

THE POETRY PROJECT NEWSLETTER
No. 4 1 March 1973

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The following article by Tom Veitch, written for the SAN FRANCISCO BOOK REVIEW No. 27, is reprinted in order to bring out into the open the way poets (known and unknown) and publishers (big and small) often fail to understand one another. Veitch's case is typical, though extreme.

HOW I WON THE BIG TABLE PRIZE AND GOT MY HEAD PUSHED IN

This is the record of one man's weird hassles with the publishing biz, the greasy residue of a little war I had this year with Big Table Books (Follett, Chicago).

Maybe the info contained herein will help the callow uninitiate to understand: books are commodities, like soup; their sale and distribution is (a) a communications problem involving manipulation of the news and control of the public eye (image input); (b) a physical problem involving the movement of hard goods in space, and the control of space. The number of writers are many. The physical outlets for their work are few and controlled by few. Unless you're prepared to make your own forays into the public eye (make some news), or tackle the problems of being your own publisher, then buddy you're workin for Uncle Bennett's ghost, and he aint about to let you forget it.

I'm told Follett is the largest publisher of children's books in America. They also publish specialty stuff like The Shooter's Bible. In 1967, through the effort of Frank O'Hara's brother, who worked there, they entered into connubial arrangements with Paul Carroll, a poet most known for having edited Big Table magazine in the 50's. Paul and Follett began a series of books under the BIG TABLE logo that gave fresh hope of recognition to young poets. For one thing they held an annual competition for "the most distinguished volume by a younger poet." They also did an anthology that brought a lot of hitherto distant voices into earshot. (The anthology has gone into four printings.)

There were some hassles, Paul quit once or twice, and in 1971 a lady named Pat Meehan took over as editor of the series. Then me and my books came along, and now Big Table is dead.

Paul Carroll had accepted my novel THE LUIS ARMED STORY before he split with Follett. The novel, published in Germany in 1970, had been seen by every New York editor and a few in Boston. It had received praise but had been rejected for "market considerations," i.e., it was non-commercial, avant-garde, did not fit into any of the preconceptions currently in vogue. O.K., all that aside, P.C. knew it was a good book, and Big Table was purposely pushing "non-commercial" and "literary" items.

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(An aside: American publishers aren't really interested in the evolution of literature except as it relates to the marketplace. And the evolution of consciousness is not in the running at all. So many bright babes of the mind fall like unnourished star-children into the tarpits of obscurity, while troglodyte mutants thrive and have many offspring. (Whew!) The natural law of 'survival of he who advances the species toward knowledge' has transmuted into the political law, 'survival of he who can pander to the tastes of 50 million bored housewives.'))

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It took nine months to carve out a contract with Pat Meehan and her superiors. I was using the services of a N.Y. agent at the time, Roslyn Targ by name. Finally we signed and the book was scheduled to come out in September of '72.

Meanwhile, a few days before Christmas of '71, I received a letter from Paul Carroll saying that altho he no longer worked for Follett, he was still judging the annual poetry award, and I should submit a manuscript before January first. Two days later I submitted a poetry manuscript and three days after that Paul told me I had won the 1972 Big Table Award, "hands down."

A week later Pat Meehan told me the same news and said she would forward a contract to my agent. I said no, send the contract to me, I think we can do this faster without the agent, she seems very busy with her "bread and butter clients," as she calls them.

The contract arrived. It was very similar to the LUIS ARMED contract. Pages and pages of legal bullshit, most of it designed to protect the publisher. I read it over and finally deciphered a few clauses I didn't like. One said "the publisher shall furnish the author with a proof of the work which, except for such reasonable changes in styling as are required by the publisher, shall conform to the completed manuscript as submitted by the author..." Woo! This seemed to be a clever way of saying they had the right to change the words of the poems, altho I can't imagine they'd ever do that. Checking my LUIS ARMED contract I found the same phrase! I'd missed it before, even tho I had read the contract six or seven times.

Another long and contorted clause said, in effect: hereafter the publish will control the reprint rights to these poems and may grant those rights without consulting the author. ('Wha--?? Man, that's bullshit!')

The rest was pretty innocuous. I crossed out ~~and~~ initialed the two offending passages and added a few clauses of my own: "the publisher agrees to consult the author in matters of typography, lay-out, cover art, blurbs, and agrees that the result shall be mutually pleasing to author and publisher." This seemed more than fair. After all, I could have left out the words "mutually" and "publisher." I also added, "publisher agrees that the hardcover price will not be more than \$4.95 and the paperback price will not be more than \$2.95." Amen.

I sent the cofrected contract back and waited. I assumed I'd get my prize money a few days later. I should have known better, because what I'd done was challenge the sanctified powers of the publisher (Mr. Big) over the author (Mr. Nobody).

