

THE POETRY PROJECT NEWSLETTER

\$5.00

ISSUE NUMBER 201 DECEMBER/JANUARY 2004-2005



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ISSUE NUMBER 201_DECEMBER/JANUARY 2004-2005

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DISTRIBUTION Desert Moon Periodicals, 1226 Calle de Comercio, Santa Fe, NM 87505 • Small Press Distribution, 1341 Seventh St., Berkeley, CA 94710

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THE POETRY PROJECT NEWSLETTER is published four times a year and mailed free of charge to members of and contributors to the Poetry Project. Subscriptions are available for \$25/year domestic, \$35/year international. Checks should be made payable to The Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church, 131 East 10th St., NYC, NY 10003. For more information call (212) 674-0910, or e-mail info@poetryproject.com.

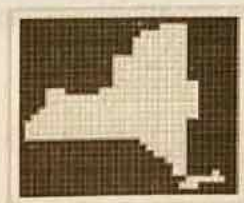
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FUNDERS The Aeroflex Foundation; the Axe-Houghton Foundation; Brooke Alexander Gallery/Brooke Alexander Editions; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, Inc.; Edge Books; The Herman Goldman Foundation; Granary Books; The Greenwall Foundation; The Heyday Foundation; Irwin, Lewin, Cohn & Lewis; the Laura (Riding) Jackson Board of Literary Management; The Jerome Foundation; Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.; the Lila Acheson Wallace Theater Fund, established in Community Funds by the co-founder of The Reader's Digest Association; Nenaker & Herrmann; Penguin; Scribner; Studio One; Talisman House; Vehicle Editions; The Winslow Family Foundation; Anonymous Foundations and Corporations; Russell Banks; Dianne Benson; Mary Rose Brusewitz; Rosemary Carroll; Willem Dafoe; Georgia & Bill Delano; Anne Delaney & Steve Staso; Renée Fotouhi & Henry Scholder; Agnes Gund & Daniel Shapiro; Ada & Alex Katz; Kazuko.com; Michel de Konkoly Thege; Vicki Hudspeth & Wallace Turbeville; Jonathan Lasker; Mark McCain; Deborah Berg McCarthy & Michael McCarthy; Jerome & Diane Rothenberg; Elena Prentice & Summer Rulon-Miller; Jeannette Sanger; Hank O'Neal & Shelley Shier; Simon Schuchat; Andre Spears; Peter & Susan Straub; The Harold & Alma White Memorial Fund; Joan Wilentz; Karrie & Trevor Wright; members of the Poetry Project; and other individual contributors.

The Poetry Project's programs and publications are made possible, in part, with public funds from: the National Endowment for the Arts; the New York State Council on the Arts; the City of New York's Department of Cultural Affairs; and the Materials for the Arts/New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and Department of Sanitation.

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New York State Council on the Arts

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Readers,

My esteemed colleague in the column to my right has pointed out the fact that our annual New Year's Day Marathon is coming up, and he does a fine job of begging for food and books, so you can be spared such good-hearted effontery here. We're going to press post-election amidst a pervasive sense of gloom in the city (except in the pages of the *New York Post*) about the results, which is likely understandable given the general politics of the area, but I'll tell you this: I'll take the relatively definitive result of this election over the debacle of 2000, if for no other reason than the fact that responsibility for the actions of the government can finally fall into the hands of the voter-majority. If I try to tell the Prez there's blood on his hands, he's not going to hear it, but if I tell folks who voted for him that the blood's on their hands, that's finally a down and dirty truth. And a place to begin really hashing it out. I mean, if you don't mind telling me I'll burn in hell, then let's have the conversation go both ways; polite society is a mirage anyway, and I'd rather have a nasty conversation than some bogus public debate full of scripted, lazy rhetoric.

Now, if you disagree, great. Come down to the Project on January 1 and tell me so. There will be over a thousand souls coming in and out, listening, hanging out, and taking part in one of the handful of real community events left in the East Village. You want to hear about where people are going next year, what they're going to do, who they're calling on or calling out, what kind of work they're doing or beginning or finishing? The Marathon is a place to start. And it helps us to have you here, no doubt. That's the sell, beginning and end. The truth is, we make some money at the Marathon, but not a ton; the best thing about it is the gathering, the energy therein, and the art that comes to the surface via a long line of writers, artists, musicians, and crackpots. We don't get everyone here who could be here, but we get a lot of them, and the aim, over the next few years, is to keep new people coming in to the program.

Love,

Anselm Berrigan

U2 TO PERFORM AT NEW YEAR'S

As Steve Mallarmé once famously remarked to Eddie Degas, poems are made out of

words, not ideas. As if to prove that ideas are just as welcome around yer ol' PP, we lurch toward our 31st Annual New Year's Day Marathon Reading, which, this—I mean, next—year, will take place on (surprise!) Saturday, January 1st, 2005. As always (you know what's coming next), we are appealing to the community at large and small (as well as all you inbetweens out there) for donations of books, food, labor, etc.

The Marathon Reading remains the Project's main fundraising event, and it is only able to take place thanks to the continued support of writers, artists, musicians, publishers, vendors, and volunteers. The Marathon starts at 2 p.m. on the 1st and runs until around 1 a.m. on the following day. We need at least 10 volunteers an hour to keep it running smoothly—more than 100 volunteers total over the course of the day.

We will also be gladly accepting food and book donations to sell alongside the Marathon's traditional culinary pièce de résistance, a tuna mold in the shape of W.H. Auden (be sure to come early if you want a piece of his you-know-what). Last year's book table was an unparalleled success, and we are counting on your generosity again this year, whether you're donating a chapbook, a box of out-of-print classics, or one of Giuseppe Ungaretti's cocaine-white pubic hairs.

The Marathon can't and won't happen without your help. Please call us at (212) 674-0910 or e-mail us at info@poetryproject.com. Thank you, all (and get baking, Gillian!).

CORRECTION

At the very last second before the October-November '04 issue of the *Newsletter* went to press, a very evil garden gnome let loose by the Garden Gnome Liberation Front came in the office and removed Tom Devaney's name from his wonderful obituary of Carl Rakosi, leaving the piece completely uncredited (actually, a few canny souls did figure out it was Tom who wrote it, deducing the fact from the photo credit). OK, so it wasn't a rampaging garden gnome who did it, but your friendly, neighborhood asleep-at-the-wheel Newsletter Editor, who somehow didn't catch that Tom's name had dropped off the edge of the page just before she sent the *Newsletter* to the printers. The Editor hopes that Tom finds it in his heart to forgive her and assures anxious readers that she has gotten some much-needed editorial help in the form of Charles

Wolski, who will be helping her minimize like errors in future (much as we are fans of mistakes when they happen to *other people*, delighting in misspoken words, awkward social situations, or serendipitous typos).

CONGRATULATIONS

To Ange Mlinko, whose *Starred Wire* was chosen for the National Poetry Series. To C.D. Wright, who received a MacArthur Fellowship. And to Cole Swensen, whose collection *Goest* (Alice James Books) was nominated for the National Book Award.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Good evening, Poetry Project People.

Tonight I am compelled to tell you how much I appreciate the *Poetry Project Newsletter*. I just finished ripping out the few "useful" pages (classifieds, competitions—blech—and calls for submissions ... I feel so ashamed, so dirty!) from another literary newsletter, but the rest is now physically defined as trash. In contrast, I save every curled up, highlighted, scribbled-upon issue of the *Newsletter* and sometimes force it upon my friends, exclaiming "You must read this ... it's so exciting! There's actually an inspiring/amusing/useful thought in here!"

You conjure the closest thing to that coveted poetic dialogue (blah blah blah) everyone's always on about. I mean, I feel part of this usually evasive "conversation," just through the act of reading. That's a tough effect to achieve.

[Aside: I also like the journal *Conduit* for this reason.]

So thanks. Now I can sleep more peacefully.

Yours truly,

Chris Prentice

THE POKER

On Thursday, December 2nd at 6 pm, *The Poker* will celebrate its 5th issue and raise some much-needed funds as part of the reading series, "d.a. levy lives: celebrating the renegeade press," at ACA Galleries, 529 W. 20th St., 5th Fl., in New York City. In return for your donation, you will get wine, music by Drew Gardner, and readings by *Poker* authors including Ange Mlinko, Laura Elrick, yrs truly, and editor Daniel Bouchard.

DONALD ALLEN 1912-2004

Donald M. Allen died August 29, 2004, here in San Francisco, at the age of 92. He was the editor of *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, and of *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*. He discovered, promoted, and translated many U.S. and international writers, from Eugène Ionesco to Ed Dorn to John Rechy; his work on "The San Francisco Scene" issue of *Evergreen Review* (1957) alone would have made his name in literary history. Being with him was like being with some odd, totemic figure from another place and time. He was a little spooky, but I learned to love even his elusiveness. Since his death I keep thinking of him, seeing him lumber toward me, a smile on his august face.

I remember goggling when introduced to him at a party at Bob Gluck's house. Later on he worked it out. "You didn't believe I was really alive," he said, accusingly. As I began to assist Lew Ellingham with his life of Jack Spicer, I asked Don for more and more help; my cluelessness must have amused him, for he saw me through many difficulties, first in his stylish cottage on Grand View in the Castro, then in his apartment on Diamond Heights Boulevard above Market Street, in what I took to be an "old people's building." In later years he had been fading. We would plan to have lunch and then, the morning of the day, he would call and cancel, complaining that he hadn't been able to sleep the night before. "OK, Don," I would say, adding a few more words in the midst of which he would hang up on me. His curt ways I came to enjoy. They betokened an era when people had "character" (by which I suppose I mean "eccentricity"), like figures from Dickens. One time we had driven up to Marin County and had stopped off at a bookstore on the way home. I was browsing idly though the aisles, the way you do when the other person is intent on buying something specific, and after a bit I realized he had driven off without me. Always impatient. Luckily I know the bus routes pretty well. I got home just fine. And he was a hermit, a recluse or what have you, or something like it. He didn't like being interviewed per se, but if I had specific questions and wanted specific answers, he would type them all out and hand them back to me. Ben Friedlander, who edited Charles

Olson's *Collected Prose* with Don (1998), never met him face to face.

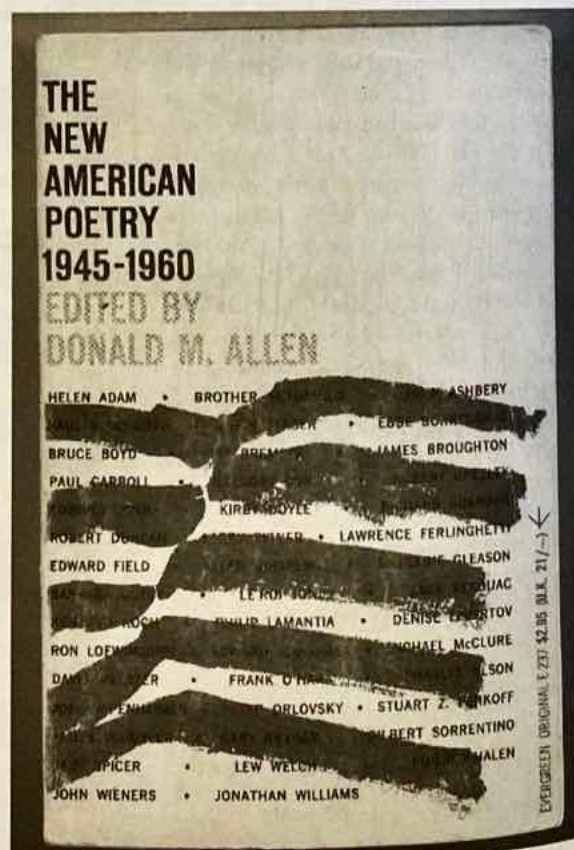
I used to ask Don about the role of the editor but after a while I stopped asking, for he would make me gifts to illustrate his answers. I asked him about editing the "Eye on Mexico" issue of *Evergreen Review*, and off his wall he took the framed drawings by Juan Soriano that had featured in that 1959 issue, and he said, "You're the first person to ask me about them in 30 years. They are for you." We would tease him about sex. He had never put any of his authors on the casting couch, he said, denying indignantly the rumors that had gathered around him for years. Yes, he'd had sex with one of the "New Americans," one only, that's all, only one. (Jack Kerouac.) He had, of course, been fond of many others, among them John Wieners, LeRoi Jones, Philip Whalen. I always thought he'd been at least a little in love with Barbara Guest, back in the 1950s—if he was ever down, you could ask him to tell you the story of meeting Barbara Guest in Yaddo or wherever and he would pick right up. I imagine that his closest friend was Robin Blaser in Vancouver: the two spoke often on the phone and visited when they could. Most of all, when you visited with Don, you learned a lot about Frank O'Hara. Until right before his last illness, Don had the most beautiful Joan Mitchell painting, a square of glowing rose and orange. It would sit in a chair as though it were a person. Frank had taken him to meet all the artists during one week in 1958 and Don had bought everything Frank told him to, and had spent under 900 dollars for 12 or 15 great paintings.

I asked him about Joe LeSueur's book, *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara: A Memoir*, and Joe's account of the wild wake for Frank O'Hara in their apartment in New York, when Kenneth Koch came bounding up the stairs with two suitcases to take away all the O'Hara

manuscripts with him, protecting them for posterity. Don brought me to his back room and kicked a suitcase with his toe. "There's one of them." The suitcase, with its label, "Hold for Donald Allen," lies beneath my desk now, empty of course, the oddest conversation piece in the room. He was generous to Small Press Traffic, the experimental poetry center in San Francisco, and it was at Small Press Traffic that he made his last public appearance in 1999, to launch the reprint of *The New American Poetry*.

Don was fond of Marjorie Perloff, whose book on O'Hara he loved, and of Maureen O'Hara Smith, Frank's surviving sister. I call him "Frank" as though I knew him, but it was only from listening to Donald Allen speak of him that he came to seem palpable to me, a real person. I hope when I'm in my 70s, 80s, 90s, I'll be able to fill the room with my ghosts, the men and women I knew and loved and lost to a death that seems more and more like a mere strip of cellophane, a formality, that's all.

—Kevin Killian
San Francisco, CA



DEAR MICHAEL (10)

Mark McMorris

No grammar will console the human
who feeds on utopia, and my eyes
are always open, even in the tense
mise en scène where we exchange bodies
and dismantle the prophecies
of a whirlwind, warlike encounter
in the sacred forest. Reading
your books, I see nothing of what
you will become at the noon
of your vanishing, when the poems
falter and words grow desiccate
symbols in a mimesis of power. Empty
as perfume dreamt of in Créole
islands by a poet, my experiment
of looking and schooling arrives
at its limit. I am not what you see
and I am assuredly an individual.
What the kidnap says in the abstract
remains on the books.

