor. Is there anything you are working on in that capacity?

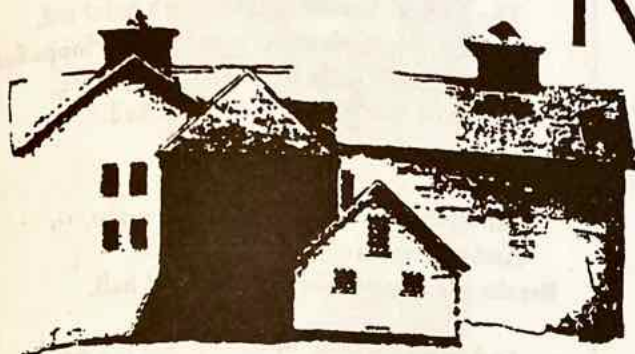
T: I recently edited, with the poet Maxine Scates, a selection of Ann Stanford's poetry. Maxine and I were both students of Ann's in the seventies. Ann was a nationally known poet, editor, translator, and scholar. Since her death, her work has fallen completely out of print. It's a real shame. Her poems are wonderful; they taught me so many things, things I was able to use in my own writing. We're currently seeking a publisher for it.

Just recently I was daydreaming about editing a magazine. I'd call it *Slicker*, after the Yardley lip gloss. It's easy to lose touch; one gets so involved in one's own life and work. One day you look around and there's suddenly a whole new generation of poets. A magazine would be a great way to stay in touch with other poets, especially younger ones.

M: What writers do you return to?

T: I frequently flip through *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, keep finding such treasures. "Fame is a fickle food" is taped to my computer. I recently came across "The face I carry with me—last," "Did Our Best Moment last—," "I had been hungry, all the Years—," and "I watched the Moon around the House"—all amazing. The older I get, the more I appreciate her. I don't

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seem to return as much to the poets I used to read all the time—Sexton, Plath, Bishop, O'Hara, Schuyler—though I use their poems when I teach. These days I look to Dickinson, William Carlos Williams, Alice Notley.

M: What is the crown jewel of your collection?

T: Do you mean toy collection or poetry collection?

M: Toy.

T: When I was really into collecting, one of my sisters gave me three dresses that my mother had sewn for her Barbie doll in the early sixties. They're quite charming and well-made, with hems and darts and hooks and snaps. You can tell she spent a lot of time making them. My mother died three years ago, so these little doll dresses seem much more dear than any mass-marketed toy.

Douglas A. Martin is the author of *Servicing the Salamander* and a co-author of *The Haiku Year*. His novel *Outline of My Lover* will be published by Soft Skull Press, Spring 2000.

KID STUFF BY OSCAR WILDE

The Etch A Sketch is laced with fitful red,
The circling Spirographs and Hula Hoops flee,
The Water Wiggle is rising from the sea,
Like a white Barbie Doll from her bed.

And jagged brazen Balsa Planes fall
Athwart the Magic Slate of the night,
And a long Slinky of yellow light
Breaks silently on Thingmaker and hall,

And spreading Silly Putty across the wold,
Wakes into View-Master some fluttering bird,
And all the Mexican Jumping Beans are stirred,
And all the Coloring Books streaked with gold.

—David Trinidad

writing workshops

Experimental Writing guided by Larry Fagin (Tuesday evenings, 7-9 pm: 10 sessions begin October 19)

Language on vacation. Writing & reading sans souci et sans pantalons, fiendishly winching every last model & maquette out of the muck—expressionistic, cubistic, futuristic, suprematistic, dadaistic, gertrudistic, surrealist, swingmatistic, lettristic, beatistic, projectivistic, situationistic, newyorkscholastic, spiceristic, oulipistic, coolidgistic, bernadettistic, languagistic, etceteristic. Larry Fagin edited *Adventures in Poetry* and is the author of *Dig & Delve* (Granary Books, forthcoming).

Poetry Workshop taught by Frank Lima (Friday evenings 7-9 pm: 10 sessions, begins October 22)

In this workshop, participants will be introduced to the Neruda and O'Hara ode, the sestina of John Ashbery, and do assignments, such as writing a bad poem and failing at the attempt, read poets such as Anne Sexton, Henri Michaux, Francis Ponge, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler, Amiri Baraka, Joe Ceravolo, David Schubert, Cesar Vallejo, Rene Char, and the African poet Leopold Senghor, to name a few. Students will learn how to rigorously edit and review their work and will be given assignments to write "newspaper poems," elegies to inanimate objects, and mimic the Ted Berrigan sonnet. A student of Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch, Frank Lima is a poet and teacher of the culinary arts at the New York Restaurant School. His books of poetry include *Inventory: New and Selected Poems* and *I Do Believe I Do Believe I Do Believe* (forthcoming from Hard Press).

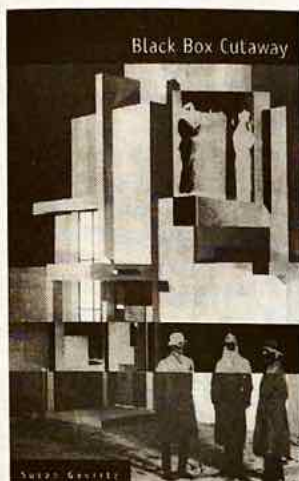
Poetry Workshop taught by Patricia Spears Jones (Saturday, 12-2 pm: 10 sessions begin October 16)

In this workshop, participants will work on poems that reflect their personalities and pursuits with an emphasis on craft and revision. Poems by a broad range of poets will be used to generate discussion and serve as models including works from Lynda Hull, Bob Kaufman, Alice Notley, Cornelius Eady, James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara, Sapphire, William Carlos Williams, Maureen Owen, Jaime Manrique, and David Trinidad. Participants will be urged to read a selected poet in depth. Participants are asked to submit 7-10 poems by September 30 to the Poetry Project office for review. Patricia Spears Jones is a poet, playwright, and author of *The Weather That Kills* (Coffee House Press) and *Mother*, a play produced by Mabou Mines.

The workshop fee is \$250, which includes tuition for classes and an "Individual" membership in The Poetry Project for one year (see back page of the Newsletter for a full listing of membership levels and benefits). Reservations are required due to limited class space and payment must be received in advance. Please send payment and reservations to: The Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church, 131 E. 10th St., New York, NY 10003. For more information, please call (212) 674-0910, or e-mail us at poproj@artomatic.com.

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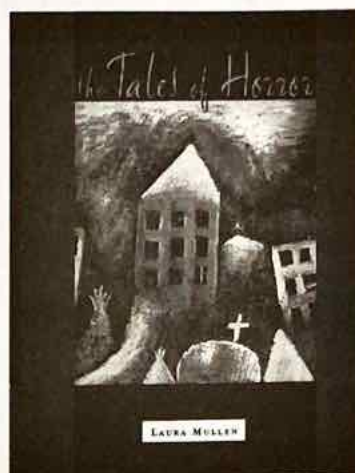
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BLACK BOX CUTAWAY

Susan Gevirtz

Gevirtz cuts away the box through which one looks to frame any set of values or work of art. The poems work as instruments of refocusing and reframing. Barbara Guest writes, "Much praise is deserved by this risk-taker with her camera of words." Poems, 1998. \$10



THE TALES OF HORROR

Laura Mullen

Mullen's clever postmodern gothic is a literary tour de force. Here enter the stock elements of the generic horror tale: the haunted house, the doctor, the chatty housemaid. But the tale is disassembled to offer alternate readings—as a story or as a flip book. Prose/poetry, 1999. \$12



FOUR YEAR OLD GIRL

Mei-mei Berssenbrugge

These poems proceed through moments of exquisite vulnerability—perceptions are exposed to the quick. *Publishers Weekly* writes, "Berssenbrugge has quietly written some of the most stylistically consistent and elegant poems of the last decade." Winner of the Western States Book Award 1999. Poems, 1998. \$12