I went go into the hurricane of phone calls and letters which followed. Arguments and counterarguments. The nub of it all was this: Pat Meehan said that my "demands" were "out of the question," and I must accept the contract as it stood or forfeit the prize. "I hope," she said, "you aren't going to be one of our difficult authors, like Aram Saroyan and Bill Knott." Gulp.

I thought about this maternal advice for a few days, and I came to the following conclusions: I deeply resented having my "demands" summarily rejected without discussion. I felt that these points were reasonable and valid, I felt that I was asking for rights that every author should have. Not only that, they were about to publish my novel, so it was really in their interest to assent to my few requests. I deduced they were trying to impress upon me that I was still a lowly unknown author subject to their approval. But I didn't really care to play a subservient role in the relationship, so I called their bluff and told them o.k., give the prize to somebody else. "Let's forget the poems and get to work on the novel."

I was positive they would relent, because they couldn't afford to estrange me. After all, if the novel was successful, I might hop to another publisher in seconds flat!

Then an amazing thing happened. I didn't hear another word from Big Table for over a month. Pat Meehan refused to answer my letters and when I called she was always out. Finally a letter from C. Allen Fort, v.p., informed me that Follett was discontinuing the Big Table line. If I'd be so good as to return the \$1000 advance on THE LUIS ARMED STORY, they'd be glad to give me my unconditional release.

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Pause for a few moans, guffaws, and chuckles.

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Big Table published twenty-three titles in the four or five years they were in business. According to Mr. Fort, only three of these titles made money. I was their last inning clutch hitter and I chose to haggle the contract instead of stepping up to the plate and knocking in the winning run.

Both of us learned a lesson. They learned to stick to children's authors, who are more docile than wise-assed poets. I learned (again) to stay clear of The Garden of Earthly Delights. Cold Cash Karma is the game. You're a sucker if you compromise your freedom and give in to it. You see, the confrontation was not so much over the precise terminology of the contract -- it was really corporate arrogance vs. self-respect. The classic American existential predicament.

My demands were pretty minor. Most men could have reached a human, gentlemanly agreement, and the books would have been published. But their attitude was "we don't have time to explain or discuss this with you, Small Fry. Sign the contract or no book!" Feeling the supreme weight of their power and condescension, I had no choice but to toss the Big Table Award to the winds.

So, pals, buy a printing press. Publish your obscene odes on

the windows of your own skull. You are great, they are small. Time is on your side.

Don't give them the advance money back, either.

-- Tom Veitch

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Veitch's DIE LUIS ARMED STORY was published in Germany in 1970 by Kiepenheuer & Witsch, which company also signed on a collaborative science-fiction novel by Veitch and Dick Gallup, THE PLANETARY ROUTE. In early 1972 K&W suddenly decided not to publish the book, on the grounds that fiction was not "doing well" in Germany.

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Published writers often have even more complaints than "wise-assed" poets whose books are simply dropped. Fewer and fewer young writers are floating into the publishing houses and euphorically signing on the dotted line. His growing concern with how his words are used, and the problems this creates with publishers, have generated an antagonism which has yet to find its mediator.

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A revised and enlarged edition of A DIRECTORY OF AMERICAN POETS has just been published by Poets & Writers, 201 W. 54th St., NYC 10019, for \$4. (The 1200 poets listed in the DIRECTORY receive free copies). The primary purpose of the 192 pp. DIRECTORY is to assist in locating these writers for readings, workshops and other assignments, but it also functions as a reference work for libraries and facilitates communications between poet and publisher, poet and poet.

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The Spring-Summer catalogue of Grossman Publishers lists ARISE, ARISE by Louis Zukofsky, CAPITAL OF PAIN by Paul Eluard (trans. Richard Weisman), QUADRIFARIAM by Frank Samperi, LIVING AT THE MOVIES by Jim Carroll, THE MAXIMUS POEMS, Vol. III by Charles Olson, all in hard-cover and paperback editions, and THE AMERICANS, photographs by Robert Frank introduced by Kerouac, and ARCHAEOLOGIST OF MORNING by Charles Olson, both paperbacks.

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The Australian government is offering \$6,500 for a new national anthem (formerly "God Save the Queen"). Denise Green, 510 Broome St, NYC (tel. 925-9192) is interested in collaborating with poets and song-writers on this incredible project.

by Rudy Buckhardt

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Forthcoming readings at the Church: March 7, Michael McClure. March 14, a Special Double Feature of Movies: HIPPODROME HARDWARE (color, sound, 50 min.) by Red Grooms and AVENUES OF COMMUNICATION (black & white & color, sound, 45 min.). N.B.: two shows, 8:30 and 10 pm. March 21, Michael Brownstein and David Shapiro. March 28, Dick Gallup and Ted Berrigan. April 4, Bobbie Louise Hawkins and Robert Creeley.