Mark McMorris is the author of several books of poetry, including The Blaze of the Pouï (University of Georgia Press), The Black Reeds (University of Georgia Press), Moth-Wings (Burning Deck Books), and most recently, The Café at Light (Roof Books, 2004).

READING (ART) REPORT

Painter Among Poets George Schneeman
Selected Photographs Rudy Burckhardt
Tibor de Nagy, New York City
July 8 to September 11, 2004

Tibor de Nagy, the gallery attentive to the unpredictable and tender links among New York School visual artists and poets, recently exhibited a selection of George Schneeman's collaborations and Rudy Burckhardt's photographs. A foreign city, the intimacy of a portrait, the recognizable curve of a friend's signature—this exhibition reminded me of collaboration's wide and subtle range.

Leaving Switzerland and arriving in New York in 1935, Burckhardt was overwhelmed by the city's daunting scale, and one can see a little of a stunned effect in his black-and-white photographs. They possess a modern attention to the drama of New York's endlessly defamiliarizing designs and stacked perspectives, but Burckhardt adds a sober chill to his subtle renditions, as though he longed and looked for correspondences that were more than visual. *Circles* (1939) renders a moment of simultaneity and correspondence: a woman in a dark skirt patterned with white donut shapes has just walked over a strip of sidewalk with glass circles embedded in its surface. From the middle distance, Burckhardt catches how the circles of her skirt echo the circles in the sidewalk. There is no sign that this woman is aware of how her skirt and timing helped to create this image—we only see her shoes and legs, the dark sheen of her stockings, and her skirt—perhaps there is a suggestion of sadness about connections usually missed or lost. *Jackson Pollock 2, Springs, Long Island, New York, 1950* alludes to and develops the echoing forms of *Circles*. One of Pollock's drip paintings takes up the lower half of the photograph, an early and dark layer of rhythmic splatter that seems to rip up the bright white canvas. The curved forms and points of convergence in the painting correspond to the pattern of open paint cans above the canvas. Crouched close to the floor, with his arm reaching toward a can of paint, Pollock's physical form links the distinct sections of this photograph, making their formal similarities bounce and resonate.

This show highlights Burckhardt as a subtle portraitist of New York School painters. He poses them in the context of their work, letting the complexity of their expressions shape the photographic image of the paintings. In *Joan Mitchell VI* (1957) the painter looks to the side, regal but apprehensive. Her face and hair—light—and her clothing—charcoal

dark—seem to be the “palette” for the wild but restrained gestures and thickly swirled facture in the painting behind her. Both a portrait and a cityscape, *Edwin Denby on 21st Street* (1937) is a treasure. Taken at roof level, the photograph is split by the diagonal line of the roof's edge, and allows the viewer to look over three blocks on 21st Street. The block in the foreground is busy with cars, trucks, and people; the farthest block becomes abstract in a hazy light. With all the street detail it might be easy to miss the portrait of Denby. He's sitting on the roof, and in the upper right-hand corner of the photograph—serene, well-dressed, looking straight into the camera, a curled strand of hair has fallen on to his forehead with charm.

It struck me that Schneeman's collaborations with poets are charming too, but in a louder, funnier way. Fruit stickers, monkeys, nudes, neon orange, whiteout: surprising images appear in playful, unpredictable arrangements. Quirky phrases—“the grey ball goes batt”—skew images' expected associations. Working—in the most playful sense—with Anne Waldman, Ted Berrigan, Bill Berkson, Michael Brownstein, Larry Fagin, Peter Schjeldahl, and others, each image has its own peculiar cartoon bang, Schneeman's unmistakable visual signature. What could be more generous than an artist who continually discovers his style by directly engaging with the styles of his friends? Collage is perfect for collaboration, and is perfectly developed by Schneeman into a visual conversation, a patchwork of shared and responsive perceptions.

Perhaps because I saw this show the day before the anniversary of September 11th, many of these pieces, created in the late '60s and early '70s, resonated with events of the present and the recent past. In *Statue of Teddy Bear*, a collaboration with Ron Padgett (1968), a tiny Statue of Liberty rides a wave rendered in bright blue pencil. Above the wave is a fragment of yellow legal paper with the following declaration typed upon it: “I think it's time the Statue of Liberty turned and faced the nation.” It seems like the fragment has been cut to fit the bear's side, between his simply shaped arm and leg. With squiggly pen lines covering his face, floating in the white paper sky, this black teddy bear seems to be in the midst of coming into or out of visual existence. Play and imagination, friendship and comfort: these are needs, oh Statue of Teddy Bear, we want to welcome today.

—Kimberly Lamm

BY THE WATERS OF MANHATTAN

TALKS BY/ON JEWISH POETS

Poets discuss and read from Jewish poets who have influenced them, as well as from their own work

Richard Hell on Nathaniel West
Tuesday, December 7, 2004
7 pm

Karen Weiser on George Oppen:
Lived Perception and Language
Tuesday, January 18, 2005
7 pm

Teachers & Writers Collaborative
5 Union Square West, 7th Floor
New York City
For information, call 212 358 9534

Presented by The Committee
On Poetry/ Jewish Below
Fourteenth Street

These talks are made possible by
a grant from Educational
Alliance's Jewish below
Fourteenth Street Project, which
is funded by the UJA-
Federation of New York to
enrich Jewish life in Downtown
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TALKS ARE FREE TO THE PUBLIC

"UNCANNILY IN THE OPEN": IN LIGHT OF OPPEN

by Rachel Blau DuPlessis

The impact of George Oppen's poetry is not aesthetic only, but is an ontological arousal to thought itself—not to knowledge as such, but to the way thought feels emotionally and morally in time. The way it feels is moving, aching, startling, and barely consoling. Oppen's serial works are based on thought rather than knowledge (don't misunderstand this): a motivated, apparently non-tendentious, even random cast into and among materials that is forever open-ended and changing: "there are things/ We live among and 'to see them/ Is to know ourselves'" (NCP 163). It wasn't so much collage that Oppen did (though it sometimes seems to be) as gnomic aphorism pitched past thought by thought. One can call this, precisely, the negative way: against fusion, totality, rest. If culture means assent, we are doomed to those who want to think for us. If it means skeptical hope, we can, like Oppen, work against wholeness, positive thinking, delusive ideologies, celebratory visions. His work exemplifies Blake's call to make "Mental Fight": a critique, an examination, a skeptical wariness combined with an underlying fervent hope, a readiness to experience the ruptures and possibilities of our place and time.

The sensation of reading George Oppen, as of reading Paul Celan, is of being propelled into a space on the edge, of being brought out about as far as one can go by a curious and unique mix of thought and language practices. For Oppen is, like Celan, a poet of negativity, of ontological intransigence. Both writers offer the sensation of leaving the "poem" as made object with its conventions and attractiveness, leaving the text as contained formula of words, and of leaving the poetic career as a curated artifact, in order to be in the world of statement itself, both beyond language and inside it. The only poem for our time is something that refuses poetry. Both could be called hermetic poets; yet of course both insisted that they were only writing a reality as they understood it. Both used a form of the kenning: more clearly in Celan's fused word nodules, and for Oppen in some of the odd things (I mean words) that end up together, kenning-like, on one line, like "page the magic" (NCP 278), or "distances the poem" (NCP 281), or "center of the rock image" (NCP 271), riddling, mutually illuminating word clusters. Certainly both refuse to console. Both would say, as Celan did, that language in poetry "does not transfigure or render poetical; it names, it posits, it tries to measure the area of the given and the possible" (Rothenberg/Joris 1998, 155).

The January 1958 speech by Paul Celan in which he accepts the prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen offers some terms pertinent to Oppen. Celan will refer, in this passage, to the recently launched Russian satellite Sputnik. Its launching was a Cold War crisis moment for the West, thereupon compelled to weigh its own technological (and covertly military) prowess and "superiority," the compromises of its educational systems and values. Celan offers an even deeper crisis out of which he writes.

[These lines of thought, the poems, said Celan] are the efforts of someone who, overarced by stars that are human handiwork, and who, shelterless in this till now undreamt-of-sense and thus most uncannily in the open, goes with his very being to language,

stricken by and seeking reality.

(Felstiner 1995, 116)

Our political, historical time keeps sending us out, in Celan's decisive phrase, "uncannily in the open." But because of this political and existential homelessness and exposure, one must undertake to find in language a kind of strange home, and in reality a subject. Celan's final phrase in German is *wirklichkeitswund und Wirklichkeit suchend*—in John Felstiner's close-English gloss, "reality-wounded and Reality-seeking" (Felstiner 1995, 117). This phrase, and its close companion, "most uncannily in the open," seem particularly germane to a meditation on George Oppen, and not only because of the accidental onomastic pun. Oppen also spoke of the shelterless subject and the high stakes of the act of writing, the going to language "reality-wounded and Reality-seeking."

In the poetics and projects of Oppen there were several intransigent problems—how to achieve a saturated-realism, presenting the things that had presented themselves to be comprehended, the "things on the road," the images encountered, but how to do so without what (he felt was) the taint of surrealism, or willful juxtapositions. And second: how to understand the space we are in now, in this particular postwar of modernity: our exposure "uncannily in the open" without the props our civilization and other civilizations have depended upon for hundreds of years: Enlightenment self-justificatory reason or vatic irrational mysticisms of the non-secular, including religion treated as certainty, as religiosity.

Nothing is so simple, but for purposes of this argument I would say that one central instrument of his attention to these issues in and as poetry, is a central formal mechanism: the line. To understand this, we have to acknowledge "line" as a crucial communicative means of poetry itself. That is, something fairly straightforward, but highly distinctive, separates and distinguishes poetry from nearby modes like fiction and drama that also unroll in time and use sequencing tactics of various kinds. The word narrativity evokes the central aspect of story-telling—making sequenced events with some point unroll in represented time. Performativity means making elements of coded and decodable gestures in special space and time. Poetry is the kind of writing that is articulated in sequenced, gapped lines and whose meanings are created by occurring in bounded units precisely chosen, units operating in relation to chosen pause or silence. The line segment creates meanings. The act of making lines and their particular chains of rupture, seriality, and sequencing is fundamental to the nature of poetry as a genre. Fundamental to what can be said in poetry, as poetry. Segmentivity—the ability to articulate and make meaning by selecting, deploying, and combining segments—is the underlying characteristic of poetry as a genre.

Oppen remasters and changes the lyric, proposes a subjectivity ("reality-wounded and Reality-seeking") by historicizing (perhaps this is "temporalizing") not only the speaking subject of poetry, but the line itself, the material practice of poetry.

In the starlight things the things continue
Narrative their long instruction and the tide running
Strong as a tug's wake shorelights'

"UNCANNILY IN THE OPEN": IN LIGHT OF OPPEN

Fractured dances across rough water a music
Who would believe it
Not quite one's own
With one always the black verse the turn and the turn
(NCP 213)

There are a number of allusions to, and metaphors for poetry and the poetic line in this passage: "narrative" (amusingly), "long instruction," "a music," "dances,"—not the least of which is "the black verse the turn and the turn." This alludes to blank verse (that is, to epochal poetic form in the humanist period), to the dark ink of writing on the page, to the darkness of water at night, and the dark side of modernity's unfounded optimisms. It also alludes to the mechanism inside verse that makes it "turn," to turn the plow to make the next furrow of work—precisely the etymological meaning of verse. By the layering of the encrypted words blank verse underneath black verse, the old humanist line is alluded to and surpassed, and a new ethical and formal space for a post-humanist "black verse" line "uncannily in the open" is suggested. "Black verse" could, without too much overstatement, allude to poetic tactics chosen when one is faced with dark events of recent history, wounded by that darkness, and yet "Reality-seeking." It is at once the prosody of and the ethical calling into the *via negativa*. "The black verse" is always in motion, because it derives from the play of waves, which is the play of historical time, and which is the play of the poetic segment. "Black verse" is Oppen's metaphor for his poetry of negativity: an un-consoled poetry of turning and searching, an un-consoling poetry of hope. To repeat Celan, "black verse" leaves one "uncannily in the open."

Especially in his later poetry, Oppen achieves a non-surrealist, but continuous combinatorio—a realist but destabilizing combinatory movement, by the junctures along the line, the openings inside the line, and by the hinges created by linebreak. The strained, open, gnomic and aphoristic line of his later poetry gives to him, but with a different ethics, a different epistemology, what surrealism has given to others: an investigatory tool to explore how the world may be put together differently by setting certain materials in combination. This is not a magical irrationalism in Oppen, but it does create a sense of unresolvable oddness at the core of the real. The vertigo of these unrolling line turns of "black verse" propels one magnetically down the *via negativa*, the road of negativity, skepticism, and resistant hope. This is the goal of Oppen's saturated-realism (the opposite of surrealism), and he achieves this not by combining image-based words, but by the startling combinatorio of his linebreaks. These linebreaks offer a sense of another space, the space of awe and the inexpressible. One aspect of the "uncanny open" is, then, Oppen's vertiginous sense of statement, syntax, and space. How the spaces of the poem are like the universe of stars, and of human losses. How a poem swung from the smallest to the largest terms at once, a netting of the void. The open is also the historical and dialectical swing of statement, where the lines are thesis and antithesis at once, where any "synthesis" is like the beginning of a new dialectical formulation.

In their use of fragmented phrases, Oppen's lines are not static, but the phrases, taken as objects, seems to stream toward each other in a desire for connectedness in the between created by the poem. This desire for connectedness is never fulfilled in the later poems.

They are something between full statement and attenuated absences, plenitude in opacity, bridging between the two states in a literal demonstration of the between. The space of the between is sometimes figured as whiteness inside the line, a kind of glow of possibility of the condensation of any one thought into finality, but as more possibilities are created, the sense of a "black verse" overwritten with itself, also increases. The phrases stream along all on the same "speaking plane," but they turn both toward and away from each other as the stream of language moves along. There is very little settled (there is, indeed, very little final punctuation or commas), and nothing seems to end, even at the conclusion of any given poem. Yet many of the statements have the force of enormous pronouncements. This is black verse, a wobbling line of statement afloat on mystery and grief.

One is often straining for meaning as it shifts, via linebreak, right under your eyes. Indeed, any given line may have two centers—a completed thought and an incompleting thought (in the swing to the next line). This is a plausible condition of poetry in general, one might say, but Oppen pushed this potential of the poetic line very far. Finally often in the later work, the poem never ends but simply stops, leaving us where we are: and by this we know we are "uncannily in the open." (I have of course, echoed both Celan's phrase and Oppen's own line, "by this we know it is the real / / That we confront"; NCP 202.) The uncanny open of Oppen exists in the tensions between surface and depth, between conclusion and endlessness; between sententia/aphorism and the breaking of those vessels not by force, but by the direct continuance of thought itself. This is Oppen's saturated realism, a mode of practicing "combination" that makes a critical answer, in form, to surrealist practices of the image, allowing for alternative combinations, pointing to real things. Oppen wants to show that claims of our materiality are the same as claims of our mystery: "I suppose it's nearly a sense of awe, simply to feel that the thing is there and that it's quite something to see" ("George Oppen" 1969, 164). Where materiality and mystery join dialectically along the line, there is the uncanny light of his poetry.