UNDER FLAG

Myung Mi Kim

Kelsey St. Press is pleased to announce the second printing of *Under Flag*, which we first published in 1991. The *Multicultural Review* writes, "The poet sings her liminal state, no longer quite Korean, not yet American. She announces as well her commitment to a poetics of piercing fragments and formal elegance." Poems, 1998. \$9

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SEPTEMBER 29. WEDNESDAY

The Electric Magistrate Circus: Emily XYZ and Friends

A night of spoken word, music, and performance in support of *Electric Magistrate*, Emily XYZ's captive CD. Emily XYZ, Dael Orlandersmith, John Giorno, John S. Hall, Glenn O'Brien, Beau Sia, dancer Lawrence Goldhuber, the Virgil Moorefield Ensemble, and others promote artist ownership of work. [This event is \$10; \$7 for members]

OCTOBER 1. FRIDAY

Pre-Millennial Cramps: A Spoken-Word Happening

Celebrating the end of the Millennium with Beau Sia, Todd Colby, Galinsky, and Lisa King. This spoken-word exorcism is one in a series of Millennium Celebrations sponsored by Pseudo.com. The season-opener at the Friday Night Series. [10:30 pm]

OCTOBER 4. MONDAY

Open Reading. sign-up at 7:30 pm [8:00 pm]

OCTOBER 5. TUESDAY

Lawrence Ferlinghetti & Edward Sanders

Lawrence Ferlinghetti is the author of *A Coney Island of the Mind*. His most recent book, *A Far Rockaway of the Heart* has just been issued in paperback. He was the co-founder of City Lights publishing house. In August 1998, he was named San Francisco's Poet Laureate. Edward Sanders's *America, a History in Verse, Volume I* (1900-1939) will be published this fall by Black Sparrow Press. His other books include *The Family*, *Tales of Beatnik Glory*, and *1968, A History in Verse*. Sanders is the inventor of such musical instruments as the Talking Tie and the Microlyre. (Please note that this reading is on a Tuesday night)

OCTOBER 8. FRIDAY

Po' Jazz

Possible House. His poems and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in journals such as *Verse*, *Raritan*, *Ribot*, and *Combo*.

OCTOBER 20. WEDNESDAY

Susan Thackrey & David Abel

Susan Thackrey's newest book, *Empty Gate*, was recently published by Listening Chamber Press. Her poetry has appeared in *Hambone*, *Avec*, *Apex of the M*, *Mandorla*, and *Talisman*. David Abel is the author of *Selected Durations* and *Rose*, collaborations with book artist and publisher Katherine Kuehn (Salient Seedling Press). A new chapbook is forthcoming from Situations.

OCTOBER 22. FRIDAY

The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry

A celebration of the publication of *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* by Thunder Mouth Press. Featuring Miguel Algarin, Penny Arcade, John Giorno, Maggie Estep, Alan Kaufman, Hettie Jones, Maggie Estep, Sharon Mesmer, Regie Cabico, David Trinidad, Bob Rosenthal, Thaddeus Rutkowski, Gerry Gomez Pearlberg, Daniel Ferri and many more! [10:30 pm]

OCTOBER 25. MONDAY

Lourdes Vasquez & J.L. Jacobs

Lourdes Vasquez's books include *Marina: A Biography of Marina Arzola*, *La Rosa Mecanica: Prose and Poetry* (San Juan: Huracán) and, forthcoming, *Cuentos de Purgalcito*. J. L. Jacobs was born 1967 in Oklahoma. Her first book of poetry, *The Leaves in Her Shoes*, was published this year by Lost Roads.

OCTOBER 27. WEDNESDAY

John Keene & Barbara Henning

John Keene is the author of *Annotations* (New Directions). He has held fellowships at Yaddo and Bread Loaf and was a Cave Canem Poetry Workshop Fellow in 1998 and 1999. His work has appeared in *Hambone*,

also have their poems published on Rattapallax's Web site. [10:30 pm]

NOVEMBER 8. MONDAY

Denver Butson & Jorge Clar

Denver Butson is the author of *trptych*, a selection of poems from three manuscripts: *alarm clock alibis*, *the drowning ghazals*, and *remote and mocking sky*. (Commoner Press, 1999). Jorge Clar was born in Hato Rey, Puerto Rico in 1965. Some of his readings/performances include *Linda Evangelista in Love*, *Life on Earth*, and *Gardens*.

NOVEMBER 10. WEDNESDAY

Kenneth Koch & Jordan Davis

Kenneth Koch's is the author of *On the Great Atlantic Rainway: Selected Poems*, for which he was awarded the Bollingen Prize for poetry. A new book of poems, *New Addresses*, will be published by Knopf in May. Earlier this year he was made "Chevalier dans l'ordre des Arts and des Lettres" by the French Ministry of Culture. Jordan Davis is the author of *Poem on a Train* (Barque Books) and *A Little Golden Book*. He is an editor of the literary journal, *The Hat*.

NOVEMBER 12. FRIDAY

Amor Latino

A reading for *Amor Latino*, an anthology of gay men writing about their Latin Loves published this year by Painted Leaf Press. With contributors Erasmo Guerra, Guillermo Castro, Regie Cabico, and others. [10:30 pm]

NOVEMBER 15. MONDAY

Catherine Wagner & Roberto Tejada

Catherine Wagner has two chapbooks forthcoming this month from Minium Press and *811 Press*. Born in Rangoon, Burma, she was a finalist for the National Poetry Series this year. Roberto Tejada is the editor of *Man-*

OCTOBER 8. FRIDAY**Po' Jazz**

A jazz poetry reading with Golda Solomon, the founder and director of the poetry-jazz group *Po' Jazz*, journalist and writer Gerthie Owttram, and musicians [10:30 pm]

OCTOBER 11. MONDAY**Blood & Tears: Poems for Matthew Shepard**

A reading for *Blood & Tears: Poems for Matthew Shepard*, published this spring by Painted Leaf Press in memory of the gay University of Wyoming student who was brutally beaten, tortured, and left tied to a fence for 18 hours in October of 1998. Readers include John Ashbery, Patricia Spears Jones, Jaime Manrique, Eleni Sikelianos, Eileen Myles, Dean Kostos, Kristin Prevail, Steve Turtell, Edmund Berrigan, and others.

OCTOBER 13. WEDNESDAY**Poetry in Transit**

As part of the ongoing project *Poetry/In Transit*, Danish poets Annemette Kure Andersen, Niels Frank, and Pia Tafdrup will read their poems in their native language with American readers John Ashbery, Siri Hustvedt, and Eleni Sikelianos reading English translations.

OCTOBER 15. FRIDAY**The Haiku Year/ Head to Head Haiku Competition**

Contributors Douglas A. Martin, Anna Grace, Tom Gilroy, and Jim McKay read from *The Haiku Year*, (Soft Skull Press), followed by open rounds of Head to Head Haiku, led by Daniel Ferri. Bring 17 or more haiku and win prizes! [10:30 pm]

OCTOBER 18. MONDAY**Betsy Fagin & Andrew Epstein**

Betsy Fagin's work has appeared in *Clamour*, *Skanky Possum*, and around the *City*. She edits blue language press. Andrew Epstein is the author of the chapbook, *A*

and was a Cave Canem Poetry Workshop Fellow in 1998 and 1999. His work has appeared in *Hambone*, *Ploughshares*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Code*, and *Agri*. Barbara Henning is the author of *Smoking in the Twilight Bar* and *Love Makes Thinking Dark* (United Artists). She has collaborated with artists on three books, including *Words & Pictures* (with Sally Young). She is the former editor of *Long News* in the Short Century.