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Bookshops: Bill Hoffer's FALSTAFF BOOKS, 4491 W. 10th Ave., Vancouver 8, B.C., Canada publishes a good catalogue of Canadian poetry. The best poetry bookshop in Ann Arbor is the CENTICORE BOOKSHOP, 336 Maynard. And in Philadelphia it's MIDDLE EARTH BOOKS, 1134 Pine St., which also publishes poetry pamphlets by Victor Bockris, Aaron Poller/David Federman, Patti Smith, and Tom Weatherly/Kenneth Bluford, \$2 ea. Middle Earth Books has recently issued a semi-annual magazine, LIP, the first issue (\$1.25) of which is a Telegraph Books Special Issue guest-edited by Victor Bockris. THE 8TH STREET BOOKSHOP, 17 W. 8, NYC offers a free catalogue of its poetry stock. Catalogue available at the store.

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David Antin's TALKING, published by the Kulchur Foundation, has been nominated for the National Book Award! Kulchur will publish Carter Ratcliff's FEVER COAST in April. Other Kulchur books are said to be by Paul Violi & Larry Fagin. Also, the Foundation will sponsor 3 poetry readings at the MOMA this spring. April 26, Robert Kelly, George Economou & Armand Schwerner introduced by Rochelle Owens. May 3, John Perreault, John Giorno & Bernadette Mayer introduced by Anne Waldman. May 10, Kenneth Koch, Kenward Elmslie & Barbara Guest introduced by John Ashbery. For further information, write to the Kulchur Foundation, 888 Park Avenue, NYC.

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The following ANGEL HAIR publications are available from Lewis Warsh, 65 Inman St., Cambridge, Mass. 02139: ELECTIVE AFFINITIES by Jonathan Cott, \$2. GIRL MACHINE by Kenward Elmslie, \$1. VERGE, a broadside by James Schuyler, \$3. TWO WOMEN by Charlie Vermont, \$2. JOANNE by Joanne Kyger, \$3. THE VIRGO POEM by Charles Stein, \$3. ICY ROSE, a broadside by Anne Waldman, \$3. ASYLUM POEMS by John Wieners, \$2. LANDSCAPE by Larry Fagin & George Schneeman, \$2. TWELVE POEMS by Larry Fagin, \$1.50.

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Richard Kostelanetz announces that THIRD ASSEMBLING, an annual anthology of "otherwise unpublishable manuscripts" which he co-compiles with Henry Korn and Michael Metz, is available for \$2.95 from literature bookshops or from Box 1967, Brooklyn, NY 11202. For this unique anthology, contributors send in 1000 copies of whatever they wish, and the compilers collate it.

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PARNASSUS: POETRY IN REVIEW, published by Stanley Lewis & edited by Herbert Leibowitz, 216 W. 89, NYC 10024. Published semi-annually, \$3.50/issue. The first number of this well-produced magazine contains 200 pp. of reviews by Helen Vendler, Erica Jong, John Koethe, Jonathan Williams, Diane Wakowski, Anselm Hollo, etc. on O'Hara, Borges, Neruda, Vallejo, Valéry, Perse, Brautigan, Ashbery, Sorrentino, Lima, Rothenberg, Berryman, etc.

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Two poetry readings at PAULA COOPER GALLERY, 100 Prince St.: March 8, Michael Brownstein & Larry Fagin. March 22, Joe Brainard & Ron Padgett. Both at 8:30 pm. Contribution.

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Paul Carroll, meanwhile, has completed the editing of THE YOUNG AMERICAN POETS: SECOND SELECTION, and AMERICAN POETS 1950-1970, two anthologies which presumably would have been published by Big Table/Follett. Carroll is currently trying to reestablish Big Table Books in association with another publisher. According to Carroll it was not only Veitch's books which got the axe: John Perreault, David Mus, Clark Coolidge & others had manuscripts accepted, then dropped. Carroll has recently completed the first draft of a 150 stanza ODE TO DARWIN ABOARD THE HMS BEAGLE.

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Readers of this NEWSLETTER interested in subletting or exchanging houses or apartments this summer should send complete details to the editor.

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The fifth issue of CONTACT is a special ANNE WALDMAN ISSUE, with poems, an interview with Bockris-Wylie, comments, a bibliography, photographs & drawings. Ed. Jeff Goldberg, 866 N. 21 St., Philadelphia, Pa. 50¢.

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The forthcoming competition for the Frank O'Hara Award for poetry has been postponed. Submitted manuscripts are being returned. The competition will resume later this year.

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PENUMBRA (ed. Charles Haseloff, GPO Box 1501, NYC 10001) is looking for poems and art for its Life After Death Issue. Deadline (sorry) for submissions is April 30.

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TO

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First Class Mail