

# poetry project

NEWSLETTER

DECEMBER/JANUARY 1999/2000 ISSUE #177

\$5

## WHAT'S INSIDE

An Interview  
with Renee Gladman

Tribute to Rudy Burckhardt

Dawn Michelle Baude from Paris

Jen Hofer from Mexico City

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Catalina Cariaga

Chris Stroffolino

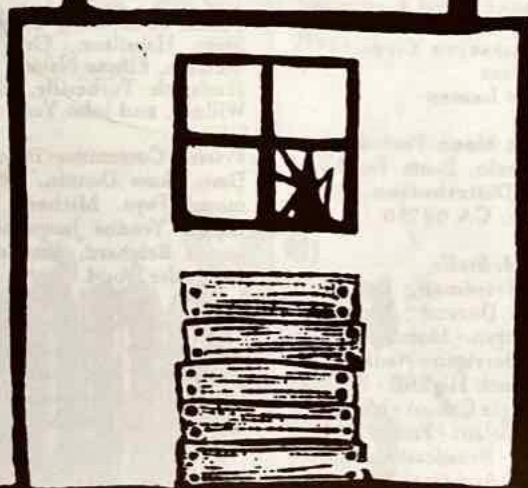
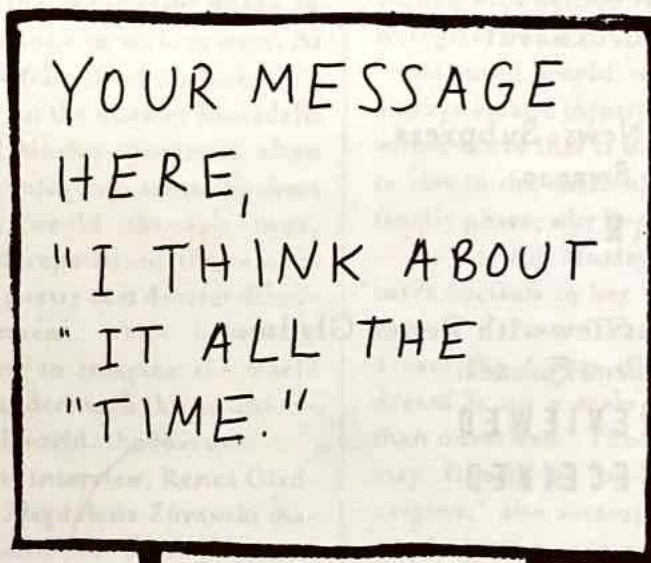
Barbara Guest

Edmund Berrigan • Tom Devaney  
• Greg Fuchs

Mary Burger

## POETRY BY

Kenneth Koch



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## EDITOR'S COMMENT

Disenfranchisement: literally, it has something to do with a privilege being taken away—with being deprived of something.

Figuratively, in poetry at least, it has to do with the power of love and loss, of fate, and of the sometimes despotic rule of the emotions. It also has to do with more tangible forms of injustice: the tyrannical rules of governments and the uneasy negotiation between the self and the larger society.

The discourse of poetry has always been in conversation with the discourse of disenfranchisement. Much of what we define as poetry, from Phyllis Wheatley to Antonin Artaud, to the endless lists of captivity narratives, jeremiads, testaments, litanies, and lyrics that comprise poetry, has had something to say about what is fair and unfair. Whether it's "They Flee from Me," or "I flee from them," fear, exuberance, and intensity of spirit have marked the best poetry.

But the questions remain: Why all the symbolism? Why metaphor, prosody, simile, allusion? Why not just say what you mean? If one feels

disenfranchised, then why not take it to the polling booth or to the editorial page?

The answer lies in subjectivity, with the expression of one's interior states of mind. Such states are often too subtle for the polling booth and too ambivalent for the editorial page. So, where is the justice in expressing one's interior states? Where is the power in that? Why bother?

The writers featured in this issue of the *Newsletter* speak to such questions in various ways. As Dawn Michelle Baud outlines it in her piece on the work of Ramsdell, Day, and Moxley, poetry is often phenomenological—accessing some originary world through tone, lyric, and repetition, that eludes us. It is a poetry that decries disenfranchisement, while heroically attempting to imagine the world that lies underneath the injustice—the literal world, the lost wax.