Notes: The essay refers to the following works: John Felstiner. Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995; George Oppen, New Collected Poems. Edited with an introduction by Michael Davidson, preface by Eliot Weinberger. New York: New Directions, 2002 (abbreviated NCP); "Interview with George Oppen," conducted by L.S. Dembo on April 25, 1968. Contemporary Literature 10. 2 (Spring 1969): 159-177; Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris. eds. Poems for the Millennium: The University of California Book of Modern and Postmodern Poetry, Volume 2: From Postwar to Millennium. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

"Uncannily in the open": In Light of Oppen" comes from a longer work of the same title to be published in a forthcoming book of essays, Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work by University of Alabama Press. It was delivered in 2003 at the University of California, San Diego, on the occasion of Rachel Blau DuPlessis's receipt of the Roy Harvey Pearce/Archive for New Poetry Prize. Her newest book of poetry is DRAFTS. Drafts 39-57, Pledge, with Draft unnumbered: Précis. Cambridge (England): Salt Publishing, 2004. She teaches English and Creative Writing at Temple University.

AKILAH OLIVER

Talks to Rachel Levitsky

Between poet and audience lies a vast reservoir of space and air. Some poets push through it, striving to achieve some sort of liftoff between paper and ear. Akilah Oliver reaches fearlessly into and through this mutable medium, engaging body, sound, and breath in her conjoining of the physical activity of writing and performing with the ideals of justice, peace, and compassion. Oliver is the teacher of "Flesh Memory" workshops, which facilitate a multidisciplinary approach to activating and connecting with the writing process and the founder of LINKS Community Network, a Boulder-based group dedicated to creating action for positive change in the healthcare industry and honoring her son Oluchi McDonald, who died tragically and unnecessarily in a Los Angeles hospital in 2003. She is the author of *the she said dialogues: flesh memory* (Smokeproof/Erudite Fangs, 1999), as well as a new chapbook/CD, *An Arriving Guard of Angels, Thusly Coming to Greet* (Farfalla Press, 2004). She currently teaches at Naropa University in Boulder.

On Friday, July 25, 2003, Rachel Levitsky spoke with Akilah Oliver about her evolving work/performance/opus, *An Arriving Guard of Angels, Thusly Coming to Greet*, written and performed by Oliver in collaboration with Latasha N. Diggs (voice, chaos pad), Fanny Ferreira (voice), Bethany Spiers (guitar), and Rasul Siddik (trumpet), which was performed afterward in Brooklyn.

Rachel Levitsky: I'm interested in how performance and poetry interweave and separate.

Akilah Oliver: In my mind they are always separate and I'm surprised that people think of me as a performative-type poet because that's seldom my intent. I'd envisioned *An Arriving Guard of Angels, Thusly Coming to Greet* as a text piece that incorporated sketches and graffiti art, some documented from photographs and others from my son's sketchbooks, and that I would write a text that would weave in these visuals. The piece changed very quickly, and the next element that came out of it was a collaboration with musicians: electronic music, jazz trumpet, and electric guitar, morphing it into an oral piece. So for me that was a surprising intersection. It hadn't necessarily been the intent of the piece, to become a collaborative performance with musicians.

RL: Tell me about the visual versus the oral, and the history of visual elements in your work. Where does the visual exist for you? It sounds like you were very specifically thinking about image in this piece.

AO: In most of my performance work, the visual existed in the living body. The body was the central visual element—the body nude, the body semi-clothed, the body interacting with other bodies—so it was a living kind of visual that depended on subjectivity and the gaze. That is, those performances depended on how the audience viewed the body and how I contextualized it in a given text and all the elements in a stage play—lights, space, props and so on. *An Arriving Guard of Angels*,

Thusly Coming to Greet is a very different piece performance-wise for me. I'm very much influenced by graffiti because my son was a graffiti artist and this piece came out of his death. By graffiti, I mean large-scale murals of names, tags, and graphics, which are very beautiful, but they are temporary in the sense that they're placed in public spaces. They interrupt the discourse because the public discourse is reserved for advertising. Large billboards are in the realm of paid advertising, so these what I call phantom bodies—in other words, graffiti artists—put up a piece on a train, or on the side of a wall and there is a certain lifespan for that piece. I don't know how long that lifespan could be, but it's not going to be years, we know that much. Sooner or later that disruptive image has to be eliminated. I'm fascinated with graffiti, how these bodies, these people who create graffiti challenge the discourse around the death of the author, blah blah blah, in that postmodern bullshit discourse. Graffiti was postmodern before the postmodern ever was. Graffiti questions who owns the material, who can even "read" the text, the notion of accessibility. I mean we look at graffiti and we're engaged, whether we're revolted, attracted or dismissive, or even if we think it's pretty or ugly—it forces an engagement. Often the nonconsensual viewing public can't read that script, those letters, literally. I don't know what it means and even if I can make out all the letters, I can't necessarily ascribe meaning to it. Part of that has to do with the anonymity of the author and the codes of the text and the lack of accessibility. So, the sense of these



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invisible, phantom bodies creating visual text, beautiful large-scale visual disruptive text in public space, is, to me, fascinating.

RL: And they are very often literally "moving" pieces as well, whether in a style that mimics movement or they are literally on a train, or that you are on a train moving and a piece is in the station, so again it has the phantom sense you speak of—it goes by really quickly.

AO: It's fleeting. It's nomadic in that way. It has an unstable quality, but is weirdly fixed in urban landscapes and not-so-urban landscapes, in little alcoves all over the country, like Boulder.

RL: And the world.

AO: And around the world, absolutely. I have about three pages of photographic documentation of graffiti in four different cities in South Africa. Beautiful stuff, you know, in terms of the lettering, styles that are so incredibly different, gorgeous fonts. Graffiti artists have an entire glossary and vocabulary that they use to critique and to read their own work.

RL: In advertising language they call it branding, and in graffiti, it's called tagging. The graffiti artist is certainly aware of it as advertising space, in terms of tactics. What do you see as the difference between tagging and branding and how do they inform each other?

AO: There's definitely a sense of informing back and forth, an existing dialogue. I think

graffiti writers are aware of their position as insurgent authors. Even the word "tagging" has a sense of usurping. I'm going to tag, hit split [laughter]. Even "the tagging" has the sense of an active moniker, it's an action. Time informs how the work goes up—do I have a lot of time, a set number of hours, do I have a few minutes to get this up? So there is always this interloper sense. As for "branding," I think even the term itself has a more proprietary sense. I can brand this space. I can own this space, name it, and claim it as mine. Architecture and public space act like bodies. The buildings are these bodies that hold up the culture.

RL: Competing forces of how space is used, whether it's moved through or colonized...

AO: ...has to do with power relating to empire, on one level. There is a certain amount of disregard and co-opting, which is nothing new. But a lot of graffiti artists work in advertising, in graphic arts, in all kinds of surface, legit jobs. Just like what any of us do for money.

RL: The visual has moved in your work from being a moving, living body to a more phantom graffiti artist. Where do they intersect?

AO: What I'm saying about graffiti is that it's an aesthetic informing a text that is a collaboration between musicians and poets, and poets are voices. There won't be anything, when people come at this stage of the show, that will be visibly graffiti. We don't have art work as part of the show, so it's interesting that the absent body, the phantom body, the graffiti artist, the producer, is feeding this piece, is part of the aesthetic of it, but isn't obtrusively anywhere in it. Rather, I'm pulling on the energy of the absent visible, this idea of how bodies mark time, name, and disappear. What does inform this piece in terms of the phantom body is ritual around death and spirit and the dead. A lot of this piece is about naming the dead. In many cultures there's a belief that "the dead are not under the earth." That the dead are with us in spirit, that death is a complicated thing and bodies don't necessarily just give up attachment to the earth. So there's this sense of the present phantom body as always being present in this piece. It is about the process of how we honor the transition of bodies into spirit. For me, it is the absent visible, phantom body again. I keep using those four words interchangeably: absent, visible, phantom, body.

RL: Absent and visible, that's nice.

AO: Just like in a graffiti piece, I see the piece and know that some energy, some labor, people, or a person went and created that and made that happen, and I can feel the presence of people when I look at graffiti, very, very

strongly. This same sense of feeling the presence of the absent body is what *An Arriving Guard of Angels, Thusly Coming to Greet* tries to achieve. I want to create a space where the absent body is very much visible and a part of our aesthetic and a part of our struggle and a part of how we construct ideas about what it means to live.

RL: We're speaking around words, how the visual becomes musical, becomes electronic, and the boundaries that do or don't exist between the dead and the living. Words seem to be very amorphous and mutable. Music is another one, amorphous like words.

AO: Maybe somewhere down the line I'd like to do a performance with visuals, but I'm not very interested right now because I feel like we're making tags hit in space orally with the text and especially with electronic [sounds]. I haven't considered electronic devices as instruments before, as serious instruments. Before working with Latasha Diggs, I thought of electronic instruments as something to play with for feedback, reverb, and echo. But collaborating with her has opened up the possibility of electronic music, in particular the chaos pad as a serious instrument. I'm fascinated by its range—[you can] hit, tag, reverb, sing, echo something, then it disappears and the next minute something thoroughly different happens. It's a way of creating text with the nomadic sense of tagging, hitting, and it hits in different spaces, then withdraws, or it can keep repeating and looping or doing something. It's almost like the aesthetic that I've created around graffiti art (I admit not all graffiti artists share this aesthetic) and my sense of the absent phantom body. The nomadic guerilla writing of graffiti art has fed the composition of this performance piece, which is exciting.

RL: I'm thinking about the connection between the Anglo-European capitalism that colonizes spaces as land that one possesses and puts borders around, and burial that is a dead person under the ground and the notion of nomadism—a different use of space as well as a different understanding of death. How in this moment in NYC and in the United States, which is a colonial venture into a nomadic culture, do these ideas coexist? Is there room for a non-dominant idea of nomadism? Maybe it is one of our classic American paradoxes, these two ideas coexisting?

AO: New York is a very nomadic culture and city. There's always some displacement, replacement, some motion happening with bodies constantly throughout the city [such as] subterranean trains always moving. But there's also a level of immigration that shapes

and changes the character of entire boroughs such as Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan—changes the faces and face of the city. It seems very much the centerpoint, the epicenter. And it's the most capitalist place in the world at this point. It's one of the centers for markets and for tracking market investments. It makes sense that it's the place of confluence. Like in ancient Arabic cultures, centers of capital were also the places of cultural confluence.

RL: Though dominance repeatedly fails, it's necessarily the impulse of the power, the erasing of graffiti, the clean-ups in Queens, the battles against the return of graffiti as reported in the *New York Times*.

AO: Capital has to keep up the gesture that sustains itself, that sense of dominance, of erasure, the guise that it's never-ending. It's limited, but it must keep up the gesture or how else could it maintain the illusion of dominance? And if we can't erase you, what else can we do? Metaphorically, erasure is a gesture of death. We will just erase you—in Queens, in Iraq, we'll shoot you. In public hospitals, like the one my son Oluchi was in, they'll let you die.¹ There are all kinds of ways that bodies are erased in capital culture. I'm saying capital culture instead of capitalist culture because I think capitalism is something that happened already. We're talking now about a different kind of market and the way capital is distributed and maintained and manipulated. In my mind, it's beyond post-industrial capitalism, via globalization.

RL: Another reason why I asked you about the conflict between the erasers or the dominators.

AO: I like calling them erasers. Have you ever seen Gumby cartoons? There were Gumby erasers to put on the end of your pencil.

RL: Since Oluchi died, in what to me was an obviously wrongful death, you've talked a lot about activism and connecting with activists and fighting and making this not silent—what are the (confines) and where is the fight?

AO: There are several ways to think about bringing performance to specific communities, or inviting those communities to spaces where performance is. It becomes difficult to use performance as political conduit when there's a lot of grassroots work to be done in specific communities, a lot of organizing, but the idea is to make the work available to multiple specific audiences, to pinpoint those audiences, then fund it. And where are those audiences? We can't expect huge diverse audiences to come to my two performances, one in Williamsburg and one in the Lower East Side, and I don't live in New York and I don't have those grassroots connections, even

though I desire to build that into this piece. There's a way to do that and I know how to do it. But the whole funding process is exhausting. Grief is so private in this culture and by that I mean across cultures in America. It is proscribed and limited to certain realms—we have funerals, we do whatever we do, and then we go back to work, we get a few days or weeks off, just like giving birth—but since communities are strangled by grief in private spaces, the work I'm doing, creating a public space for transformative mourning, challenges my sense of who the audience potentially can be and the strategies I need to use to connect to those audiences. Back to capital, it even influences the culture that we're permitted to develop around grief. You get your pills, and you're back into the medical capital system, the pharmaceutical companies. The cycle continues. Death has even entered the market economy—Costco now sells coffins. One of the things I attempt to do with this performance is explore the question of why six months after Oluchi's death are we still talking about this? Why are we still grieving? And I feel that it's because the phantom absent body/visible absent body/the dead are not dead, they're always with us. Why would we not be talking about them? Why wouldn't we be naming them?

RL: Like the Sweet Honey in the Rock song.

AO: "The dead are not under the earth, they are in the whimpering of the rocks . . ." That comes from a poem by a Senegalese author named Birago Diop. It's a beautiful, absolutely gorgeous song. I share the worldview that the dead are not under the earth, and I make that central to this piece and central to the dialogue with the audience. It is an important thing for me to keep doing. And it's not timely. We didn't do this a week or month after my son's death. If we do it three years from now, it's right on time. To make a public space is to make a political space, in the old sense of the word political.

RL: The town square.

AO: Here we are creating in the town square.

RL: It's also a secular space...

Taking it out of the temple, out of the obscure, and putting the temple into secular space. And when that happens, something happens in the secular space as well. I often use the term "ritual" to talk about this performance. And at the Williamsburg performance, we are for the first time going to set an altar up and have people place things on the altar. The candles might face the wrong way. Gods might get upset, but we're going to throw up a pagan altar, so be it. There's a separation between ritual and religion. Oluchi's death started this process for me, but so did your councilman², Bethany Spier's 20-year-

old friend who just died of a heart murmur, the wife and son of Yusef Komunyakaa, my cousin Sherman last week, Nina Simone, Celia Cruz last week. . . . The constant cycle of transition is the continuation of this piece.

RL: Idi Amin on his deathbed.

AO: Let him die. We're not helping him out in this performance.

RL: It brings up a moralistic idea of only the good dying.