OCTOBER 29. FRIDAY**Love is a Bad Neighborhood**

Love Is a Bad Neighborhood is a choreopoem by poet and playwright Francine Witte. The hero, Tag, will be read by performance poet Ken Thompson, with Sister Pain read by Faye Armon and Love Doctor read by Julian Rozzell. Poet and comic Mark Larsen will open the evening with a short reading of his own work. Francine Witte's one-act plays have been performed by Love Creek Productions, the Turnip Theatre and Pulse Ensemble Theater. [10:30 pm]

NOVEMBER 1. MONDAY**Open Reading. sign-up at 7:30 pm [8:00 pm]****NOVEMBER 3. WEDNESDAY****David Bromige & Elizabeth Fodaski**

David Bromige is the author of over 30 books, most recently *Piccolo Mondo* (Coach House Books), *Initializing* (Meow Press), and *As in 'T'*, as in 'Tether' (Chax Press). His selected poems, *Desire* (Black Sparrow), received the 1988 Western States Book Award. Elizabeth Fodaski is the editor and publisher of *Torque* and author of *fracas* (Krupskaya).

NOVEMBER 5. FRIDAY**Rattapallax Reading**

Rattapallax celebrates its second anniversary with an open reading contest and featured readings by George Dickerson, Ron Price, and Lamont P. Steptoe. Free computer giveaway for the three best readers, who will

goon, Burma, she was a finalist for the National Poetry Series this year. Roberto Tejeda is the editor of *Mar de Soria*. New Writing from the Americas and the author of *Gift + Verdict*, published this year by Leroy Press. He is currently preparing an exhibition titled *The Festival Aspect: Visuality and Meaning*. Photographs of Mexico by George O. Jackson, scheduled to open this December in San Antonio.

NOVEMBER 17. WEDNESDAY**R.B. Morris & Rebecca Moore**

R.B. Morris is a poet, songwriter, and performer, currently living and recording in Nashville. His first CD was *Take That Ride* (Oh Boy Records). He has a new CD forthcoming from Koch Records this fall. Writer and performer Rebecca Moore has performed in the Lower East Side since her childhood, and has worked with Richard Foreman and John Jesurun. Her newest CD is forthcoming from the Knitting Factory.

NOVEMBER 22. MONDAY**Eleni Stecopoulos & Erik Sweet**

Eleni Stecopoulos's poetry has appeared in *Chain*, *Rampike*, *Kiosk*, and other journals. Her essay on poetics and theory is forthcoming in *Open Letter*. Erik Sweet is the co-editor of *Tool: A Magazine*. His work has been published in the latest issue of *The Hat*.

NOVEMBER 29. MONDAY**Douglas Goetsch & Jacqueline Waters**

Douglas Goetsch's first full-length collection, *Nobody's Hell*, was published this year by Hanging Loose Press. He was a 1997 recipient of a New York Foundation for the Arts Poetry Fellowship. Jacqueline Waters's work appears or is forthcoming in the *Brooklyn Review*, *Hanging Loose*, *Poetry New York*, and *The Germ*.

Wheelchair access to Poetry Project Events is possible with assistance and advanced notice.

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All events are \$7.⁰⁰, \$4.⁰⁰ for seniors and students, \$3.⁰⁰ for members and begin at 8 PM unless otherwise noted. Programs are subject to change. For information call 212 674-0910

EDITOR'S COMMENT

In a recent conversation with the poet Douglas Rothchild, I was asked why I had chosen to run a feature on the new Walter Benjamin compendiums. After all, Douglas reminded me, these books would be getting plenty of press. They would even be written up in the *New York Times*. I asked Douglas if he thought of the *Newsletter* as an advertising platform. No, he said, but I think of it as a place where one can look for something one can't find anywhere else.

This issue of the *Newsletter*, whether it's sharing turf with the *New York Times* or no, offers a kind of conversation one simply can't find elsewhere. The four primary write-ups—on David Trinidad, Walter Benjamin, and two first volumes of poetry by two first rate *ephebes*, Brenda Shaughnessy and Lee Ann Brown—combine to make for something more than the sum of their parts (and all of them concern themselves with parts: collage, fragmentation, doll parts, serials, and so on). Indeed, they are all, in spite of the differences among them, exploring much common terrain.

What struck me as the most interesting connection uniting the group is their relationship to collecting and collectibles. Benjamin, who is well known as one of the century's great fetishizers of books, was also one of its great collectors of quotes. "Quotations in my works," he once said, "are like robbers by the roadside who make an armed attack and relieve an idler of his convictions." Though Benjamin is now published by the press of "the wealthiest university in the world," his ideas remain exemplary. His thought was what one might call

epistemological, running deep and questioning the very foundations of traditional intellectual practices. A proponent of radicality at its most necessary levels, Benjamin has much to offer any conversation—poetic, intellectual, and political.

Trinidad also takes his collections as points of both cultural critique and poetic inspiration. His attitude toward collectibles eerily echoes Marx's famous notion of commodity fetishism, but this time with a twist. A commodity, as Marx saw it, "steps forth" into this world and is changed into something transcendent. A definite social relation between men is transposed into the "fantastic form of a relation between things." Trinidad takes this relation and pushes it even further. His collectibles take on the fantastic forms of poems—objects with little mater-

ial value that are nonetheless sacred.

Shaughnessy and Brown share a proclivity for the collection of strange words, styles, tones, terms, and tendencies. Both of their reviewers spend a good deal of time outlining their immediate influences: Brock-Broido in Shaughnessy's case, the "Language School," "New York School," etc. in Brown's. One could then say that they collect or otherwise transpose the work of beloved precursors, but that would be a reduction. For theirs is a language of necessity and reverence, not merely of allegiance. There is also a language of desire. And if it can be said that "fetish" is really a loaded term for love, then *Polyverse* and *Interior with Sudden Joy* go far to show us how radical love really is. It is what keeps us writing poems—beyond the call of any tangible value. As Shaughnessy says in "Transpassional," "I've melted my silver for you."



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Walter Benjamin

A RETROSPECTIVE

by

Jordan Davis

IN THE FIRST TWO OF THREE VOLUMES OF THE *SELECTED WRITINGS OF WALTER BENJAMIN* to be published (a fourth volume, of Benjamin's legendary uncompleted "Arcades Project" is scheduled for the end of this year), the press of the wealthiest university in the world has brought into English over a thousand pages of translation of occasional reviews, fragmentary remarks, student work, literary journalism, travel writing, radio talks, historiography, satiric *belles lettres*, critique, and interviews.

Readers familiar with Benjamin's previously available collections *Illuminations* and *Reflections* will find themselves given access to a heartbreaking-ly eccentric range of lost subjects: children's books, toys, handwriting analysis, the writings of the insane, drug experiences, the fabulist Jean Paul, the Spanish playwright Calderon, the almanacher Johann Peter Hebel, the Lisbon Earthquake, the railway disaster at the Firth of Tay.

Benjamin, born to a well-to-do Berlin family in 1892, died of suicide by morphine overdose at the Spanish-French border as he attempted to flee occupied France in 1940. The first German to translate Proust successfully, Benjamin was also a poet who wrote and broadcast radio talks for children.