In their interview, Renee Gladman and Magdalena Zurawski discuss a number of topics pertinent to a consideration of disenfranchisement, particularly the fluidity

of the self in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the ways it can be revisited and renegotiated toward productive ends through writing.

Carlo Arreglo shows us how Catalina Cariaga's work, while based in a traditional sense of Filipino identity, moves us, often through a fragmented aesthetic, into new social and philosophical terrain.

Finally, Mark Wallace, through an exploration of mixed metaphor, among other devices, discusses how Chris Stroffolino conveys the agony of a human soul that is concerned with neither the phenomenological world nor an historically constituted world of categorical and systematic injustice, but rather with a world that is *de facto* unable to rise to the challenge that poetry finally poses: why bother?

As Jennifer Moxley puts it in the introduction to her book, *Imagination Verses*: "Though we may dream the dream of equality, we dream it on a scale much larger than ourselves." Though the poem may, finally, be "smaller than its origins," the attempt to put the dream into words enlarges us in spirit, while making our unjust origins a little less defining of our lives.



# Magnetic

# To Destiny

by

## KENNETH KOCH

You could be a rock  
Or a rock star. An elephant. A ride in a canoe  
That concludes with a faster heartbeat for all involved.  
You could be a pestilence or a courtship or a seminary.  
You're bound to have a limited plot; but say, what is it?  
You are an old idea not talked to so much any more. People have figured out  
What they think they're doing. You seem to some a DNA roustabout—  
If anything. A hand of yours is raised to interrupt me:  
"If you tear the building down, what will you do with the stones? I am Destiny!  
Don't try to outwit me." But—there are things I want you to tell me.  
Does it matter if I go on drinking? Should I stay married or not? Who or what  
Is my redeemer if anything or anyone is? Does it matter if I keep working or not?  
Where should I live?  
Am I meant to amend, and to attend on, other lives?  
Won't you, yourself, fly off to younger souls  
Who promise fatter progeny? Have you already done so, recently?  
"No," you roar, "I am still here. And the answer to all your questions is that it  
doesn't matter—"  
As far as I'm concerned you might as well eat this tub of butter,  
Fly in that damaged plane, go off with that woman,  
Sleep on a bed of fire and work all night instead of during the day.  
Your questions are misdirected. I'm the future. What you do now doesn't matter  
To me or to anyone else in my unknowable establishment."  
No wonder hardly anyone speaks to you any more. "I know. It's useless."  
Still, thanks for what I already have. "Not my doing—I'm the 'Shall-have' man."

# announcements

## Emergency Fund for Oliver and Notley

Any who would like to contribute to a fund that will help the poets Douglas Oliver and Alice Notley following Doug's hospitalization for cancer, please send checks either to Lyn Hejinian (2639 Russel St., Berkeley CA 94705) or Leslie Scalapino (5729 Clover Drive, Oakland CA 94618). The contributions will be given anonymously.

## Awake, my soul!

The new issue of Poets & Poems on the Poetry Project web site ([www.poetryproject.com](http://www.poetryproject.com)) features new work by Susan Gevirtz, Don Hymans, Pattie McCarthy, Lytle Shaw and Roberto Tejada. Forthcoming in the January issue of Poets & Poems: new work by Ricki Garni, Diane Glancy, Bill Kushner, Mark McMorris, and Susan Schultz. Also new at the web site: Jill Stengel's Letter to the Editor in the Tiny Press Center; electronic reprints of Bernadette Mayer's review of Clark Coolidge and Vicki Hudspith's interview with Lyn Hejinian from back issues of the Poetry Project Newsletter (we're talking les années '70s!); and, reprinted from the *World*, Jaime Manrique's essay, "Ashes and Embers: Presence of Latin Poetry in New York City."

## And let her works praise her

We'd like to announce the addition of staff members Kara Rondina and Prageeta Sharma, who will be our new box office tenders. We'd also like to congratulate former Poetry Project intern Luisa Guigliano for receiving an ARTS Alumni Award.