AO: Reagan never dies. We keep certain of them around for counter-poetic reasons. The lucky ones, bad, good, indifferent, they get to die. And lucky us, we get to live. I'm being facetious. It's not like that. Oh luck! We're lucky we get to die, we're lucky we get to live. . . . We're bodies and all are going to transpire, transform. There is constant, constant energy around us, so I turn to public space, to create just a little space to embrace this constant energy. We're all dying all the time. Not to be judgmental, but I think that some of us have brought a conscious grace to our time on earth, the planet, and some haven't necessarily done such a great job of it. One of the refrains we use in this piece is: "How ya livin', How ya livin'." It's almost biblical.

RL: Like Ecclesiastes, which is sort of secular too, more open as a question. Whatever god is, we're living together now, in the public square. How we are to each other determines the space.

AO: There's something important about being a good friend while we're here. I don't think that Idi Amin was a good friend. Lives are qualitatively different, so I guess that the experience of death is qualitatively different for all of us.

RL: I've not asked you much about the transgender work you've done before. Transforming gender has resonance with the transformation from life to death, a death of the female, birth of the male.

AO: That's a hard one to answer because I'm not a transgender person. In my experience, witnessing people who have actively transitioned from one gender to another has been unlike my witness of death.

RL: Yet there's a grieving...

AO: . . . that is very similar, the grieving for the lost body that we've identified as the person.

RL: I was thinking about how much one performs when they're public—as I'm public with you right now. I imagine the dead aren't different for themselves and for the group.

AO: That's the odd thing about people dying. Somebody who didn't know Oluchi, to whom I showed a picture of Oluchi a few weeks ago, asked how old he was. I was really thrown off. I was like . . . he'll always be 20. No, first he

asked, "What was his name and how old was he?" And that threw me off for a minute; I got really disoriented. I felt his name was Oluchi and he'll always be 20. The panic that arises in me sometimes is that of course his name is probably not Oluchi anymore and he's probably not 20 anymore and in my knowing of him he'll always be 20, he'll always be Oluchi, and will he remember me? There's a terror sometimes in that question, will he remember me? As he's becoming . . . it is kind of like transqueer dialogue where we don't even have pronouns. How shall I receive him? What do I call him? What form is he in? What form? There is that panic that some have when people change genders, over losing the familiar markers.

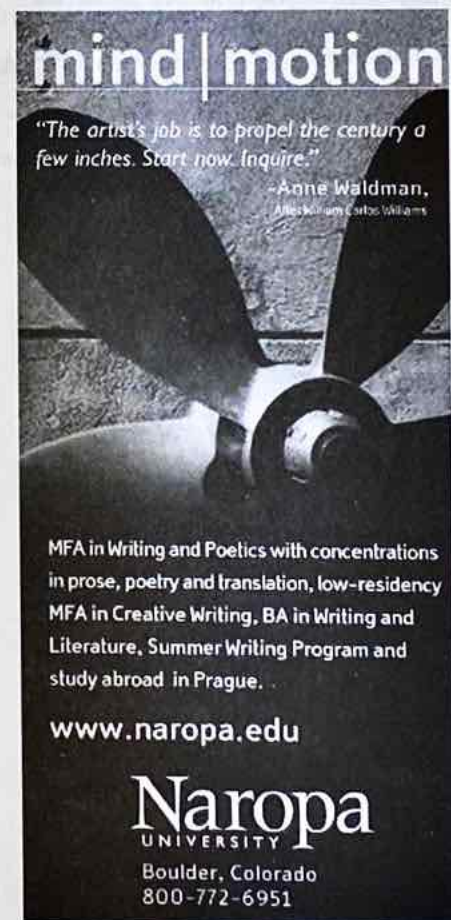
RL: I had a vision of him as Oluchi. I think his name's Oluchi.

AO: I think so, too.

Notes:

1 *Oluchi McDonald died at Martin Luther King Hospital, aka King/Drew Medical Center, in Los Angeles, CA, on March 13, 2003, from a surgically correctible condition. He went untreated and undiagnosed for over 30 hours. He had been transferred to King/Drew from a private hospital because he lacked medical insurance. Oluchi, 20 years old at the time of his death, was, in his own words, a "scholar and graffiti vandal."*

2 *On July 23, 2003, Brooklyn Councilman James Davis was shot and killed at City Hall by political rival Othniel Askew.*



mind | motion

"The artist's job is to propel the century a few inches. Start now. Inquire."

Anne Waldman,
Alfred Williams Estate Williams

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MURDERING DAYS

plot where he might lay his ambush down, christmas late past year,
fever clouds his visage, i to lace his frayed gluteus when chosen,
no hermetic task nice, granny's got a vintage shotgun attentive in closet,
i call for a sensorium before the last orders go out,
in accordance with his crazy lineage i can hear them pointing.

if i am to engage antiviolence work then by necessity i enter into contract with violence,
no shy slippers here.

it's just that, there is a turtle carrying its house on its back, the metaphor was put like that once in lit-
tle body time, and someone trying to knock it off,
the house that is, or the turtle, or the promises the house stands for,
this, what was ours invaded, defiled.

i to cord his frayed intestines when chosen.

Akilah Oliver

MICHAEL PALMER

Talks to Leonard Schwartz

Poetry is language, perhaps the form of language in which false dichotomies can best be dissolved. They are themselves only frozen language, while poetry is fluid and hot, even when it appears cool. Michael Palmer is one of the most important poets in terms of temperatures real and apparent, words hardened or in process, and political or aesthetic implications. I wanted to talk to him about poetics and power in the age of the Neocons on my radio program, "Cross-Cultural Poetics," which airs Wednesdays from 5 to 6 pm Eastern time on KAOS 89.3 in Olympia, Washington (you may access KAOS's audio stream at http://kaos.evergreen.edu/programs/cc_poetics.html). On "Cross-Cultural Poetics," I have been speaking with poets all over the world about the function of the poetic word. If we have entered the Dark Ages, international vanguard art offers a kind of monastic change of light across national boundaries. If in fact poetry can effect change, conversation is a kind of politics.

—Leonard Schwartz

This interview with Michael Palmer took place in November, 2003, and was transcribed by Carl Kelleher.

I have Michael Palmer on the phone from San Francisco, a city with which he has long been associated. *The New York Times Book Review* said of Palmer, "He's one of our finest poets, at the height of his powers," and the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* wrote, "Michael Palmer has been one of the most influential writers in recent years, perhaps because he fuses contemporary concerns about syntax and meaning production with some very ancient poetic pleasures." Can I ask just very bluntly, can words "mean" and how do they do so at this point, for you?

Michael Palmer: First of all, I would say that "meaning production" and "poetic pleasure" are, in my mind, fused, insofar as the production of meaning is partly out of our hands and in the hands of the poem. As it leads us along through its particular harmonies and disharmonies, things arise that are largely ungovernable, even by us, I think, but ungovernable by the powers that be, as well.

And I think as far as meaning goes—can words mean?—we can't necessarily prove it, but we can make an agreement, a kind of contract that we live by, to disregard our doubts and hope that the production of meaning is possible. It's something I believe in and, as I'm sure you know, I'm philosophically skeptical, but at the same time one has to suspend a certain kind of disbelief and move onward.

LS: Yes. I also hear that very ancient "as if" implied in what you say.

MP: Yes. Yes, that's right.

LS: I have in front of me a lecture you recently gave at the University of Chicago and you mention the poet, Aygi. [Aygi is from the Chuvash Republic, 500 or so miles north of Moscow, but Pasternak persuaded him to write poetry in Russian.] Can I read the passage back to you?

MP: Sure.

LS: You say at the end of a walk with Aygi through the streets of Paris:

All poetry is, of course, translation, a bearing across from one region to another, a crossing of borders, a conjoining of same with other. It is a voyage out of the self-same or the self-identical or the self-satisfied into a fluid semantic and ontological field. That is, to translate is also to be translated, to commit to an act of becoming... what? Human perhaps, in a world where we cannot assume that as a given, but as something to be earned partially and imperfectly. The extensions of voice, beyond that one with which we come into the world. The elsewhere so necessary to any understanding of the here-and-now. Yet the "here-and-now" of our national conversation seems suddenly to have filled with a virulent xenophob-

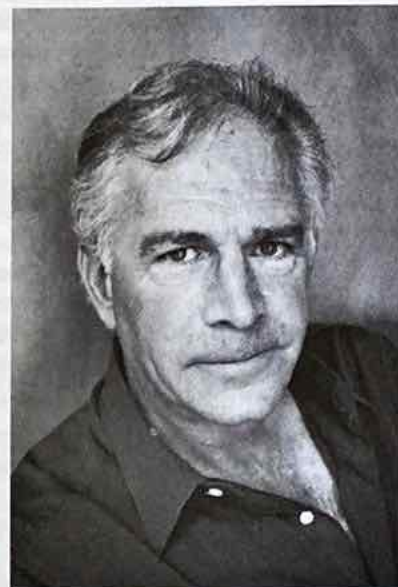


PHOTO COURTESY OF GENYA TUROVSKY

bia, and a hatred, as well as a fear, as well as a willful ignorance of the other, the foreign, even of difference itself. The closing of minds is represented as certainty of belief and of righteousness. Outside must be remade to conform with inside, by total force if necessary. We cannot help being reminded of the language of earlier empires, of the "white man's burden," of the "mission civilisatrice." Language under siege from within.

That's such a powerful passage, ending with "language under siege from within," which I think further complicates that initial question of whether words can mean.

MP: Of course. Because whenever we speak of the discourse of power, and much political discourse in general, we're talking about draining meaning from language. It's a kind of demonic magic act, and certainly with this administration we've seen that taken to Orwellian extremes—up is down, black is white—and a veil descends over that thing we have been talking about, which is meaning. So it seems to me that one of the things that poets in times such as these have to do is—they have a stake in, oddly enough, a thing that is sometimes but not necessarily always associated with poetry, which is truth.

That essay is titled "Poetry and Contingency: Within a Timeless Moment of Barbaric

Thought." And I think we are in such a moment. I'm 60 years old now and I've been through some pretty terrifying régimes within our republic, but many of the people of my generation feel this one has endangered the principles of democracy and fairness and discourse more than any other regime in our lifetimes. So it seems very tragic, and sadly enough many people are paying with their lives as we speak to this, both innocent Iraqis and American soldiers, Red Cross workers, and others. By double-dealing with language, we have put ourselves into a rather tragic situation.

LS: It is indeed shocking to see to what degree the war is dependent upon the perversion of language. Even the basic metaphors we're working: The war on...blah, blah, blah.

MP: Well, there are many things that have to be done to launch a war, as Göring noted at the Nuremberg trials. Of course people don't want war but they have to be convinced that if they are against the war they are cowards and unpatriotic and they have to be vilified. There's a manipulation of the psyche through the manipulation of language, and through the manipulation of words, like democracy and freedom. They have to be emptied of their true content and turned on their heads in a very odd and terrifying way so that people who are genuinely moved by issues of patriotism will be convinced of the righteousness of their cause, whether that righteousness of their cause includes ethnic cleansing or whatever. So a series of rationales is established, and people, many of them in good faith, some in very bad faith, profiteers and others, follow through on that.

LS: Are they all Republicans today?

BC: It's like they were born Republicans and therefore they are Republicans. There's no questioning. It's not about philosophy. It's more like, it's my team. Obviously, many people are like that.

LS: Where does that leave us as poets? In Russia, during the Soviet period, the job of the poet was to stay out of jail—or oftentimes to go to prison. The current situation is that no one can afford to publish anything; it costs too much to print it. But our situation is different. We're not going to prison, obviously, for writing and we still have something like a literary economy, as small-scale as that poetic economy may be.

MP: It's interesting that you raise that question, because the Israeli poet Aharon Shabtai was reading last Thursday at San

Francisco State, a very fierce, condemnatory reading relating to the current situation of Palestine and Israeli violence. He's saddened by the betrayal of those fundamental values associated with the founding of Israel. In the discussion afterwards, that question came up: One person asked Shabtai, "Do you get into trouble for your opposition to Sharon and the ethnic cleansing that's going on?" and he said, "Sharon has skin as thick as an elephant. It wouldn't matter in the slightest what a poet said."

Likewise, you have someone like George Bush, of whom it's certainly safe to say is a poetry-free zone and for whom that whole world of cultural production and agency through language is without meaning whatsoever. That's one of the tragedies of his leadership, that he is without reflection of any kind. He lives under the Logos—which is an entirely exclusionary Logos, ironically enough. Therefore, as with Shabtai, we can say whatever we want, because it is assumed that no one cares and no one is listening. I think in fact it does make a difference; sometimes it makes a difference over time, but it is a crucial difference. I wrote also in that essay you referred to that poetry may not make anything happen, but it's something happening among other things that are happening, and that counts for something.

Naturally, if we do work of political resistance, it can't only be in the field of poetry, it also has to be in the streets, and in various forms of protest to what we see as these barbaric actions. Speaking, in a sense, for the human, the human in the other. Speaking for culture, in the best sense of that word, which is a larger nobility of social purpose. It's hard, in other words, to pin down the world of poetry to any practical effect, yet at the same time when we see societies that repress it or are without it—and not just poetry but the arts in general, and cogent philosophic and intellectual thought—we see black holes. We see barbarism and unfettered irrationalism governing things. So, it seems to me that there is a great deal of importance in what we do.

LS: What I'd like to say is that there's a way in which language implies the presence of the other. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has become particularly interesting to read at this point when one isn't sure if anyone is listening, as you put it. But the very presence or existence of language implies an other.

MP: Of course. And that's why poetry is a kind of dialogue, a conversation. It's also

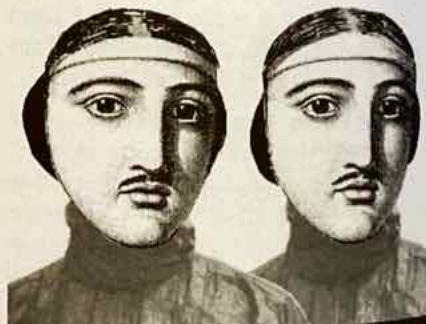
always important to remember that it's not, particularly in a commodity-oriented society such as ours, necessarily the size of readership. Otherwise, a lot of junk on the bestseller list that's completely ephemeral would turn out to have the most influence. But it doesn't, really, in the long term. It doesn't signify that way, and it's not meant to take on issues of life and death and meaning in the same way that we conceive them.

LS: I want to ask you a question "within the tribe." Sam Hamill was recently here at The Evergreen State College and gave a series of interesting talks at a conference on the possibility of peace. "You're either part of the solution or part of the problem," was Sam Hamill's formulation of it. I wonder if you have a general take on Poets Against the War, and that project of Hamill's.

MP: Yes. Certainly there are aspects of it that I strongly support. Plumbers against the war, poets against the war, carpenters against the war, all of that I think is terribly important. I think it's also important not to fall back on those rather simplistic '60s slogans: part of the problem or part of the solution. It's a kind of absolutism that

THE GODS ARE POUNDING MY HEAD!