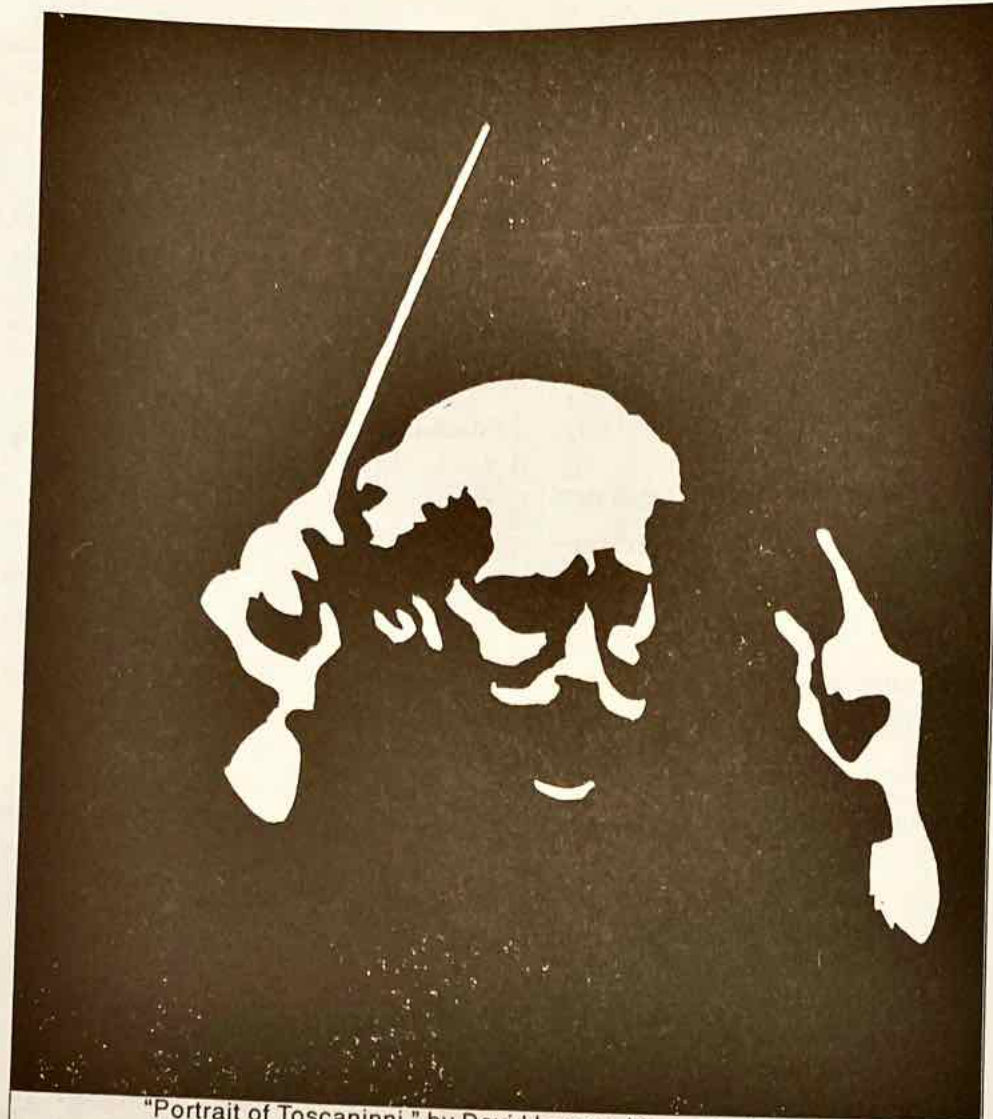
A poet, the inimitable grace in the presence of paradox in his essays has been attributed to a poetic imagination, and this is not mere phrasemaking. Benjamin wrote poetry, and translated it (though neither his poems nor his Baudelaire translations are included in this collection).

His ambition, however, was to be the greatest critic in Germany; while others had applied psychology, economics, and history to the interpretation of literature before him, his achievement was to look at his subject not through one and only one frame of reference—in other words, not to serve any particular dogma—but to change the frame, to change the subject, to digress as surprisingly as Tristram Shandy (one of his favorite books), and then to act as if no surprise has taken place. Like the Cretan of the famous logic problem who sarcastically announced that all Cretans are liars, Benjamin tended to use language to conceal, not contradictory meanings, but dissonant, ironic, hopeful, emotion-saturated unfamiliar ones.

While certain terms—aura, distance, experience and perception for example—reverberate in the later essays in the 1968 collection, *Illuminations*, they confuse none more than those who, isolating them as if for a glossary, would take them as evidence of a systematic literary intelli-

gence, instead of as the translations into prose-experience from poetry they are. These idolaters of Benjamin (who may well still be seeing to it that no American student majoring in art or literature can receive a bachelor's degree—not to speak of a graduate degree—without repeated, uncontextualized exposure to Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction") are not unlike Hebel's young German man in Amsterdam, who, when he asks passing strangers whose mansion, whose great ship, and whose funeral he is seeing, and is told "Kannitverstan"—three Dutch words meaning 'I can't understand you'—draws the eternal lesson of the vanity of human success: "Poor Kannitverstan! He cried, 'what can all your riches bring you now? No more than my poverty will bring me one day: a shroud and a winding sheet; and of all your lovely flowers a bunch of rosemary perhaps on your cold breast, or a sprig of rue.'"

The main problem with these wholesale expositions of the blue flowers of Benjamin's prose is not that they choose to reduce his ambivalences and paradoxes into the battle of good and evil, of wisdom and information, of experience and the passing of time. Everything, or at least half of everything in his work urges this patently messianic interpretation. The craving for terms, which Benjamin mocked in his little book of shocks, *One Way Street* (revealed here to be "selected paragraphs" on the model of Andre Gide's *Pages Choisis*), will not be thwarted by the organization of these new collections, which explicitly include the earliest possible citations of the terms that appear in anthology pieces like "The Work of Art...", "Theses on the Philosophy of History," "The Storyteller," and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (all of which were completed after *Volume Two's* close-bracket of 1934). And this is all to the



"Portrait of Toscanini," by David Larsen. Lino cut: oil on paper

so as well," runs Benjamin's paraphrase of Novalis.

This is surely part of the thinking that produced "The Task of the Translator," Benjamin's overrated preface to his 1923 version of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, one of the few pieces in *Volume One* to have appeared in English before the Harvard edition. To be fair, there are many sensuous sentences in the essay:

Unlike a work of literature, translation finds itself not in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one.

The essay is grounded in a Novalisesque idea of "translatability": "If translation is a form, translatability must be an essential feature of its works." The tautological nonsense about essence here and elsewhere deserves to be refuted more thoroughly than the space of this journal permits.

Coincidentally, it was his increasing involvement with that least noticeable of genres, literary journalism, that brought Benjamin into the phase of his writing which the reader of poetry is urged to notice.

A happy achievement of the Harvard edition is the chronology of Benjamin's life corresponding to the bracketed years of each volume. In the chronology at the back of *Volume Two*, one learns about: his luck at gambling (he once won enough at Monte Carlo to finance a week's vacation in Corsica); the shabby room he kept, aged 35, in Paris; the romantic motivations of his various intellectual allegiances; his consuming participation in the literary politics of the Weimar; when his divorce becomes final, his wife takes custody on behalf of their son Stefan of a large part of his immense collection of children's books. Most of the work collected in

good; who doesn't enjoy an Easter egg hunt.

But in the first of these two new volumes, which contains the dissertation essay "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism" (an essay as rewarding for its preview of the intelligent perversities to come as John Ashbery's thesis on Henry Green), Benjamin is just (barely) beginning to write intelligible prose. Until the last sixth of *Volume One*, with his notes on Hebel, his travel essay on Naples (probably written with the Latvian director Asja Lacis, his girlfriend at the time), and *One Way Street*, Benjamin is promising to be another turgid German philosopher.

Though he broke free of the style of this larval stage, he carried some of its unpleasant fallacies with him well

into his forties. The struggles of mind as articulated by Novalis, the brothers Schlegel, Fichte and Schelling that he outlines in "The Concept of Criticism..." have less to do with the ethical dilemmas faced by I and You than with the hashish traumas of I and Not-I. The solipsistic reciprocity of German philosophy so subtly rebuked by Nietzsche's famous warning about looking into the abyss—careful, the abyss is also looking into you!—is taken frighteningly seriously by Benjamin, who quoted enthusiastically from Schlegel: "Everything that one can think, itself thinks—is a problem for thinking." "It is not only persons who can expand their knowledge through intensified self-knowledge in reflection; so-called natural things can do

Reflections is from this period, during which Germany had not yet brought the National Socialists to power, and in which travel was relatively unrestricted.