## In consequence of their own deeds

*La Calaca Review*, a new literary magazine from Calaca Press, is looking for "literature about the daily lives and struggles of nuestro pueblo. Beautiful, hard-hitting works by Raza from the barrios, Aztlan, the rest of Latin America." Send poems, essays, short stories, b&w photos, artwork, etc. in English, español, or bilingual

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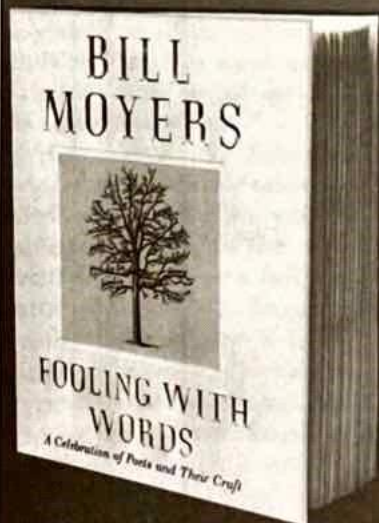
## So I commend enjoyment

Many, many thanks to the wonderful interns and volunteers who helped make the Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Edward Sanders reading such a success: Jennifer Bartlett, John Coletti,

Tom Devaney, Kelvin Fernandez, Naima Freitas, Atticus Frieman, Anna Godbersen, Abigail Frankfurt, Paolo Javier, Daniel Kane, David Kirschenbaum, Carlos Luciano, Caitlin McDonnell, Richard O'Russa, Douglas Rothschild, Anthony Salerno, and Ian Wilder. Also thanks to those of you who have been helping with our regular weekly series: Jennifer Bartlett, Edmund Berrigan, Tracy Blackmer, Abigail Frankfurt, Drew Gardner, Essence Woodard (and her family!).

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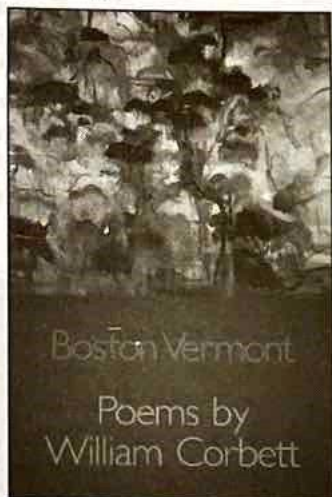
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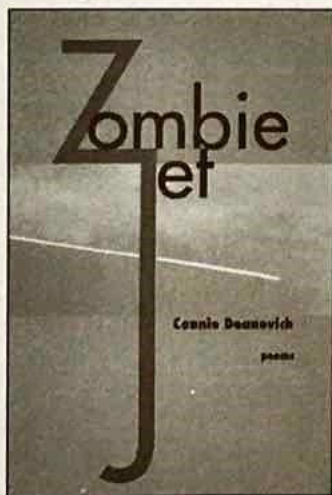
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# regional updates

## PARIS

RAMSDELL, MOXLEY, DAY

by Dawn Michelle Baude

Dear Katy,

You know how books end up in your hands? Sometimes you're ready for them, sometimes you're not. Well, three interesting books by American poets were all given to me in the span of a week—which is unusual, given that the ocean is wide and deep.

The first is *Lost Wax*, by Heather Ramsdell. *Lost Wax* was, you may be interested to know, a 1997 National Poetry Series winner selected by James Tate. I was surprised that Tate chose it, as it's so cutting edge—I'd have expected him to go for something a little more mainstream. Obviously I've severely misjudged Tate! *Mea culpa*.

*Lost Wax* is divided into five sections of poems of varying length and structure. One of the strongest links between the various styles in the book is the carefully controlled repetition—from phoneme to syntagma—at which Ramsdell excels. We both know that in the hands of less accomplished poets, repetition becomes painfully grating, but in the hands of a master, it's a decisive ingredient. Ramsdell has a refined ear and a remarkable ability to incorporate silence into her writing. The use of repetition, coupled with a mindful application of silence, makes her poems astounding sites of resonance.

Taking this idea even further, there's evidence that Ramsdell treats words as 'positions' that we return to and rediscover. Hence, the narrator in *Lost Wax* constantly finds spots and places, loses them, fixes axes and co-ordinates, and so on. The poet is, in fact, using language to situate, or site, the world, to locate the 'real' through the range of ideas available in American English. This siting (or citing) of the real reaches an obsessional pitch in the most accomplished

section of the book, "More About the Closet."

Read this part aloud, even if you don't have time. The literal writing place—the room with its computer, closet, desk, and drawers—becomes a field of consciousness incorporating both sensory and dream data. Within this field, various constituents of the 'real' are positioned. But the problem is that thoughts don't stay still. The world doesn't stay still. So the writer's warning, "do not / move. Do not anything" has a kind of humorous, neurotic quality.