(AKA LUMBERJACK MESSIAH)



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unhappily echoes the rhetoric of the Bush administration itself. And so I think we need to formulate it with a little more complexity; at the same time we need to support the efforts of resistance. Our disagreements are not as important as a certain kind of unity is, particularly at a time like this, with so much slaughter—unacknowledged slaughter. We haven't even seen the figures on the deaths of the Iraqi populace, but we know it's probably up to 10,000 by now, of innocent civilians, and it's sad all of that is being suppressed, along with so much else that is being suppressed.

But, as you know, I also wonder about Poets Against the War. Some of the work being published under that rubric is, in itself, rote response, so beholden to habitual language that it comes to seem more like a war on poetry. I think we have to be cautious about pure righteousness and rant. Once again we fall into the trap of speaking in the tongue of the enemies, so to speak. That's something to be aware of at all times.

LS: I certainly agree that our commonality is more important than our differences at this point, and yet these questions of poetic composition remain crucially important, maybe more important than I'd ever really guessed up until these last three years. If we end up with more bull-horns and slogans, that's certainly not contributing anything.

MP: It's interesting that we have been forced into this kind of reflection, which is very necessary and very useful, and it's one of the positives that have come out of this period of turmoil and extreme right-wing activity and power. I think it's caused a great deal of useful reflection and action in the artistic communities, and we can at least be thankful for that.

LS: Having said that we're going to work with the notion of "as if," and, having decided to continue, in spite of the casualties you've just described that have yet to be counted or named, could you read some work from your new manuscript?

MP: Sure. This is a poem for my Mexican translator, a poet named Pura López-Colomé. It was for her 50th birthday, celebrated last year. It's called "Este Mundo," this world.

This world
with its sounds

and that other with its othering
where words then solid things

melt into sounds.

Enough?

This writing inside
the lids of the eyes.

Enough?

This table enough,
these wars enough?

A sip enough,
a glimpse?

Oars spinning,
the broken notes enough,
the drunken boats?

And the idol asleep in the mountain,
his nurse's milk on his lips.

He's dreaming of peacocks,
meteors, pyromanic moths,

dreaming of serpents and pyramids,
worlds hanging from clouds,

the wine jug, the lover's spine,
and fire as it claims
the edges of a page.

Bastante?

This world
in the fold of an echo:

You can hear them
beneath the mown field,
the restive songs.

for Pura López-Colomé

I am struck in going through these aspects of the later poems in this manuscript of how much the force of the excess of reality presses in on the work and alters its atmosphere. It's very interesting in that sense.

Here's another one from that manuscript: "Untitled (February 2003)." This also refers to Pura's place.

It's true that sometimes I've used the word
raisin in place of reason,
true that I'm surprised each time

by the sudden progress of the seasons
and that often when all is said

all comes undone. Look at how the worms
turned into gods

before our filmy eyes
and how the lyric

war machine sings
in the greyness of the morning.

And the name of its song?
But here we are

among the dogs large and small
of the afterdawn.

Is it possible to make love in such light

or read from the first pages of Silence?

The bright, early butterflies
at Pura's place, under the volcano.

Campesinos blockading the roads.
Es bueno.

LS: Thank you Michael, that's a wonderful piece. Can you say a little bit about it?

MP: Yes. Well, that first line, "It's true that I sometimes use the word raisin in place of reason," came to me, and the poem followed from that, the curious sense of dislocation that implies, and sometimes humorous dislocation. It seems to me we've reached a kind of dislocation that leads us to the phrase "the lyric war machine sings in the greyness of the morning."

LS: I'm certainly struck by "the lyric war machine sings."

MP: I think it's all about the subversion of meaning. There's also something humorously ridiculous going on right now that I think is healthy to note. Ridicule is a very important tool at this point, a tool of language.

LS: It really has reached the level of ridiculousness, hasn't it? The large literary issue of the day is who's responsible for the authorship of "Mission Accomplished." Those two words, that little poem, "Mission Accomplished." No one wants to claim credit for it.

MP: Where have the authors all gone?

LS: The death of the author has finally reached the level of White House politics.

MP: Well put. So the tone of the work, the fracturing of meaning—in the sense of paradox, which has always been in my work, but I think it's inflected, in a funny way, by these things. By an inexplicable atmosphere.

LS: You are the author of many books, most recently, *The Lion Bridge: Selected Poems*, published by New Directions press, and *At Passages*, also published by New Directions. Did I miss one, or are those the two most recent?

MP: *The Promises of Glass* is the most recent, after *At Passages* and *The Lion Bridge*. The next one is called *Company of Moths*.

LS: Also New Directions?

MP: New Directions, sometime next year.

LS: Wonderful, I'm looking forward to that. Michael, it's been so great having you on, thanks for speaking with us.

MP: Well, thank you, Leonard, for the invitation; I've enjoyed it.

POETRY PROJECT EVENTS CALENDAR

DECEMBER JANUARY 2004-2005

DECEMBER

1 WEDNESDAY

Heather Fuller & Eileen Tabios

Heather Fuller's *Startle Response* is forthcoming from O Books. She is also the author of *perhaps this is a rescue fantasy* (1997) and *Dovecote* (2002), both from Edge Books. Eileen Tabios's recent books include *Reproductions of the Empty Flagpole* (2002) and *Ménage à Trois with the 21st Century* (2004). *I Take The, English, For My Beloved* is forthcoming in 2005. Her awards include the Philippines' National Book Award for Poetry, the Potrero Nuevo Fund Prize, and the PEN/Oakland Josephine Miles National Literary Award.

3 FRIDAY

Adeena Karasick: Cannibals, Kabul & Kabbalah

A reading and book party to celebrate the publication of Adeena Karasick's *The House That Hijack Built* (Talonbooks, 2004), with a multivocal performance, video projections, tarot readings, and jazz. Daniel Carter and Alan Semerdjian will be the evening's special musical guests. [10:30 pm]

6 MONDAY

Jean Donnelly & Karen Weiser

Jean Donnelly is the author of *the julia set* and *Anthem*, which was selected by Charles Bernstein for the 2000 National Poetry Series and published by Sun & Moon Press. She co-founded the journal *So To Speak: A Feminist Journal of Language & Art* at George Mason University. Karen Weiser's recent chapbooks include *Eight Positive Trees* and *Placeness*. Her poems also appear in *Isn't It Romantic*, *100 Love Poems by Younger American Poets* (Verse Press, 2004), *Van Gogh's Ear*, and *Jacket* online.

the author of eight books of poetry, including three installments of his ongoing poem *Metropolis: Metropolis 1-15*, *Metropolis 16-29*, and his latest collection *Metropolis XXX: The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Edge Books, 2004). With novelist Rodrigo Rey Rosa, he co-wrote the feature film *What Sebastian Dreamt*, which was selected for the 2004 Sundance Film Festival and the Lincoln Center Film Festival, LatinBeat.

19 WEDNESDAY

Poets Memorial for Steve Lacy

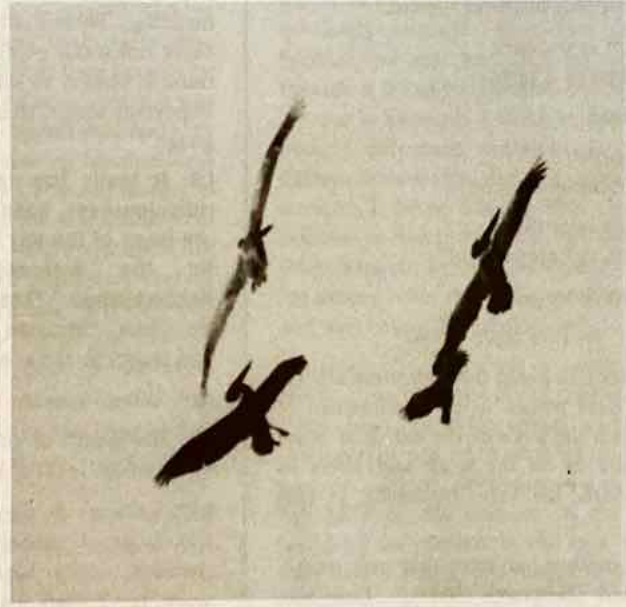
A memorial for and tribute to the great and most literary of jazz musicians, Steve Lacy, who died of liver cancer in June of this year, age 69. Born in New York in 1934, Lacy rescued the soprano sax from almost total disuse in 1950 and, in the ensuing decades, made the instrument uniquely his own while simultaneously expanding its possibilities. Tonight's readers and performers include Irene Aebi, Juni Booth, William Corbett, Robert Creeley, Douglas Dunn, Suzan Frecon, John Giorno, Pierre Joris, Daniel Kelpfer, James Koller, Ruth Lepson, Nicole Peyrafitte, and Roswell Rudd, among others.

24 MONDAY

Barbara Cole & Noah Eli Gordon

Barbara Cole's chapbooks include *little wives* and *post-cards*. In 2002, Handwritten Press published the first chapbook-length section of her ongoing project, *situation come dies*, and /ubu editions published another installment, from *foxy moron*, in 2004. Noah Eli Gordon is the author of *The Frequencies* and *The Area of Sound Called the Subtone*, and the publisher of the Braincase chapbook series.

26 WEDNESDAY



JANUARY

1 SATURDAY

The 31st Annual New Year's Day Marathon Reading

Spend the first day of the New Year with the best of downtown poetry, performance, dance, music, and multimedia, with over 120 performers and readers, including Lenny Kaye, Dael Orlandersmith, Rebecca Moore, Dana Bryant, Elliott Sharp, Tuli Kupferberg, Penny Arcade, Nick Zedd, Jonas Mekas, Eileen Myles, Mark Ribot, Douglas Dunn, Cecilia Vicuña, Maggie Estep, Emily XYZ, Erica Hunt, Todd Colby, Brenda Coultas, Charles Bernstein, John S. Hall, Steven Taylor, Chris Rael, Tony Towle, Lee Ann Brown, Edmund Berrigan, Christopher Stackhouse, Jackson Mac Low and Anne Tardos, Mike Tyler, Ange Mlinko, Ed Friedman, Marie Ponsot, Jim Behrle, Rodrigo Toscano, Marcella Durand, Aaron Kunin, Greg Fuchs, Miles Champion, Corina Copp,

8 WEDNESDAY

Allison Cobb & Rodrigo Toscano

Allison Cobb is the author of *Born 2* (Chax Press, 2004), and a co-editor of *Pom²*. She was born in Los Alamos, New Mexico, birthplace of the atomic bomb. Rodrigo Toscano is the author of *To Leveling Sverre, Platform, The Disparities, and Partisans* (O Books, 1999). His work has recently appeared in *War and Peace* (O Books, 2004) and *Best American Poetry, 2004* (Scribners).

13 MONDAY

Susan Landers & Brian Strang

Susan Landers is the author of *248 mgs., a panic picnic* (O Books, 2003) and a co-editor of *Pom²*. Recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Magazine Cypress, Aufgabe, and Chicago Review*. Brian Strang is the author of *Incretion and machinations*, among others. Recent work can be found in *Aufgabe, Ecopoetics, and Volt*.

15 WEDNESDAY

Aaron Kunin & Marjorie Welsh

Aaron Kunin's collection of poetry, *Folding Ruler Star*, is forthcoming from Fence Books, and a prose chapbook, *Secret Architecture*, is forthcoming from Braintcase Press. Recent work has appeared in *No: A Journal of the Arts, The Poker, and The Poetry Project Newsletter*. Poet, painter, and critic Marjorie Welsh is the author of several books, most recently *The Annotated "Here"* and *Selected Poems*, which was an Academy of American Poets Lenore Marshall Prize finalist, and *Word Group*, both from Coffee House Press. In 2005, she will be Judith E. Wilson Poetry Fellow at Cambridge University.

3 MONDAY

Open Reading: Sign-up at 7:45 pm [8 pm]

5 WEDNESDAY

Luis H. Francia & Carol Szamatowicz

Luis H. Francia is the author of the semi-autobiographical *Eye of the Fish: A Personal Archipelago*, recipient of the 2002 PEN Center Open Book and 2002 Asian American Writers literary awards, as well as *Her Beauty Likes Me Well* (with David Friedman) and *The Arctic Archipelago and Other Poems*. He is the editor of *Brown River, White Ocean: A Twentieth Century Anthology of Philippine Literature in English*, (with Eric Gamalinda) *Filipino: Filipinos on America*, and (with Angel Velasco) *Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream, 1899-1999*. Carol Szamatowicz is the author of *Cats & Dogs, Zoop*, and *Reticular Pop-Ups*.

10 MONDAY

David Perry & TBA

David Perry is the author of a book of poems, *Range Finder*, and two chapbooks, *Knowledge Follows* and *New Years*. The co-reader will be announced later this month.

12 WEDNESDAY

Sherry Brennan & Robert Fitterman

Sherry Brennan's book of poetry, *On poems and their antecedents*, is just out (from Subpress), as is her translation of Jean-Michel Espitalier's *Fantasy Butcher* (Duration Press). Her earlier chapbooks include *Taken, again today* and *The Resemblances*. Robert Fitterman is

28 FRIDAY

Lenny Kaye's "You Call It Madness: The Sensuous Song of the Croon"

Lenny Kaye's *You Call It Madness* (Villard/Random House) illuminates a critical juncture in American popular culture—a time when singers crossed gender and racial lines, and the mores of the 20th century began to shed their inhibitions. Tonight Kaye will read and perform songs from his impressionistic study of the romantic singers of the 1930s, complete with tuxedo shirt and vibrato'ed guitar. [10:30 pm]

31 MONDAY

Talk Series: Thalia Field, "Blunt Edge of Chaos: A Poetics of Emergent Forms"

A talk exploring the ways in which artistic/creative work models other living forms in process, leading to a range of artistic "display" which is only partly phenotypical with regard to literary "genre." Working between poetry, essay, fiction, media and theater, these new forms are weedy and hard to define by niche, while remaining genuine to their causes. Thalia Field is the author of *Point and Line* and *Incarnate: Story Material* as well as the performance novel, *Cloven Shrapnel*, forthcoming from Coffee House Press.

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All events are \$8, \$7 for seniors and students, \$5 for members and begin at 8 pm unless otherwise noted. Programs are subject to change. For information call (212) 674-0910.