The limits of the life of a career literary journalist were well-known to Benjamin. He was an acquaintance of Rilke, a snob against the circle around Stefan George (of whose sumptuous, mystical and possibly proto-fascist work it seems only a matter of time and money before it will be brought before the English-speaking world again), a sparring partner for Brecht, an adoring interviewer of Gide, a protégé of Hugo von Hoffmanstahl. He was edited by Martin Buber, was taught in a seminar by Theodore Adorno, was overwhelmed by the work of Kafka (of whom he considered himself a disciple). Although increasingly successful, he had to present himself as secondary to the phenomena of other writers and their work.

He remarked that if he was considered a superior writer, part of it was that unlike most of his colleagues he almost never permitted himself to write in the first person. In his public work the arrogant incomprehensibility of his student writing is driven underground by startling, concrete prose grounded in sensation, quotation, and sympathetic jokes. In his travel notes on Moscow, for instance, every section opens with an observation worthy of his (unknown-to-him) Soviet counterpart Viktor Shklovsky: "Each thought, each day, each life lies here as on a laboratory table"; "Travel by streetcar in Moscow is more than anything else a tactical experience"; "Green is the supreme luxury of the Moscow winter."

But as contrasted to Shklovsky, whose idea of estrangement suggests that art has an end in making the familiar strange, Benjamin is closer to the Argentinian poet Jorge Guin-

hieme, and his exposition of the concept of *hasos*—the art of concealing in one line what has been revealed in the previous line. Art, Benjamin worked all his life to say without saying, is the business of putting things out of reach. Two such things Benjamin put out of reach were the seemingly-familiar concepts of aura and distance. Aura, as sketched in "The Work of Art...", is the authenticity—the singularity in time and space—of an artwork created by hand in the days before lithography (and later photography, and then cinematography) brought on the proliferation of images. Since the Harvard edition has practically been arranged as an outline of terms such as aura and distance, it may be amusing to note that the first appearance of aura in Benjamin's writing is very near the beginning of *Volume Two* in a diary entry titled "Main Features of My Second Impression of Hashish." [The main feature, preserved in goofy seriousness, is that instead of getting brighter, things took on a dark tone for Benjamin: "My smile assumed satanic features...people became more deeply entrenched in the room. The room itself became more velvety, more aflame, darker. I uttered the name of Delacroix."] Significantly, the aura appears at its first perception accompanied by the threat of harm:

"Bloch wanted to touch my knee gently. I could feel the contact long

before it actually reached me. I felt it as a highly repugnant wound to my aura. In order to understand this, it is important to realize that this happens because, with hashish, all movements seem to gain in intensity and intentionality, and are therefore unpleasant."

This fear of unwanted contact is echoed in the description of Poe's and Baudelaire's loathing of being jostled in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." In that essay the shock of involuntary memory is the occasion for a brief paraphrase of Freud's essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle": "Put in Proustian terms, ... only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an experience, can become a component of the *mémoire involontaire*.... In Freud's view, consciousness as such receives no memory traces whatever, but has another important function: protection against stimuli."

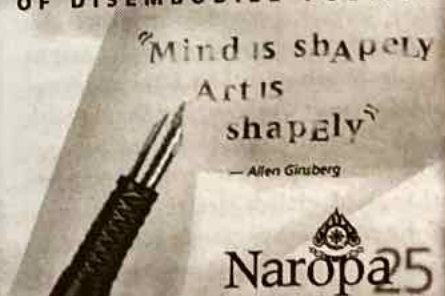
If experience, as opposed to the mere passing of time, is the result of having what Benjamin calls a "passion for waiting," it is certainly worth one's time to look over the second of these new volumes. "Everything is thought. The task is to make a stopover at every one of these many little thoughts. To spend the night in a thought. Once I have done that, I know something about it that its originator never dreamed of."

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Interior with Sudden Joy

BY BRENDA SHAUGHNESSY
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999,
84 pages, \$21.

"The most inscrutable beautiful names in this world / always do sound like diseases. / It is because they are engorged." So begins the epistolary "Dear Gonglya," by Brenda Shaughnessy, whose own name is not at issue but whose poems are often beautifully inscrutable and almost always engorged with exotic vocabulary, "toxic ability," and the supply-side erotics of a joy inseparable from *jouissance*. Shaughnessy goes in for words like *imbroglio*, *besmirch*, *strop*, *succubus*, *quaalude*, *slimsy*, *trinket*, *sepia*, *febris*, *vexed*, *sheepweed*, *pilfered*, *skulduggery*, *tourniquet*, and time and again *blue*. Such diction won't necessarily send you to the dictionary—as would the analogous list from Lucie Brock-Broido, whose poetry provides perhaps the nearest precedent—but you might want to brush and floss after reading. *Interior with Sudden Joy* shares with Brock-Broido's two collections a passion for fetish, the private-tongue lashings of girlish desire, acquisitive epithets and ampersands ("It must be a Love, this crackpot of heart, / my sterling & cashmere & no money. / You my fat bad fricassee, cough of a candle. // Through snow, my little

weather, you are gone"). And like her onetime teacher's, Shaughnessy's rhythms ride roughshod; strategic enjambment and frequent spondees keep us going, off-guard. But whereas Brock-Broido imports with each of her public personae a context of associations which affords us eavesdroppers some purchase (sometimes with the help of endnotes), Shaughnessy's poems, likewise addressed in most cases to an anonymous second person, often lean toward narcissism. The visceral pleasures she takes are contagious, however. Countering exclusivity, she indulges in the inviting, Byronic fun of "What we feel in the solar plexus wrecks us," easily unpacked portmanteau words (*Epi-thalament*, *Arachnolescence*, *Sleptember*, *masokismet*), and some silly puns: "Holding reminds me of fishes and the looming // reelings I had when I caught one, / then lost it or scaled it down to size."

Though rapt by body-image and gaze (Shaughnessy thanks Judith Butler among her many mentors), she is most attentively, giftedly aural. Sound is what bodies and buoys her poems. Witness the aptly titled "Voluptuary":

And if my sister married now then
I will
wed wonder, I will seek blunder,
and wifely be naked for a
throttled,
verging slumber slit with: love
is losing.

If you haven't known the true
faulty
pleasure of half-beauty, the
sublime uncomely,
dreamt without vision two hot
marble arches
round your vague orca trumpet
of a thigh,

then why would you love me?

If, as Helen Vendler has argued, style

ought to be thought of as the material body of poetry, Shaughnessy's style would indeed resemble the allegory of "sudden joy" in Dorothea Tanning's painting, which provides the book's front and back cover and title. It is a shrouded, only vaguely anthropomorphic (long-legged, hoofed, but huggable) style. If such a creature could speak, could we understand it?

This is Shaughnessy's first collection—quite a coup. It may take a few more books' worth of getting to know her before whatever's holding together the sentence-fragment sequences of "Starting Here and Going Back" and "Ever" seem more like catch-worthy monofilaments and less like the Emperor's new threads. I prefer those poems for which she has given the overflow of powerful feelings she seemingly has on tap some counterpoint, collected (which is not to say recollected) them with some contrastive structure or logic. Shaughnessy punctuates "What's Uncanny" with complementary evaluations: "Too much choreography. [...] Too little dance." While I don't think we can ever get too much dance from poetry, I'd prefer a little more choreography (and I say this as someone who goes to poetry as a site of elective inconvenience, eager to imagine what would motivate another human to use words in unexpected and initially inexplicable ways). In the opening poem "Still Life, with Gloxinia," the persona's avowed intention to "make something of you both pigment / and insecticide" is indefinitely deferred, as if the related tale of nuns who dyed their insides with a poisonous berry-juice communion, had tainted the teller in the telling as well. Few of the poems which follow have such elegant conceits.