And it's just at this point that the title, *Lost Wax*, becomes operative. In *Lost Wax* casting, you dip a wax sculpture in plaster, burn the wax away, and cast the hollow mold with molten metal. A similar process is at work in Ramsdell's poetry. Things—words, ideas, perceptions—appear and disappear in a play that is similar to the play of positive and negative molds that empty and fill in the casting process. "I recognize," she says, "your face in all things and all things must fit / together, as all stars once did, as all sands did so that sand on the / floor made sense until we looked closely at it and it spread."

In the next book, *Imagination Verses*, Jennifer Moxley takes a very different approach. Have you come across Moxley's work in the mags? I was excited to see what a full collection of it would be like. *Imagination Verses* was written over a five year period, so the poems don't necessarily follow one another, though overall they do give the picture of a life thoroughly dedicated to poetry. The range of forms is notable—from lengthy odes to spare haiku to inventive stanzaic structures that necessitate a specific kind of Moxley-made poem.

When I see a range of form like this, I'm always impressed by the stylistic courage and compositional flexibility that such a project entails. Don't get me wrong. This isn't a sheaf of successful creative writing exercis-

es; this is more akin to a polysemous expression of self—multiple, varied, resourceful. The mind, it would seem, demands numerous venues of self-expression. Rather than channeling that demand into some pre-conceived idea of idealized form, Moxley allows the impulse to roam almost at will and certainly without censure. What happens is that the exploration of poetic form then mirrors a cognitive investigation into the nature of the de-centered lyrical self.

At one extreme, there's the savvy poet steeped in postmodernist thought; at the other end of the spectrum, there's the naive, romantic "I," eager to emote. Moxley's poems navigate the spectrum without polarizing, giving her "I" a kind of perpetually 'youthful' quality—adaptable, rebellious, bemused, iconoclastic—the kind of "I" that is imbued with a rangy wisdom, the kind of "I" that I'm interested in watching and tracking, because it's an "I" capable of surprise.

Which brings me to what is, I believe, the source of Moxley's vigortone. The force of Moxley's poetry is in its uncompromising attitude toward itself and the world. It's most apparent, as tone usually is, in her word choice—those uncanny juxtapositions that amount to very serious word play. She's an extraordinarily lexical poet—the fascination of what happens when one word abuts another is a mainstay of her work. But, as always with tone, it moves from the micro-level (in this case, the level of the word) to the macro-level (the level of the poem). Rarely have I come across a book with so much verve. It's sassy, it's irreverent, it's angry—particularly when it comes to lofty issues of social injustice. There's a terrible need to strike back, denounce, point the finger, accuse. What energy!

But the flipside to the I-won't-let-you-fuck-with-me stance is vulnerability, and we see that aspect emerge, particularly when the poems allow death to enter in. Death is, in fact,

one of the haunting figures in this book. It can appear in subtle disguises, in the form of loss, or as phantom corollary to the many poems that describe, in almost etiological terms, life's intensity.

*Imagination Verses* made me think often of the work of Shelley as representative of a Romantic model that takes into account the poet's political responsibility. There's a similar no-holds-barred approach—with its attendant appeal to grandiose issues of myth, life, love, self and death—and, at the same time, there's a kind of unrelenting remonstrance. Moxley's version of Romanticism incorporates the disjunctive, cumulative nature of our *fin-de-millennium* experience, so it's a Romanticism far too self-aware to buy into the old tradition. The book functions then as one possibility of the ways in which the Romantic project might be recuperated in a *fin-de-millennium* context.

In *The Literal World*, by Jean Day, the main issue isn't the opposition (or correspondence) between self and world raised by Moxley, or the citation of the real in Ramsdell, but the location of self in a world made of words. In order for that location to occur, the boundary between the "I" and the "world"—that curious interface between me and not-me, between objectivity and subjectivity, between interpretation and existence—must be constantly delineated. Hence the 'literality' of the world in the book's title, which suggests a kind of urgent need to establish the world, not as real, but as fact.

One application of this project is an urgent need to establish the poem as poem. While Ramsdell's poems tend to emphasize the end lines, Day's tend to emphasize the openings—almost as if the poem were struggling against brutal phenomenological obstacles. I'm not suggesting that the ends of Day's poems lack force (or that the beginnings of Ramsdell's lack strength); I just want to draw attention to the fact that some poems build toward an end while others hang from their opening.