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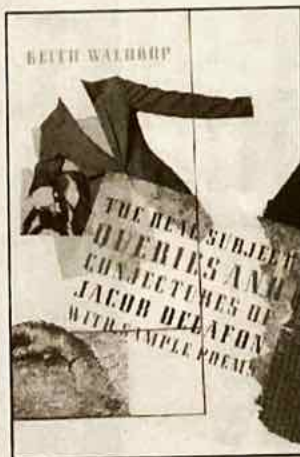
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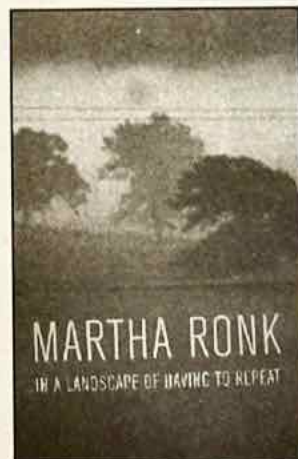
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— Bin Ramke

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Paul Violi

Right knee left foot

Left knee right foot

Right ouch

Asphalt

Elbow knee

Elbow foot

Knee foot

Foot slip

Face hurt

Asphalt grass

Forearm dirt

Ooof ouch

Brickwork

Nudge shrub

Bush clutch

Flowerbed

Rose white

Nose cool

Backdoor

Doorknob

Tall grass

Sweet grass

Flop floof

Gasp sigh

Pants pocket

No key

Pants pocket

No key

Suit pocket

No key

A PODIATRIST CRAWLS HOME IN THE MOONLIGHT, PG. 2

Tie flip

Damp stain

Sniff silk

Whiff

Oil

Sniff silk

Whiff champagne

Whiff

Gunpowder?

Whiff-whiff

Gunpowder

Bug pile

Lamplight

Broken wings

Broken bugs

Sniff sky

Sniff and decide

Freedom

Beauty

Sniff and decide

Freedom and beauty

And the fleet-footed pursuit

Of essential thrills

Are the key

To good health and happiness.

FINISH THESE SENTENCES

Paul Violi

The qualities I look for in a subordinate are

A situation in which humor might be most unwelcome is

After considering which is better, to be wealthy or wise

My greatest sense of personal fulfillment depends on

It's one thing to champion a sticky empiricism
But it's another altogether different thing to

I think of myself as a caring professional who as the days
And nights tumble by like woozy pandas trying to achieve
A position conducive to procreation

She had an accent that turned eyes to ice, heart
to hard, and transubstantiation to

From the bloody throats of those dull-colored birds
That scream at the sun,

As a patch of grass and wildflowers where lovers lay
Begins to revive, so too my mind once oppressed by joy

In that one moment, when they begin to flap
Frantically in their doomed arc, the great books I fling
Off a high balcony almost

A complete individual is one who

Now there are hands, lovely hands that have played
Rare instruments in the dark and thrown
Many a burning basket into the wind, and there are eyes

I like to think my superiors value my ability to

It is easy for me first thing in the morning to scoff
At questions like how many angels can dance on a pinhead,
But such figments, especially when immersed in paradox,
Oxymora and the like, don't seem so frivolous when we
Recollect the most intense and memorable experiences of our
Lives, experiences that in one moment produce a state of
Devastating superflux, of many simultaneous, powerful and
Distinct if not contradictory feelings, that when captured
In words not only allow the closest thing to prayer that the
Faithless can rely on for solace, but also remind us how
Figurative speech provides a refined atavistic satisfaction,
Especially evident in the way deeply imagined metaphor by
Enlivening objects reawakens the residual susceptibility
Of the primitive, superstitious mind to fetishism and

Paul Violi's most recent books of poetry are Fracas, from Hanging Loose, and Breakers: Selected Long Poems, from Coffee House Press. He is a recipient of the Zabel Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, in addition to numerous other awards, and teaches at New York University, Columbia, and in the graduate writing program at the New School.

BOOK REVIEWS

PETER CULLEY

HAMMERTOWN

New Star Books, 2003, \$12

Presented in three sections of six poems each, Peter Culley's *Hammertown* is experimental at its core—check the particle-accelerator serial mash of “Snake Eyes”—and, strangely, beautifully classical on either wing of the triptych (or gatefold LP cover), as the poet deftly mixes modes and methods—a sustained lyricism shot through with riffs epistolary, pastoral, elegiac; leavened with sincere homage; ventilated by epic-ironic gestures. And then there are surprises, such as the healthy doses of “tumbling verse” à la Skelton; Culley's rhymes and snapped lines, written “with dance tunes in mind,” help leash the poems enough to keep their wilder energies from spinning the work off into space while keeping what can be a very dark book moving towards the light. There is nothing emptily virtuosic in Culley's polyverse; on the contrary, I repeatedly felt the thrill of the new while plunging into “a mix without edge or limit” and, just as often and importantly, the satisfaction of frequent enough snatches of “an air familiar” to keep from losing too many wits to bear witness.

D.J. comparisons are as inevitable in describing Culley's work as comparisons to bop are with Kerouac's. References—samples, quotes, splices, dubs—come quick and thick. A product of Culley's numerous enthusiasms (see also his bricoleur's blog extraordinaire, *Mosses from an Old Manse*), *Hammertown*'s rich intertextuality never unbalances the work with clumsily dropped names or awkward stabs at the merely clever; rather, it lends *Hammertown* a sense of the “blithe complexity” that Culley finds in, say, the Afro-beat of Fela Kuti as spun in “Eight Views of Ornamental Avenue,” wherein Kuti

... takes
a few stabs in that
Sun Ra meets Sly Stone
Fender Rhodes mode
that defers and defers [...] all in the matter
of delaying
the reason we put the record
on in the first place,
that moment when the horns
come in and everything goes
BIG and WIDE ...

That paradoxical moment of simultaneous perceptual dilation and pinpoint concentration is at the heart of *Hammertown*. Such moments come with a price, of course: after a split second of ecstasy, textual, musical or otherwise, one returns to life to confront, with

heightened sensitivity, the banality and horror of the world-too-much-with-us. On this count, Culley doesn't flinch and, in fact, *Hammertown*'s moments of brilliant release are bound by an acute awareness of the fact that we humans seem hell-bent on boring ourselves to death up and down strip malls. The book's opener, “Greetings from Hammertown,” lands the reader squarely in a far different, if equally overpowering, scene from that of the audiophile's joy at finding the perfect groove, one in which Culley's native Vancouver Island's pre-post-industrial beauty falls incrementally to post-“progress” progress:

Huge uproar lords it wide.
A tin'rous grader halts
before an overflowing ditch, its
big bad boy body slumped
as if thwarted in its giggering ...

What follows is worthy of Dante's *Inferno*, as “Greetings” leaves us, finally, within “the obscure forest” where the poet had sought a

vision ... through grief and shame—
a caravan
of bright yellow trucks
[...] bristling
with crab claws, with arms like
monstrous barbed
dog cocks, depositing
layer after layer of
sulphurous spoor
into a vale of rubber smoke

Sleep frightened flies,
and round the rocking dome
howls the savage blast ...

The vision of this enduring Dis to the utopian moments that blip into being through art, music and poetry permeates, but does not dominate. In fact, Culley often seems as likely to glimpse paradise in the “savage blast” as in the “streams of my late youth / cleared and flattened for you / even as I write this.” However, art, poetry and music usually come to the rescue, whether it's the voice of Kathy Sledge, King Tubby's dub, the rhythm & rhyme of the poet's “disease skeltonic” or the poetry and friendship of contemporaries like Kevin Davies and Lee Ann Brown. Culley repeatedly finds his way out of the dejection facing those who would see the world for what it seems to be, often by returning to what it is: a place where any quick value judgment is best suspended, as he warns us in an early, aggressive aside:

If you want to read
“decay”
into this rocky heap

of nasty moss, this
eggy newspaper intrusion, that's your
quattrocento prerogative.

Hammertown is just as likely to locate its moment in “decay” as in any well-wrought yearn: The book is virtually dedicated to Philip Guston, whose words provide one of its two epigraphs, the other coming from George Perec's *Life A User's Manual*, which provides the literary-nostalgic analog to Nanaimo as an idyllic “fishing port on Vancouver Island, a place called Hammertown, all white with snow, with a few low houses and some fishermen in fur-lined jackets hauling a long, pale hull along the shore.” And as for Guston, his later studies in self-decay appear to key the book's predominant color scheme of pinks and “rosy grays” and the continual discovery of “...grotesquerie / affirming / the shapeliness of all things...” In the quasi-romantic audiophile ode “Paris 1919” (dedicated to Kurt Cobain via John Cale, Young Werther, Parsifal, Bo Diddley and Sam Phillips, among others—“a mix without edge or limit”) Culley breaks down the case of “decay” thusly:

I'd walk six miles
out of my way
To hear again
the slow decay
Of that piano,
far away—
King Tubby's
Studio A.

And I'd walk further than that to stay on Peter Culley's trail, one which stretches—like the epistolary poem “A Letter from Hammertown to East Vancouver and the East Village”—incredibly far and wide and into nooks and crannies long overlooked by the average bear, but nevertheless remains a trail that

... is no secret, either.
a deer trail,
then a dog trail,
then Pete's trail,
then my trail. Sherpa Tenzing sits puffing
on the roof of the world—
his belief in process absorbed
by the throbbing worm
that mutters and sweats
at the mucky heart
of being ...

If you haven't taken vacation from your senses (but would like to), you *must* visit beautiful, terrible Hammertown. Go now.

David Perry is the author of *Range Finder*, *Knowledge Follows*, and *New Years*.

ED BARRETT
RUB OUT
Pressed Wafer, 2003, \$10

Ed Barrett's new collection, a trilogy of experimental verse novels, strikes a defining note of the New York School: what John Ashbery, in a review of Ted Berrigan's *Sonnets*, called "a poetry that experiments with form, that is, with words." In Barrett's first two collections, *Common Preludes* (Groundwater Press, 1994) and *Sheepshead Bay* (Zoland Books, 2001), a wide range of forms and genres are already evident: prose poems, sonnets in prose, essay poems, vaudeville acts, haiku fragments, preludes, lyrical ballads, songs, and letters. But none of these would have adequately prepared one for his latest undertaking in *Rub Out*.

Barrett's experiments are part of the same tradition as John Wheelwright's 1938 *Mirrors of Venus: A Novel in Sonnets* or Ashbery's 1954 *Novel*. "Rub Out," the title poem, is "a novel in fresco" about Whitey Bulger and other Boston mobsters, which Barrett interlaces with Concord transcendentalists and a young woman who mysteriously dies: "She was/ buried/ with the light/ that had/ fallen/ on her/ face from the/ under-world." The poem is prefaced with a headline from *The Boston Globe* (January 15, 2000): "3 BODIES UNEARTHED IN DORCHESTER: BULGER CONFIDANT IS SAID TO GIVE TIP." The second poem, "Breezy Point," is "a novel in tidelines," the meditative lament of a child for a father, so minimalist it gives new meaning to the word, as voices and images ebb and flow like waves crashing on the shore: "will you raise me from the grave father," "will you bring me to my land," "sand voice," "tooth sand," "sand child," "book sand."

The last of the three novels is "Tell on You," a sequence of prose poems, subtitled "shells in a novel"; here he gathers odds and ends such as newspaper underwear ads, thoughts of Sheepshead Bay, a woman in "Prada slacks from Avenue U" sipping a "frothy sea-green" margarita and parading from table to table in a local dive, Las Vegas comics, a meditation on the soul—"The soul is a carved wood napkin ring in the center of your chest"—and a memory of a boy's boxing gloves, ending, "And the world as expectation and desire and the part which relates to action as the result of everything else: permanence and passing no more belong to us than we to them, and the illusion that separates us."

Barrett could have had several reasons for choosing the novel form: to underscore the fact that novels and fiction receive so much more critical appraisal than poetry these days, or that poetry is seldom reviewed unless it is very familiar in form and not too difficult to understand. Or *Rub Out* could be a comment on the current corrupt political climate, so similar to Bulger's times, during which bodies were buried beside an old police station. One need only look at *Black Mass: The True Story of an Unholy Alliance Between the FBI and the Irish Mob* (2001), by Dick Lehr and Gerard O'Neill, an exposé on Bulger, John Connelly, and abuses of the FBI, not so unfamiliar today. Despite the similarity in names, however, Barrett is not remembering a long-lost relative when he tells us about the mobster Bucky Barrett. That association, like so much else in *Rub Out*, is a red herring. Or maybe Barrett's purpose was simply to dwell on words, songs, and the stories they tell, as in the line "chance board rivet swim," from "Breezy Point," or the thought, in "Tell on You," of a place in which "the sentimental air immediately segues into a local hip-hop group rapping We live in Brooklyn."

"This is what I do. This is how I do it," Barrett says at one point. How well he succeeds at the many things he does best—especially evoking the mystery and spicy flavor of Brooklyn, at times with palimpsests of Boston, as in the symphony-like tour-de-force "Tell on You," which is introduced by a glittering "snow globe" image from William Cowper, who, like Barrett, was a classical scholar. Etched in this "Language of recognition and desire," *Rub Out* startles, bewilders, informs, and delights, leaving one feeling a little like the young woman at the end of "Tell on You": "falling back on the new-made bed after a shower, inhaling the smell of fresh linens, sinking into the pillow to just the right depth, rubbing her bare arms over the sheets a couple of times to feel the perfection of a thing doing what exactly it was meant to do."

Eugene Richie is the author of *Island Light* (Painted Leaf Press).



In "To the Muse," her brilliant tête-à-tête, straightforward, admonishing, accusing, imploring address of the elusive Muse, Ruth Altmann defines the unsheathed honesty of her work and sets a tone of reverent colloquialism. Her poems reveal a marvelous concinnity composed of ordinary language and a chronicle of being alive that roars with lyrical compassion. This singular reportage opens thunderous as prairie space.

Maureen Owen

Because she takes various shapes and speaks in many voices, through a long life, and like no other, this is a nourishing, funny, fleshy, brainy book of poetry—exactly the one to read. Follow Ruth to the Midwest, New York, the Antarctic, through literary and drug adventures, into her eighties, her knowing everything, carnally, spiritually, the moon's dust, I love this book.

Alice Notley

Of all the people and things I miss about New York City it is Ruth Altmann who makes it more clear than ever that to change the world through poetry, you don't have to change yourself.

Bernadette Mayer

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across the big map
by Ruth Altmann

JOAN RETALLACK
MEMNOIR

The Post-Apollo Press, 2004, \$10

So what is a suitable rating for “the unnoticed actual condition of [the] life (32)?” Joan Retallack’s *Memnoir* takes us to the movies only for us to find that we are already there—complete with “violence & graphic photos of murder victims in black and white” (13). There is no handy Archimedean (read American/ read coalition) point for us to hypothetically cling to from the outside. The ideal of removing oneself from this scopic line of inquiry is not an option. We are flung out—and back in—on a cinematic clinamen swerve that pans towards us in an “indigenous aquiline twilight” where reality is cut with representation and vice versa (27).

This is living (“a person is a place after all” (24)), and this is a poem which challenges the location of a here and now where we “don’t want to know” our relationship to the past or the future (1). It posits a present tense under threat which necessitates a “reconfiguration” of “the geometry of attention” (14), in other words a re-examination of the codes, systems and definitions with which we read, inhabit and make sense of our “optics of horizon” (17), our understanding of memory and its place or *place* of representation.