That Shaughnessy's ear is keener than her eye becomes clear when one compares her most prosodically austere poems to those most simply, visually narrative. The former are far better. "Rise" surprised me—

ambushed, more like—by virtue of its formal, coy restraint.

I rise to make a supper succulent
for the cut of your mouth, your
bite of wine
so sharp, you remember you
were mine.
You may resist, you will relent.

At home in fire, desire is bread
whose flour, water, salt and yeast,
not yet confused, are still, at least,
in the soil, the sea, the mine,
the dead.

The latter quatrain's parallels do the kind of work flagrant gesturing cannot. When in the poem's final stanza the body of the returned, relenting lover (a Christ to her Magdalene?) is said to swell, the "swelling" is all at once a sexual tumescence, the rising of bread, and the bloating of the dead. That she usually forgoes such plainly wrought tropes—"not yet confused"—suggests that Shaughnessy really means it when she writes, "I will seek blunder" and, elsewhere, that "Perfection is the campsite for those who have stopped halfway." She favors the idiosyncratic, unsettled kinesis, before and beyond the rest-stop of some agreed-upon, perfectible convention.

In "Panopticon," on the other hand, we get a straightforward tale of voyeurism: "My bedroom window can be seen from the viewing deck / of the World Trade Center. I've seen it. / What I saw? // My roommate experimenting with my vibrator." The prosaic dullness of these lines cannot be attributed to the eschewal of convention. I'm not so prudish as to look away at this point; it's just that I'd rather savor with what Eliot called the auditory imagination Shaughnessy's "Hamstrings, half edible & music, stretched like catgut, the sad-animal pull." Even the excellent title poem is most stunning in its departures from ekphrasis. At the end of "The Monument," Elizabeth Bishop admonished us to "Watch it closely." Shaughnessy concludes "What's Uncanny" with an analogous, telling imperative: "Listen for it."
We should commend Cynthia

Krupat for yet another elegantly designed book and FSG not only for backing this talented young poet but for leaving her picture off the jacket. The lack of a fix on Shaughnessy's looks keeps alive the cumulative tensions of repeated apparel and body-image worries. ("Ask your mum. / It would kill her if you were ewe gee el why. / And is it a crime to wonder, am I." Maybe that should be *em eye*, aye?) To give us an objective image would be to sap all these tensions in the same way that film versions of *Lolita* forfeit the delicious, saving ambiguities of Humbert Humbert's unreliable narration. I found myself trying to pigeonhole Shaughnessy into some sexual orientation and body type. For all the innuendo, *Interior with Sudden Joy* has remarkably few gender references. These lovers: are they men ("Excluding genitalia, / What is a man? / [...] A reverse neverland") or women ("Easier. She's a cipher, she hasn't been / decided yet")? In "Parallax," she demonstrates a winning empathy for brown dwarves, "those sad bodies too bright // to be planets but too cool / to be stars." Is she, then, "this dead androgyne" for whom "there's only Pandora's squeezebox, locked," who beckons, "Come closer, toward the light"?

If cultural studies scholars read contemporary poetry they'll eat this up. Nods to theory abound. While the Foucauldian title "Panopticon" is gratuitous, a familiarity with Lacan's mirror-stage, crucial to developing a sense of self, illuminates the wonderfully understated closing couplet of "Simulacra": "This is what I used to play myself with. / This is what I used to see the feel." In the spirit of her taste for synesthesia, I eagerly look forward to hearing the feel of Shaughnessy playing herself as she continues to discover how to help others see her from her own angle of insight.

—Andrew Osborn

Andrew Osborn is writing an English dissertation on the use of difficulty in late-20th-century American poetry at the University of Texas, Austin.



Polyverse

BY LEE ANN BROWN
Sun & Moon, 1998,
187 pages, \$11.95

Even on a casual reading, Lee Ann Brown's first full-length collection of poems, *Polyverse*, offers both subtle and immediate pleasures. The poems gathered here are by turns funny, serious, radical, playful, sexy, insightful and moving—sometimes several of these at once. The book highlights Brown's unmistakably original poetic persona, every bit as Southern as it is knowingly avant-garde, astonishingly generous and cheerful even when the world seems bleak or shaken by disaster. With prolonged attention, though, *Polyverse* gets even better. Its facility with poetic forms makes it a strikingly new kind of contemporary poetry. Through energetic engagement with a charismatic narrative persona unlike any that poetry has had before, the book's many formal structures and poetic games discover new possibilities by working changes on a number of poetic traditions. Opening with a couple of pseudo-Emily Dickinson poems that manage both reverence and satire, the book embraces, in various sections, the immediacy of New York School, the personal and literary wildness of the Beats, the word play and political insight of language poetry, and an eroticism that's every bit as contemporary as it is pure (well, impure) Sappho. These leaps from aesthetic to aesthetic rarely jar, although they can be importantly disconcerting; instead, the poet's refusal to settle for a singular approach to poetic form mirrors her thematic refusal to accept a singular identity.

Polyverse reveals all the different things we are and can be to each other, just as it critiques those world views that lock us into a narrow singularity.

Although I don't know whether Brown would use the word herself, what underlies all of *Polyverse* seems a concept of play. But not play simply as entertainment, distraction from the world's supposedly serious business. Rather, what *Polyverse* suggests is that we are always playing, even when the games are deadly. We play who we are in relation to others, we play with the structure of our daily lives, we play with governments and institutions and language even as it might more often seem that they play with us. But, *Polyverse* insists, when we forget that we're playing we forget how to play, and in so doing we forget how the world might be changed.

The book is divided into three main sections, "Her Hearsay Hymn-book," "Velocity City," and "A Little Resistance," themselves divided further into smaller sections that rapidly change aesthetic modes and organizational styles. Poetic form becomes in *Polyverse* not the grim insistence on right and wrong found in much contemporary avant-garde work, but a chance to play with who she might be, what her poems might be—although she never forgets the larger social frameworks in which these possibilities occur. A poem like "The Day the War Started," for instance, lodges its intimate moments ironically, in a larger cultural context:

My cat catches a baby mouse.
I take birth control pill number
three.

Kim says a cloud in the shape of
a cross was spotted
over Washington D. C.
and that Barbara Bush's
broken
leg is a sign.

Yet she is able to switch from this conversational directness to a more theoretical and fragmented (if still emotionally direct) poem like "Coffee":

Save grapes for water. Hat

Book Paper

Every noun becomes a verb. Play
Check Travel

Every verb becomes a noun. I
want to punch you out.

Brown clearly loves word games, and *Polyverse* is saturated with them, from the poems written from a limited selection of letters in the section "amuseme," to the two-word, four-line stanza of the poem "Two-by-Fours," to the long single sentence poem "A Long Sentence Distance." Her joy in the game of poetry shows through also in the many collaborations in the book, written with, among others, Bernadette Mayer, Jennifer Moxley, Lisa Jarnot—what kind of game is it if you can't play with somebody else?

Perhaps most crucially, Brown is a love poet—arguably the best of her generation—able to write tenderly, openly, and often plain lustfully about a risky mix of scenarios. What's amazing is how Brown manages even at her most sensually torrid not to sacrifice critical awareness. Even her most lust-drenched pieces challenge narrow conventions about proper and improper love, whether the subject be multiple bisexual partners ("Thang") or the difficulties of long-term relationships ("A Critical Approach to Love"). In fact, *Polyverse* ends with the beautifully precise thirteen-section poem "Crush," which suggests the need to "reinvent love" and offers Brown's fullest elaboration of the cultural dynamics and limitations of currently dominant notions of love.

Not every poem in *Polyverse* is great. A few of the word games are no more than briefly entertaining, and a couple poems settle for witty cuteness. But even *Polyverse's* occasionally ragged edges contribute to the wild sense of involvement that makes the book brilliant and original.