In *The Literal World*, there's a softening of the I-won't-stand-for-an-ambiguous-cognition that I associ-

ate with some of Day's earlier work. Her incisive observational knack is still present, but it's less defiant now, more tolerant and completely welcoming. Consequently, the prosody has changed, moving to a more mellifluous surface, with passages of lyric beauty and depth.

"Lyric" is a word to qualify in the context of Day's work, given her association with stringent tendencies of postmodern writing. It's inappropriate to call her a "lyric" poet—at least according to my knowledge of the current usage of the term. Day's refusal to strongly identify with the words on the page precludes a kind of "letting go" that seems to me to be one of the chief factors in lyricism—following its roots in song.

In Day's work, song is so potentially powerful that in the past a concentrated defense was mounted against it, often in the form of syntactic non-sequiturs, which she used to create a line-based prosody of lexical collision. Hallmarks of Day's earlier work—undercutting, disjunctive strategies and quick shifts in tone—are still present, but now they're more apt to service melodic harmonies. The internal prosody of her lines varies, though the pause at the end is usually constant. Even in the enjambed poems, like the "Seven Secular Sermons," the force of the line as its own independent unit creates a tension between itself and the larger syntactical unit to which it belongs. In other words, the incremental construction of the poems works against narrative momentum; I often re-read a line before I go on.

Since Day is so aware of contingency in language—how one word entails an idea which entails other words, other ideas, and so on—her word choice is far more studied than a poet, say, writing in a loose speech-based form. In the latter case, the saying dominates the how-they-say. Day never lets that part slip, even for a second, which is not to suggest that this is a deadly serious book. As Laura Moriarty points out in her essay, "The Writing Being" (forthcoming in *New Writings on Motherhood and Poetics*, edited by Brenda Hillman and Patricia Dienstfrey), *The Literal World* contains moments of utter

hilarity and poignancy. As a whole, it bears witness to a mind steeped in the heady world of ideas, but a mind which understands that ideas are never detached from the words and world upon which they depend.

Although it might seem risky, you could, at this point, shift this argument and contend that Day is a closet nature poet. Not that she writes 'about' the natural world the way that a Jeffers would—what I'm getting at has more to do with the 'intrusion' of nature into the poems. Just read the book for all the mentions of sky, rain, weather, etc., and you'll see what I mean. At first this semantic family factors into the surface the way other objects of attention do, so that it seems to receive equal weight in comparison with, say, household objects, architectural components or various philosophical concepts.

But on closer inspection, those nature words differentiate from the background, draw attention to themselves. They are emblematic, in fact, of the exacting phenomenological investigation which is underway. Day is, if nothing else, a poet of extreme precision—of word, of idea—and where else does phenomenology locate if not in the world of the ultimate givens (or conditions)—air, sky, earth?

Day's work then exemplifies one overriding tendency in all three books that I'm writing to you about (and a dominant tendency in most writing I read today). Phenomenology has been, perhaps, the key issue in the poetry of the second half of this century. I certainly see it in Ramsdell's work (the obsession with citing the real) and, in a different way, Moxley's (the multiplicity of self). In Day, it's the relation between the mechanisms which produce meaning in language and the world which those mechanisms are said to describe. It seems to me then that all three poets undertake phenomenological research, since they're all concerned with the perception/awareness/self triumphant and in its telling.

These books moved and impressed me, and I wanted you to know about them. As always, I have the disagreeable sensation of having



only just scratched the surface. There's so much to say.  
I'm leaving Paris for a year in Beirut. See you next fall.

As ever,  
Dawn

## MEXICO CITY

LETTERS HOME: The Thoughts, Perusings, and Peregrinations of One Girl Poet Upon Her Arrival in Mexico City