In *Memnoir* the cinema seems to offer a ritual catharsis of the everyday but it is a “ritual, which can hardly contain the virtual pain” (34) of “even a portion of life” (7). Retallack challenges prescribed figurings of time and knowledge by investigating the possibilities and impossibilities of the “carefully constructed” containers of the book, the movie, and even language itself: “i.e. ok this is the vocabulary in which you will be locked up for the next ten years there is no good behaviour clause” (24). The only possible hint of escape is the potential for knowledge—to go on discovering the plots, the codings, the clues that swerve the reader into multiple modes of attention and engagement with the poem and the world in and around it. For Retallack, this is knowledge as self-awareness, the *poetical* moment of curiousness, which helps one to tell “the story of [...] life, in a calm, clear voice” (7).

In *Memnoir* Retallack makes a series of formal and narrative correspondences that parallel the zoom of the camera lens with the zoom of language, from word to referent and also from concepts to ideas. Distance and mapping are crucial concerns of both reading and seeing. The poem is an examination of how to map strata of memory and projection (14), how “to find one’s position on the graph” of memory and not knowing. To do this

Retallack embodies a “stream of self-translation” (6) that negotiates its way through the cultural seepage of film into personal memory. She avoids the fixity of the still, the *known* meaning, and therefore value, of a word, a sentence or scene; definitions are not only always “otherwise,” but lead in alternate “other” ways to reveal a faulty structure leaking narrative in all directions. The question that the poem poses of “how to tell the story now without telling lies” (26) answers itself formally in the circuitous returnings and revisionings of this half-glimpsed noir as *memoir*.

Periodically featured is a woman who might or might not be Eurydice, a figure refracted through the mythic black and white underworld of femme fatale screen history who, in a comically sinister twist, is periodically trapped in *langue* and apparently seeking *parole* (21, 24, 28). Similarly she is there in the (re)projected (“i.e. don’t look back” (29)) glimpse of the murderous aunt:

or to zoom in on the scene in the darkened room on the screen the shadow of the murderous aunt is moving across the screen along the far wall of the screen one can tell it is the murderous aunt from the feather in the hat and the dagger in the hand of the silhouette of the shadow on the wall (16)

The poem also provides us with a kind of memoir of Retallack’s own practice. The text resolutely occupies the middle of the page in prose blocks which avoid what she calls the “smarmy margins.” She comments wryly that “my margins (were) much too wide” (33), a possible reference to the way in which her concerns have always exceeded categorisation—particularly in relation to an earlier wave of Feminist work which self-consciously inhabited the margins of the page. Here, despite or in addition to Eurydice, we have an “ungendered silhouette” crossing a “vacant lot” (33), underlining the fact that Retallack’s concerns have always been too large to be easily assimilable as being only about gender.

Formally the poem attempts to occupy a space that “might not reflect a purported fact” (22). An “i.e. how to get here by means of a swerve out of the grammar” [sic] (37). The addition and deletion of punctuation throws us into a dilemma about our location of the tense of the writing: present, past, future? At the edges of knowledge we come to the edges of language, of representation:

i.e. for a very long time the child want(ed) more than she could say to not want more than she could say i.e. impossible according to any simple formula for mirroring formulas (5)

Similarly, Retallack seems to ask whether rep-

resentation is even an option? How do we figure an ethical relationship between language and its referents? Do yards of shimmering adjectives *equal* a sunrise?

without yards of shimmering adjectives
description: is description possible can a
sunrise
be described by yards of shimmering
adjectives (6)

The grammar and syntax use the precision of mathematical formulas to cancel out, rather than to balance (the book). The constant irruptions of the “e.g.” into the poem offer examples that double and replicate subject positions. They continually (re)project themselves but refuse to move us from the general to the specific. Instead of the contraction of the world view to a specific point (i.e. “to hit upon here i.e. the e.g. clarification” (15)) we are met with the frustrating realisation that we are already there, that there is no privileged “point” of perfect view to be reached; instead there is only “the fatality of of the preposition reaching out to its object even as it e.g. it slips away” (18).

Redell Olsen’s Small Portable Space will be published by Reality Street Editions, London in 2004.

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MICHAEL SCHARF,
VERITÉ
Ubu editions, 2002,
www.ubu.com/ubu/scharf_verite.html

Scharf's collection is a poetic engagement of systems experienced as place and possibility. It is a poetry of economic and social critique, fused with pained and humorous self-explorations, that navigates the relationships of class conflict and nationality, and the internalizations of variously inherited structures. The poem itself is also treated as a kind of place, where the conflicts of half-submerged and openly conflicting elements of experience are scrutinized, transformed, sunk into, or left to build up.

The interlocking themes addressed in this work—economic systems, habits, fixations, unhealthy protective structures—are all approached as both internal and external circumstances, a jagged swath of the patterned determining factors of human phenomena, brought into a beautifully crafted and troubled play. *Verité* is an investigation of entanglement within systems that are deformed by concentrations of power and social imbalances.

The opening prose poem/essay "I Love Systems," like much of the poetry in the book, zigzags wildly and seamlessly between detailed elements of finely interlocked psychological, biographical, economic and historic strands of circumstance, processing an impressive amount of related material within branching, extended sentence structures:

These systems draw energies from libidinous dementias, from partially destroyed cathexes, and result, as best, in exchanges whose participants are profoundly alienated and which are mediated, however indirectly, by money, which was itself created when the direct comparison of the value of goods proved impossible, and is the basis of city life, a kind of idealization, which seems to be preferred by artists because of the kind of social contact it allows, because of the care that its infrastructure evinces, or has remnants of, and because of the kinds of work it affords. There is a little time to write.

Narcissism, which diverts curiosity into self-inflation, is often unquestioningly indulged or superficially obviated in poetry. Scharf manages a counter-deforming creative intervention on narcissistic mental forces, transforming them into uneasy instruments of insight.

After describing in painful detail the capital he accumulated from an insurance settlement and the subsequent investment of it following the death of his father, Scharf says:

Writing this is a kind of narcissism, now in wanting to insert myself in a debate over a magazine....

It is just at this point, this moment of loosening the barriers that separate one kind of creative investigation from another, as well as loosening the conventions of what information is allowed into the space of the poem, that the work jumps most fully to life, dealing directly and clearly with complex intersections of material and theme that are normally left at the doorstep of poetry.

If poetry is sometimes abused in its capacity as a free zone of imagination, then Scharf's work proves it can be an imaginative zone where playfulness and challenging investigation about the factual world can be combined:

Stop eating so much, fuckball.
But which communities, leaning toward
Bethlehem, Cisco, or CSX,
are likely to be considered
magnets for the young?
Upward, upward, upward,
the untergang knocked
my block off, then chucked in some of
their own.

This passage from another series, *Six Poems from Austria*, explores questions of travel, national identity and urban life.

a hidden ground of an earlier era
becomes more visible

Scharf's poetry involves a chipping away at these layers of hidden social inheritance, from within, it is assumed, the periphery of the settings of globalized wealth. The Austria poems could be, in some ways, equally addressing life in New York City:

that social feeling, spurring the terror of
production

The sonnet sequence that follows this, dealing with memory, childhood and family among other things, contains some of the most compelling writing in this consistently strong collection of poems.

Our planet has a big, dead moon, like yours,
spots on the sheets, and viscous mailboxes—fa fa
fat blue seedy domes—cararapacesararay,
untraceable source.

or

the great work is that
that retains its address
in any context. Poke
your head into the cake
shape, lease with flecks
checked, brush the mohair.
In slow motion, I fell off the chair,
Managed—

or

...Someone
has to pay for Grandpa's Caprice

Verité combines politics, questions of artistic production, lyric passages, denotative prose and autobiography—rich compound structures with a sharp illustrative power, a clear open feeling, and a sense of humor. Scharf consistently and beautifully balances multiple conflicting elements. This poetry is alert, and has the pleasure, as well as the challenge, of insight.

Drew Gardner is the author of *Sugar Pill* (Krupskaya).

LAURA WALKER
SWARM LURE
Battery Press, \$10.95

There is an intimate lilt, an indelible charm, a bygone narrator I'd like to know in Laura Walker's elegant collection *Swarm Lure*. Her tangibility of voice seems to know a listener. Conversation dares with an undone presence, in other words you can put your feet up. You can find shade. You may be pulled into enticing predicament:

stealing a beaded barrette, trestle birding,
waist deep with binoculars, strap against
your throat. motioning me with one hand:
slower here, it's thicker currents.

There is a southern something here, or "south of the imagination" which reminds me of moments in Lee Ann Brown's work, purely influenced by locale. For instance I'm reminded of Brown's "southern butter" when reading Walker's "battered flowers under glass." The world outside, meaning both rural landscape and literally bodies beyond the body of the poet are prodded, spoken into presence. Her precision in places is reminiscent of Neidecker, and her relation to surrounding recall the whimsical nature of Opal Whiteley's *Mystical Nature Diary*. These works have little in common beyond a sympathetic female voice in a very clearly delineated landscape. And yet there are resonant threads here from many fields. Walker is as at home writing about a romp through a lake with an intimate, making innovative use of an online translation machine, and lyrically addressing Italian bee keeping, all in one collection.

In the first series I am transported to rituals of youth which like a secret language make perfect sense at the time in the setting and perhaps most importantly, with the person with whom one engages in them. In her notes on the text, Walker writes, "Italicized words in quotation marks are from James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Words in italics only are multiple translations of (unreadable) marginalia discovered in a used copy of the text (author unknown)." These layers of quotations blend

into her language seamlessly, and in the same way, Walker creates a context whereby the reader enters into these acts, which by definition tend to exclude an onlooker. There is a continual companion who is always present—cutting nails, drying hair, which creates a rhythm of “yours then mine.” Here we find daily brushing up against another being, “squeezing lemons on wicker” a form of sweetness in a non-sentimental frame.

The relation of body to utterance is central to this sequence, and echoes throughout the book.

“Your words fade near the spine.”

“Your face pressed close to ink.”

“vines twisting into cursive as we drift.”

“I walk the length of your leg, a paragraph of blue, water seeping from tin.”

Here is expansiveness below permissive skies. Unfettered, form unseparated from thought, body integrated with surroundings. Imagination couples with landscape “to begin as most elms do, bent at the waist over water.” Time here is as continuous as the summer you remember never having ended.

In the second section, Walker has sent a prose poem through an online translation machine many times. Each page in the sequence represents a journey into and out of a different language. The result is a series of abstract still-life images, each slightly altered. The pages are frames, shots taken in succession which result in capturing subtle expressions, multiple glimpses of a picture. Thought is seen through while still in motion, like a conversation evolving to envelop a duration of time and place. The work also plays with the concept of mishearing or mis-seeing. It is another glance over one’s shoulder into a familiar, yet slightly skewed scene. In a simple room we hear of: fortune-telling (“one savage brings you happiness, three savages brings a house down”), domesticity (“wrestle a frame at the tree and bolt it at the gate”), embroidery (“her skirts in tiny baskets and willow greens”), and tea “along with citron.” An admonition becomes comic: “there is absolutely no outsider. beware.” becomes, Beware, “the window is outspoken.” This series of prose poems is able to travel greatly without ever leaving its prescribed “room.” The work creates an envelope, cinematically speaking, into which one may delve to sample a scene from various perspectives.

The third section of the book takes English and Italian beekeeping terms as inspiration for a sequence which is elegantly spare on the page. The phrase is illuminated. White space migrates, like flight. There are carefully perched invocations. Invitations to enter the

hive—which seems in Walker’s realm metaphoric for the entering into relation (with one’s surroundings, one’s companions), necessary in the work of the bee—and the work of humans in gathering various forms of sustenance (not least of all, spiritual). I’m reminded of the nectar of the moon, available to yogis entering various states of trance. The title, *Swarm Lure*, or *attira-sciami* is found here. Again we find relation of body to text. “She knew her heated hands and the river water” and “white legged they stood and brooded pale country.” Walker also knows various secrets which propel the poem, “... the spells they thought they missed: incurable, syrphus, brasserie, stutter mouthed” and “to cry the wagon and its horse tightly up a mountain.” This (book) is a bee dance which will indicate for each reader a location for nectar.

...joining hands and sweet in dance, in bows
before their shoes. hundred lining, stage left,
stage right, endless clockwork circles

Swarm Lure is a debut collection not to be missed, “her breath delicate, handheld. a / bridge to recross daily.”

Laynie Browne’s most recent books include *Pollen Memory and Acts of Levitation*.

TODD COLBY
TREMBLE & SHINE
Soft Skull Press, 2004, \$13.95

It’s a dangerous world out there. And I for one am packing Todd Colby’s new book, *Tremble & Shine*, in my survival kit. I’ve been carrying it everywhere with me, and its linguistic elegance/hilarious artistry/fantastical shockwaves have been carrying me everywhere. I’m forced to resort to the slash instead of the and/or the comma because there’s so much simultaneity here—an encompassing willingness to soak up and wring out every strand of meaning the English language has. The first reading washed over me with a sense of wow; subsequent readings got obsessive, thirsty, puzzling in the sense of provocative, exciting. What I mean is that I might need this book “in order to delay the onset of affection dementia” or because “one thing is certain: you’re slowly rotting as you read this.”

Let me be plain: this is Colby’s best work yet. He delivers the goods on the beautiful/ugly/sacred/profane/mundane nature of the human condition in language and is full of surprise and delight, using a variety of form and technique that builds on his previous work (*Ripsnort* and *Cush* from ’94 and ’95, respectively, and 1999’s *Riot in the Charm Factory*). Color, movement, veiled references to a literal or metaphorical journeying, disconnections connect and reveal. I kept thinking of something John Ashbery wrote (in his essay

collection *Other Traditions*) about John Wheelwright: “...a fertile short-circuiting, the result of many tensions pulling in opposite directions, that is the air his poetry breathes. Rather than chaos, the resulting layers of ambiguity result in a dense transparency.”

For example: “our lips are pealed”—how many poets could reference the Go-Gos and at the same time produce a meaning that’s altogether more mysterious than it at first appears? Packing three- and four-fold meaning into lines that at first sound clear, familiar, even throwaway, but then become ambiguous and then, as Brenda Coultas remarks in her back-cover blurb, “resulting in the strangest beauty,” is one of Colby’s many strengths. And just when you’re seduced by a moving image he up-ends the whole thing into a joke that’s on him and maybe you, too, if only you’ll laugh. It’s generosity that underlies the hairpin turns that engender a cascading and conflicting conglomeration of thoughts, ideas, feelings, images, sensibilities. I would say “kind of like life,” except this stuff isn’t “kind of like” anything except itself.

For another example: one of Colby’s long-standing techniques (reinvented and effective in *Tremble & Shine*), involves the use of a series of flat statements. Now, flat statements by their very nature imply clarity: “the house is on fire” or “the sky is blue.” They’re unflashy, factual, informative, and at least claim for themselves an absence of emotion or a clinical objectivity. Colby’s flat sentences, though, are a foil or springboard for the complex/twisty/comical messages he’s sending, and the effect is more than effect for effect’s sake—it amounts to a poetry of inclusion, fabulous hints for a kaleidoscope existence, an occasion for rethinking the whole project of living (what are the roles of instinct and choice?).