Reading these poems, one revels in a poetic persona that lives and loves with startling intensity, ready to make and re-make herself and whoever and whatever she encounters. That she can do this with such pleasure, at a time when even poetry often becomes nothing more than the

bearer of tragic burdens or social ironies, reminds us that we get nowhere without love and we can't know how to love unless we know how to play.

—Mark Wallace

Mark Wallace has published a number of books of poetry including, *Nothing Happened and Besides I Wasn't There* (Edge Books), and *My Christmas Poem* (Poetry New York). He edits *Situation*, a poetry pamphlet.

BRIEF REVIEWS

Voice-Over

BY ELAINE EQUI
Coffee House, 1999,
96pages, \$13.95.

If William Carlos Williams began this century's poetry with his dedication to the things of experience—not only the famous wheelbarrow but the rose petals whose edges are seen "cementing the grooved columns of air" in *Spring and All* #7—Elaine Equi's *Voice-Over* ends it with a poetry of disembodied effluvia, effervescence and in-between states. In "Desire In Winter," she writes,

With your white
that is almost blue.

With your blue
that is almost gray.

With your gray
that is almost white.

Again you come
wrapped in the coldness

of a cloud, a drifter
with edges that are not distinct.

In "Fennel" she praises the plant for being, "A sort of cigarette and breath/ mint swallowed all in one bite," and "As much liqueur as fruit or/ vegetable." Equi is interested in the possibilities at the point where edges blur. In "Gold Sandals" she identifies this project with alchemy: "Me—in my/ alchemist slippers/ Me with my miser ways." She casts a wry

eye on her activities here, as usual. And, indeed, an alchemy performed on the detritus of late 20th century commercial culture can have alarming results:

every sort of hybrid
pig squeals grafted onto wheels

burning rubber.
("Voice-Over")

But she shows us where we are at *fin de siècle*, at the close of this century of the cloud chamber and the gene splice. Now realism and Gothic fantasy seem about to converge and Equi is especially astute at rendering the new mix, the commonplace-surreal:

The woman astride the man is a
ghost
and the fact that she's dead

makes it seem more artistic
("Letter of Recommendation")

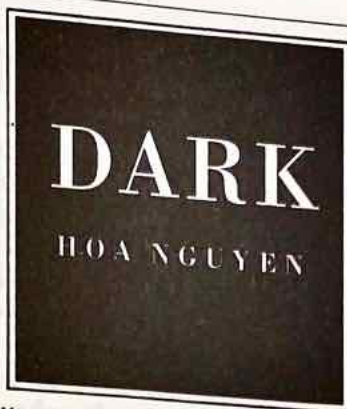
Here, as elsewhere, Equi persuades us that we can't believe our eyes. William's wheelbarrow and flowerpot would be special effects in her world. In fact, Equi takes Williams on directly in her poem, "Thesis Statement," providing her own version of his famous proclamation that "A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words."

Others say that God is a set of
words
held together by an invisible bond

not one can be added or removed.
The poem is a small machine
made of God.

At *fin de siècle*, the once explanatory power of the machine as metaphor seems to have faded. The world and the poem are as strange as ever. With *Voice-Over* Elaine Equi, an heir of Williams and of Lorine Niedecker in her spareness and precision, is perfectly positioned to demonstrate this.

—Rae Armantrout



DARK

BY HOA NGUYEN
Mike & Dale's Press, (Austin, TX),
1999, 50 pages.

All great poets must await their muse, but Hoa Nguyen, in a gorgeous new chapbook from Mike & Dale's Press, rather asserts hers. The title of the first poem in the collection, "Waiting Like Demeter," would seem to connote passivity, but in fact indicates the inevitability of writing. Nguyen's imagination is literally fertile:

I dreamt about my notebook
how fat the spirals are where

I should write down my
dreams: Charles Olson
carrying me through a swarm

of biting flies from the over-
ripe bell
peppers My notebook
dream measuring

the thickness of the blankness
I press
on.

The reference to Demeter, the goddess of harvest, points the reader in the direction of bounty; form, music, thought, and feeling work together to produce an overwhelming sense of the world's ripeness and the speaker's desire to tell us about it. This fullness of perception is strangely accommodated by what is, in essence, a fragmentary and asyntactic style. If the speaker of *DARK* successfully compares writing to harvest, then she is also successful at linking an

elliptical style with the direct speaking of one's mind. The effect is elegant. What Nguyen has to say needs no aesthetic padding in order to enthrall: "this is a body going numb from will / meeting the outside world forehead/ where the feathers were she blinks Athena/ how your wisdom darkens makes/ trouble for me to see in the eye's center" ("Dark"). This is poetry that is confident, aggressive, beautifully stark and strikingly clear.

The book's title functions at a number of levels. The most complex is that of physical color—of both the speaker and the objects and people around her. Nguyen's arresting palette is the locus of much of the volume's lyricism:

I can control the colors of
courage/ So?
("Stratum")

I am full of today/ with my sky
blue/ nail polish
("[Let Me Be a Meaning
ful Soul]")

What your dark eyes take back/
to itself, hugged in a
curve/ of touchness
("Offing")

water drips red/ sun spanning
art/ bug grew huge//
grew green break//
fall run white/ moving
was blood/ break small
("Index Finger")

The concept of darkness also extends into aesthetic realms. As a signifier of all that is visionary, it spreads itself generously over the pages of the book. As a symbol of writing—of its color on the page and thus its fecundity—it is paradoxical. For that which makes it hard to see is also that which we venerate as type *per se*:

it is dark outside
it is dark in my mouth
the sun makes me burn
("The Tea is You You
Are the Tea")

The complex weave of attitudes and perspectives that Nguyen produces is echoed by a stunning set of images at the center of the book. In these images, by Suloni Robertson, light and dark, as well as such loaded binaries as hard/soft, clear/obscure, and natural/artificial achieve a fraught aesthetic beauty that is augmented by extra-aesthetic—political, feminist—humanist—readings. The effect is phenomenological in that it presents us with a world of things-in-and-of-themselves, which is ultimately overlaid with the meanings that make the perceived world what it is: ambivalent and always up-for-grabs.

—Katherine Lederer

Billionesque

BY ALAN BERNHEIMER

The Figures (5 Castle Hill, Great Barrington, MA 01230), distributed by Small Press Distribution, 1999, 28 pages, \$7.50

After a nearly 20-year respite, Alan Bernheimer, one of the original Language poets (published in early organs including *Hills*, *Roof*, and *This*, and anthologized in *In the American Tree*) has published a short second collection. He has apparently taken or been given, as he writes, "time off for behavior." The fourteen poems of *Billionesque*, like those of *Cafe Isotope* (also from *The Figures*), consist largely of such wittily torqued clichés. "Nature," we learn, "especially abhors the smell of vacuums." "Word of Art" begins,

First a flicker of telepathy
Then screw le mot juste

and just when one thinks he might be commenting on his calculated evasions of conventional poetic justness, he continues:

Carefully into its socket
So the electricity doesn't spill.

"Kiosk" ends: "It's hard on the heels of love/ that unrest victims combat

philosophy/ trapped by self and moving/ parts/ upside possibility from mouths of how." After navigating the triple pun of the first line—for to be "hard on the heels of" usually means to follow closely, but lovers are sometimes heels and the phrasing also conjures an image of Cupid clomping about in Dr. Scholls—one still has to ride the buoyancy of nouns that may be verbs before the whole thing cascades into nonsense. Near nonsense, not quite. Bernheimer's almost successful resistance of intelligence has a tendency to spawn new should-be platitudes, like "Only trees keep up with memory's enlargement" and "The play of fruit upon/ the retina is sensuous by itself."

It's not easy to distill a pervading tone from these non-narrative accretions. Lyn Hejinian, whose appreciative blurb decks the back cover, finds in them a joyous wonder in the face of loss and doubt. And yes, Bernheimer's wordplay bespeaks (even speaks into being) much delight. His curiosity is makeshift scientific—what happens when we tweak this like this?—as is his vocabulary. Most remarkable, however, is this work's modesty: ambitious in the refreshing, etymological sense of peripatetic rather than the vote-mongering, cult-of-self sense we late-Romantics have come to expect of poetry. And while the non-sequiturs of much Language writing convey a restlessness, Bernheimer remains calm. Among the vast (billionesque?) populations of world and word, he finds "a dailiness bereft of aperçus" and, undaunted, cobbles together his own, leaving us, in the closing couplet of his title poem, with an intimate assurance: "The beauty of it is/ I am not that important either."

—Andrew Osborn

Religion

BY GILLIAN MCCAIN

The Figures, 1999, 34 pages, \$10

Gillian McCain is one of the main proponents of the Larry Fagin-influenced line-breaks-are-a-waste-of-time school of poetry, but her thrillingly bad attitude is all her own. Her second book, *Religion*, follows

her 1996 debut *Tilt* with 24 even funnier and nastier poems. Her work features "I did this then I did that" New York school immediacy, but undermines it with ironic distance that collapses any naive faith in the immediate as a clear source of value—she constructs things and tears them apart in the same instant. "My whole life has been an out-of-body experience, that's the problem," she writes, and she means it even as she risks experience again.

McCain has a brutal eye for the social ("Establish a code of familiarity with the wires and all you'll get is seasick") but she's just as brutal on herself and her friends. Some of the poems veer dangerously close to prozac-hip self pity, but avoid it through humor and an anger that remains ultimately just extroverted enough—as if she knows that the best way to feel better is to make herself into an ever more public enemy. "Every morning I wake up thanking God for sex, drugs, and violence, because without them we'd all be out of a job," she writes, and the reader laughs and feels simultaneously exposed. If a any revolution is coming, *Religion* suggests, we'd have to be ready to turn it against ourselves.

—Mark Wallace

A Run of Letters

BY DAVID BARATIER

Meeting Eyes Bindery/ Poetry New York Pamphlet Series, 1998, 28 pages, \$5 (\$20/year for series subscription of six pamphlets).

In his new 'pamphlet' of poetry, really a perfect-bound book, David Baratier reveals, through the familiar form of the epistle, his uniquely intimate familiarity with the pain of distance. What adds authenticity to these letters is the fact that Baratier actually sends them to their intended recipients, when at all possible, thereby fulfilling the functionality of their form by reinforcing the poems as real communication between people.

But what circuitous communication it is! Ideas are rarely nailed squarely; rather Baratier prefers to

walk us around them with gymnastic sentences; the swaddled emotions within require a certain respect; they are painful. But when a poem finally lets us in, it's as if respire that nervous breath of revelation along with the speaker. From "To Connor":

What's not eating in a Chinese restaurant have to do with Tianan men Square? There are familiar faces everywhere, reach to them, they have the answer, just don't ask—their opinion outweighs their experience, a wealth of it each of us has to get past blaming for the difference between who we are and who we think we should be.

One senses that the speaker is extraordinarily sensitive to the fragility of relationships; there is always the very real possibility that someone could leave at any moment: "What do you gain by pretending I'm not moving nine hours away? Do you think I am centered on where I live instead of living that rare intimacy of a tender inside area?" Ultimately, in their fusion of the familiar and the sublime, what these poems attempt to delineate is the boundaries between people and more specifically, the constantly evolving definition of the self against the moving backdrop of the other. To put it in the language of a letter: "It makes me wonder where is next/ and how long to wait."

—Kyle Conner

Like Rain

BY KEVIN OPSTEDAL
Angry Dog Press, 1998,
(3464 26th Street San Francisco, CA
94110), 81 pgs, \$10.00

"A shadow fell across my chop suey." & whose? Samuel Coleridge's? Kurt Cobain's? Joanne Kyger's? Carmen Miranda's? These are only a few of the bystanders in the wide-eyed, dark-minded Surf music that hangs like weather in Opstedal's poems. The tsunami seems to sit more comfortably in Opstedal's poems than the "centrifugal breeze," but high ten-

sion turning in the tones and images compels the audience through. "...I'm nearly a bodhisattva/ pounding at the door of unending compassion/ with a sledgehammer." "My eyes degaussed by/ a million silicon butterflies/ pinned to the icy light."

Gradually, the setting becomes somewhat clearer: after some betrayal, or some shattering of illusion, sometimes humor wins—"pausing briefly at yonder taco stand to consider the karmic value of beer for breakfast with Keanu Reeves"—more often it doesn't—"is it too much to ask to be pulverized into a pale dust/ & sifted through for some remnant of feeling?"—and various nouns are around to help move from moment to moment—"The rain kept being rain," "sidewalks stained with the blood of fuchsias," "The heroine was on heroin," "death full of rusted bottles & Joe DiMaggio."

Drugs weather poets. California music emotional upheaval. Though reading much contemporary poetry is like watching a sadist catch a rare disease, Opstedal is more of a neo-Coleridge dreaming of Xanadu, & waking up in Palo Alto.

—Eddie Berrigan

as far as

BY JEN HOFER
a+bend press, San Francisco: 1999

There must be a theory of the infinite in here, or a nascent one that will pop out when we give small words their due: "as" and "to" and all their lexical filaments. Jen Hofer's cadence in these short blocks of text is sharp. The phrases are fluid, yet the phrasing is a play of distances, allowing the words to deepen in tone and quicken in rhythm, like Monk at his most radical. And the sudden moments of incipience are like Oppen's: "Startle, and stare out," "Crying faith"—faith because it's needed to fully countenance the distance. Hofer's serials coax you into faith. By shifting the brackets, alternately "(late)," "(never having seen one)," and to begin without brackets, the poem which recurs as such, "2 Foxes," suggests such attention. Encounter the constituents and the plenary whole will

take care of itself.

as far as is a book about distances, a book of measures, and perhaps the best way to figure these measures is to say the poems aloud: "miles collude, grainy, numbers in formation, not mute, unsequenced."

Forget Poetryland for a second and let me suggest that this writing is experimental: Hofer is brushing perspective up against perspective (as in the sequence, "Short Films") and brushing description up against history (as in the sequence, "terraces"), having a go at things, not ascribing categories per se: an interior/ collapsible lights rather an outline/ does not collapse going out but very difficult/ to ignore

—Patrick Durgin

Announcements continued... from page 3

A Symposium

On November 13-14, 1999, A Symposium on the Work of William Bronk will be held at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, NJ. Participants will include Lyman Gilmore, Burt Kimmelman, Joseph Donahue, Geoffrey O'Brien, Leonard Schwartz, Joseph Conte, and others. There is a \$10 registration fee. For more information, contact conference directors David Clippinger, Burt Kimmelman, and Edward Foster at talismaned@aol.com, or at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

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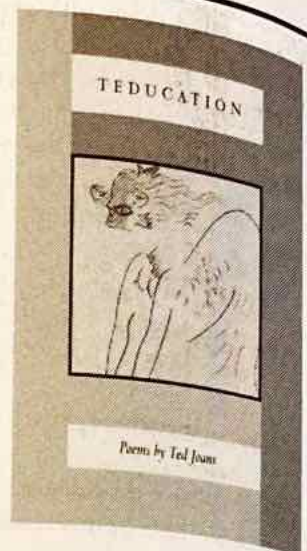
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44 pages, \$20 for 3 issues.
Contributors: Jack Collom Peter Riley,
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Little Magazine)
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Department, Albany, NY 12222), 1999.
Compact Disk.

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Quale Press (P.O. Box 363, Hadenville, MA
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Contributors: Daniel Berrigan, Richard
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Poetry New York (No. 11, Winter/ Spring
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Editor: Peter Johnson
(English Department, Providence College,
Providence, RI 02918), 168 pages, \$8.00.
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