Tremble & Shine opens with a quote from psychologist Adam Phillips’ *The Beast in the Nursery: On Curiosity and Other Appetites*, a collection of essays dealing with childhood sexuality, language acquisition, and the loss of a kind of universal perspective that accompanies growing up: “Our parents may have spoken words to us as babies, but they were not words to us.” And indeed, throughout the book there’s a marriage of disturbance and comfort that echoes the known/unknown like a skewed dream of your old hometown or a memory that makes your spine tingle for no apparent reason. This might be an important contribution to the field of epistemology; certainly, it’s delicate, gorgeous, and funny. In these “parlous” times, I don’t think you could do better than to read *Tremble & Shine*.

Jen Robinson is the author of *For Conifer Fanatics* (Soft Skull, 1996) and *Poems for Mark Shimabukuro* (Quod Libet, 2002).

**BETH ANDERSON
OVERBOARD**

Burning Deck Press, 2004, \$10

Beth Anderson's first book, *The Habitable World* (Instance Press, 2001) showed her mastery at keeping form open and closed, equanimous and off-kilter at the same time. It often seemed as if each poem, with its discrete title, beginning, middle, and ending, was nevertheless a fragment of a larger work, and that *The Habitable World* was actually one long poem enlivened by its subterfuges. There's something of that quality to her new book *Overboard*. It creates a continuum with her previous book formally and thematically: a habitable world is one that draws a demarcation around it ("home") but that recognizes its dependence on an infrastructure that draws home into neighborhood, neighborhood into city, city into world. Anderson doesn't essentialize domesticity, but she recognizes its importance to self and struggles with the fragility of its dependency. In this sense her poems are about emotional risk management, and danger lurks even in the tan pattern a sandal leaves on the foot. Hence, *Overboard*: the uninhabitable world menaces.

The two anchors of the book are "A Locked Room" (which was excerpted here in the *Newsletter*, and went on to appear in *Best American Poetry 2003*) and "Hazard," which was published as a chapbook by Germ Folios in 2001. The "locked room mystery," a popular crime fiction sub genre, proposes a variant of: How did the murderer escape the room (locked from the inside) where the body was found? Primarily a logic puzzle in which the intelligent perpetrator (ostensibly) leaves no trace, the locked room mystery gives Anderson an ingenious metaphor for the artist who must leave no trace of labor upon committing the perfect poem. Or, she is suggesting that the locked room and the crime contained in it somehow lies

at the heart of all epistemological investigations, where thinkers must make a series of escapes with words; and though everyone gets caught in the end, the most ingenious escapes are what makes you famous.

In "Hazard" Anderson essays a Stevensian long poem, where "...[O]ur primary option exploded and its/ apparatus fell into deep water." This is the poem that makes most explicit the consequences of her insight: that we live in an architecture of ideologies—or, if you prefer, logics—as fragile as our actual houses (Anderson hails from earthquake country, the San Francisco Bay area). Interdependent logics form the apparatus of a society; the apparatus can always fail.

from boat to boat ceases to be a measure that matters. To be a measure at all.

However remote disaster may seem, it can be realized when information is withheld.

Invoking the metaphor of "a rising tide lifts all boats," used by supply-side economists, these lines critique the notion that a society can exist as isolated houseboats on such an unforgiving surface. In the absence of a rising tide, it's sink or swim.

But it would be stretching it to say "Hazard" is a political poem; it's an epistemological poem that happens to believe its meditative mode is enabled by a network of social permissions. Acknowledging the debt is the first step toward being terrified that the privilege may be revoked. Anderson's poems give us all the thrills of poetry of the "autonomous imagination," as Stevens would put it, but she does not make the claim that she is all that autonomous: and this raises the stakes enormously for poetry and the habitable world which sustains it.

Angie Mlinko edited The Poetry Project Newsletter from 2000-02.

LISA JARNOT

BLACK DOG SONGS

Flood Editions, 2003, \$13

Lisa Jarnot's work moves closer and closer towards us with each book. In *Some Other Kind of Mission*, cut-ups, Bob Dylan quotes, and filmic long shots created music whose driving rhythms and impacted surprises were riveting, but at times it seemed like reaction with little source. Then she mixed peaceful synesthesia with anthropomorphic narrative two-steps in *Ring of Fire*, a book stirring in its simultaneous familiarity and otherworldliness. *Black Dog Songs*, her latest, is more relevant to us humans, politically and intellectually, even as it waxes zoological—and may be considered more momentous than the previous two books.

Immediately striking in this collection is the foregrounding of a political attitude. It is risky to address all-too-current subjects; their merest whiff on a page can signal uninteresting, one-sided verse. Jarnot, though, pulls it off. She opens a section of the book called "My Terrorist Notebook" by announcing, within a poem called "The United States of America": "I'm going to ask you to transition into a new theme about the war," as if she were lecturing. The speaker wants to "live in a cave with Osama," and although the thought might be initially dumbfounding, you realize that any of us might feel this way every now and then. Jarnot accesses and outs the predatory beast in all of us with such statements. She avoids putting her terms bluntly, and yet she nevertheless makes her feelings tangible. "Indian Hot Wings," dedicated to George Bush, gives us chickens burning in a factory, while "Dumb Duke Death," to Dick Cheney, ends with "deep debt/ dour dose/ deem dead." A poem addressed to Donald Rumsfeld recalls, with its frogmen rising from swamps, another war whose length, tragedy, and lack of success was equivalent to the current one. Sure, the comparison has been made before, but the latter poem's ending suggestion that we all "from the self same main dust spring" cannot be made enough, or more lastingly than with these thudding monosyllables. Her poems always have tremendous persuasive power—to say you "enjoy" reading her poems, while not terribly profound, is not a shallow statement about her work. Her verses want to be enjoyed, or to be *moving*, in a market in which poems more frequently want *you* to make contact with *them*. The political work here is frightening in its retrieval of humanity in inhumanity. Her poems open outwards, threading observations of everything from roses to

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Apollo to hockey into a picture whose tones are muted from sheer density. At times the gesture seems disingenuous, the images loosely bound together, as in "Manx Kippers," with its "palace of the clothesline stars/ run over clotheslines, doves and cars,/ Iberian exploding night." But her continuous reach—to find new items for the composition, and to make the unexpected more expected—is ultimately her great strength, underscored by her matter-of-fact, adjective-light style.

True to its name, the book also includes a number of song-like paeans. Their rhythms are, as is usual with Jarnot, pronounced, and they offer images—moon, sun, stars, trees, fields—which are easy to resist because at first sight they seem sentimental. In "Greyhound Ode," she writes, "Go to sleep little doggie,/ while the moon is still foggy,/ and the wild dogs all bark/ by the light of the moon." "Elmslie Blake Pastoral" begins, "In the meadow cows are leaping/ through the branches monkeys sleeping/ on the fields the sheepies bleating..." These verses' juxtaposition with other verses asks, as poets from Rimbaud to Jeff Clark have asked, that we allow these images to affect us and, at the same time, transform themselves in our sights.

The reasons behind her continuing adora-

tion of animals (the chinchilla, the seal, the dog, the lemur, the dove...) become ever more clear. In *Ring of Fire*, at times the gesture seemed somewhat of a trick, akin to Ashbery's occasional nods to the animal kingdom (*vis.* the yak, the blue booby, *et al.*). As they persist, though, the references seem both Whitmanesque in their reach outwards, and much like an attempt to find a place to put one's affection—as if humanity, in the age which she decries so effectively in this book, were no longer such a safe bet. The dourness of such a sentiment, however, does not dampen this bizarre, fascinating book.

Max Winter is a Poetry Editor of Fence.

STEPHEN RATCLIFFE
PORTRAITS AND REPETITION
Post Apollo, 2003, \$22

Stephen Ratcliffe has produced no less than 20 books in as many years, including the critical work *Listening to Reading* (SUNY, 2000) and a slew of highly influential collections of poetry, and yet he's managed to remain under the radar for many readers. Ratcliffe is one the most undersung writers of his generation, and curiously, he is also one of the most formally interesting. Bob Perelman says of Louis Zukofsky (another formally challenging and underappreciated

craftsman), "It looks like [he] has a winning ticket in the lottery that Stendhal said all writers participate in: to be read in the century after they wrote." I hope for the sake of the New, New American Poetry that Ratcliffe doesn't hold a similar ticket. Luckily, we've been given another opportunity to familiarize ourselves with Ratcliffe's work, as 2003 saw the release of two new books, *SOUND / (system)* (Green Integer), a volume composed in the early '90s (and perhaps the clearest link between his earlier work and his current project), and *Portraits and Repetition*, the most cogent collection of his writing to date.

Portraits and Repetition succinctly captures the many nuances I find fascinating in Ratcliffe's work. Foremost in my mind are Ratcliffe's many self-imposed formal constraints. It's a pleasure to simply flip through the volume and marvel at the uniformity of the text. Each poem begins with the date on which it was written, starting with "2.9," and ending the following year with "5.28"—474 days of writing, and 474 poems to show for it. *Portraits* is the first book in a trilogy, each with its own unique form, and each exactly 474 pages long (the other two volumes, *REAL* and *CLOUD / RIDGE*, are both complete but as of yet unpublished). In *Portraits*, each poem is 10 lines in

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length, separated neatly into five couplets. The first line of each couplet is always 60 characters long, and the second, 57. One word per stanza is offset in parentheses (sometimes underlined and sometimes not), adding an interesting jolt to the line as it cuts the rhythm of the couplet, or better, adds a polyrhythm similar to a second voice interrupting the text from the outside.

What is ultimately so compelling about *Portraits* is its capacity to remain endlessly generative regardless (or maybe because) of these formal constraints. Sitting down to read such a dense book can be a bit disconcerting, especially when each consecutive page looks exactly the same. *Portraits and Repetition* is a fitting title, though, because, as with Stein, the work is ultimately not repetitive, even if its formal constraints are; instead, the project is endlessly insistent. Like Christian Bök's *Eunoia*, in which Bök composes poems using only a single vowel per chapter, *Portraits* "means" in spite of itself, even while working through self-imposed constraint; as one drifts through the careful nuances of the work, one unravels endlessly generative gestures of cognition.

The only writing I find similar to Ratcliffe's is the early work of Leslie Scalapino, and like Scalapino, Ratcliffe seems to be enmeshed in an Heisenbergian dilemma. While the poems shift from simple perceptions of life spiraling outside the author's window to surfing conditions in the bay, the relationships between lovers, and the flow-ers in the vase on the table, the writing is not simply the documentation of cognition. As in Heisenberg's principle, the act of observation itself affects the object or phenomena under observation. The writing in *Portraits* documents what is seen, but in so doing catalogs the "Real" into a grid of possibilities, perhaps, as Fanny Howe mentions on the back cover, into musical notations for a score. For example, on 12.7, Ratcliffe writes,

visual action of person moving above
(content) second person
for example, where moonlight seems to
come down from left
underside of bird's white wings, whose
disappearance follows
(actual) perception of emerging green on
surface of ridge
feeling in wall behind diagonal edge of
darker shape on left
intersected by observer's experience of it,
(proposition)

(being) where grey light begins, opposite
identity of planes

against which an image of thought itself
seems to project

blue in upper right corner in relation of
(how) hand touches
texture of other side, which isn't exactly
apparent to it

(302)

The poem reads as a collaged grid of sensation, and here the senses are working overtime, documenting phenomena they would normally be unable to detect. The effect is akin to a lexical tendon holding together multiple phenomena, in effect, becoming itself an object of experience. This is essentially what is most interesting for me as a reader: the poem acts (physically) to hold together disparate observations, and in so doing, creates intriguing relations that become the focal point of the work.

Portraits and Repetition is the realized document of over 20 years of experiments in observation and cognition. If it says anything about the work to come, and I think it does, Ratcliffe is on to something that is exciting in its careful and precise execution. His *Portraits* is the best sort of daybook: at once teeming with uninterrupted attention to phenomena, while remaining firmly rooted in the world of experience.

Michael Cross is the past editor of Manifest Press and syllogism magazine and am current editor of ATTICUS / FINCH CHAPBOOKS.

ELIZABETH TREADWELL CHANTRY

Chax Press, 2004, \$16

One of the meanings of chantry is a gift, an endowment for the singing of a mass, but for whom? In here rest Pocahontas, The Brady Bunch, Aphra Behn, Rick Steves, et al. As an endowment this book is rich and telling. Treadwell fully immerses the reader into a contemporary world, yet infuses it with the baggage of the whole English language. It seems from reading this that, yes, we are workers in offices or people on road trips perhaps dressed in "synthetic velvet," but in us, on a cellular level, we are also the dairymaids and ladies wearing the fabrics of old, no less real than the copyist. So when "LOGOS" appears on the same line as "Marlboro Menthols," it is good and right that it does.

What is amazing about this book is that on the level of language the past is so integrat-

ed with the present that a new world view (perhaps a new feminism?) is created. There is an unveiling of embedded hierarchies. From the first poem, "Christines," the reader is bombarded with the bombastic language of master and servant. It's amusing in its overwroughtness:

My dear dear, request that I narrate of
them, unmarked and grave, & Sir's
happy and empty formative, that Sir
won't quell my sugar I, my bleeding
narrative & my own limbs of desiring
next to unkempt envy quote frocks of
hers, hers, marched type of figured
speech, if not quarrel, desertion, mad-
ness, stolen item. Protect your underling
Sir from I beg of Sir.

Yet there is an edge to it, a feeling that perhaps the Sir will get his throat slit in the middle of the night, that perhaps this language is the yoke. And if it is not the yoke, then how are we ever out of the master-servant relationship? One can be very singular and insert "as women" to this but really I think this question is asked of people.

A longer piece, "codes of the very femininity," is beautiful in the way it mixes the fairytale with the everyday. In the section "husbands and wives," Treadwell says, "no longer is the husband able to exercise power as nurse-and-doctor type," but also, "the maiden from the cupboard began chatting and primarily about the children's behavior." It is a piece that understands how we are in collusion with the very things that oppress us:

engaged he had a very delicate maiden
everything I demanded jump to her
death. that were missing the chore, reso-
nant with folklore and song. Happened
but I didn't find him in her present frag-
ile state of mind. whereas now, bath
crystals, one day feathers. The more
you love romance ... the more you'll
love this offer.

The work is so dense; it is at once disdainful and in love with its collections of things and people and relationships and mythologies. It is impossible to separate them out. The new and the old, the elevated and the mundane must be experienced together. And it's here where the dailiness of our repetitive lives regains an urgency.

Sarah Anne Cox is the author of Arrival (Krupskaya, 2002).

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