by Jen Hofer

More than 2,200,000 people use the Mexico City metro each day. The trains are bright orange, frequent and fast, and the metro itself sings, grindingly. The vendors on the metro selling wares out of shoulder bags and moving from car to car at each stop sing their under-ten-peso merchandise—army knives, datebooks, telephone directories, plastic photo albums, more-wax-than-chocolate chocolate bars, chiclets, newsprint volumes of the latest Mexico City laws, pens, disposable razors, keyrings on chains. Respite from or entrance into moments of deep discomfort (depending on your mood, attitude, perspective), the only people legally allowed to panhandle or busk on the metro are the physically disabled (often severely), who are often led through the goldfish-slippery press of crowded cars by very small children, who collect coins in hands gone grey with city—and the disabled dispossessed playing accordion, harmonica, guitar, sing with high, nasal, “you-know-it-is-love-if-you-end-up-bruised” voices. I don't purchase things on the metro and I try to carry fruit with me to give away with my change, and stand with my back to the doors on the non-opening side of the car so as to avoid the ubiquitous fingers of which certain metro-riders (not including me) seem to be so fond. The metro stops have a symbology, images being supposedly universally readable: Xola the palm tree, Etiopia the lion, Chapultepec the grasshopper, Coyoacán the coyote, Juanacatlán the butterfly, Zócalo the eagle and snake off the Mexican flag.

Despite any heartfelt skepticism about the transparency of language (or perception or experience—if we're considering those as separate entities for the moment) & any eyebrow-raising over activities as perhaps old-fashioned as description, I find myself utterly, hourly confounded, street after street, by the implausible, daunting, baroque impossibility of communicating where it is I am walking, and what I see as I go. I enter into the encyclopedic, somewhat anti-encyclopedically. Or I resist it from inside its very necessity.

Mexico City occupies 0.08% of Mexico's total surface area; in that space live some 24 million people, roughly 25% of the country's total population. In 1997, 5,587 people lived in each square kilometer of this city. About one quarter of these people make a living (or don't make a living) selling objects or food on the street. A conservative estimate—accurate figures are nonexistent—might

venture that 130,000 live in shantytowns or are homeless, and some 75,000 are niños de la calle—street children. Most corners are busy, and at most busy corners flamethrowers, three-tiered clown-acrobat ensembles, jugglers, vendors of slinkys, puzzles, and a wide variety of shoddy plastic toys, pots and pans, junk food, and the daily paper, windshield washers, traffic cops and bucking VW bug taxis compete for the attention of anyone who is pausing there.

It is about 9 a.m. when I climb the subway steps into the glare of the zócalo, where a Mexican flag the size of most Manhattan apartments flutters—I almost hate to say it—quite beautifully in the seemingly ever-present breeze I see an enormous square-stoned plaza in front of the earthquake-torqued spectacle of colonial architecture and indigenous masonry which is the Metropolitan Cathedral. In front of this stand approximately 150 riot cops in full gear (“Seguridad Publica”—“Public Security” in large white letters on their bullet-proof vests, though last week the front page of *La Jornada* ran a photo depicting Public Security as a “peace officer” kicking the shit out of a striking student lying in a pool of blood on a blockaded street) next to folding-table stands of EZLN literature, amber from Chiapas, silver from Taxco, sweaters from Guatemala, cheap glue-bound books, ever-beeping alarm clocks, and all varieties of packaged and homemade foods. This all happens around a tourist-bus crowded corner from lines of masons, housepainters, bricklayers, plumbers, carpenters and plasterers sitting on short three-legged stools behind signs advertising their skills and printer's helpers fast-talking passers-by into getting their wedding invitations and/or commemorative champagne glasses or CDs printed at their specific shop, one of fifty on the same block, the narrow slow block I have to traverse (shaking my head no to drivers of bike-drawn carriages, slick-suited men shoeing me into jewelry shops, taxi drivers hoping to attract a fare with honking, men making come-here-doggie noises with pursed lips). On my way I pass a beige-uniformed trumpet-and-snare-toting group of schoolchildren streaming out of a black-bricked municipal building in order to reach the library of the National Institute of Fine Arts.

How does a person learn, with limited time and the limitations of being in the limitless city? Implausible, daunting, baroque, impossible, this is the geography I'm walking in, reading in, writing in. The geography within which the literary geography of this city writes itself, as a poem which defies the geographer's desire to map, leaving her porous and happily, locatedly lost in its largeness, its largesse.

The data in this article are approximate and come primarily from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (INEGI), The United Nations Population Study, *Weekly News Update on the Americas* and various lengthy walks through the streets of Mexico City.

Jen Hofer is editing and translating an anthology of contemporary poetry by Mexican women that will be published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 2001.

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by Donald Baechler



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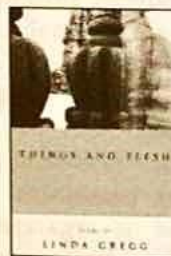
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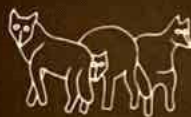
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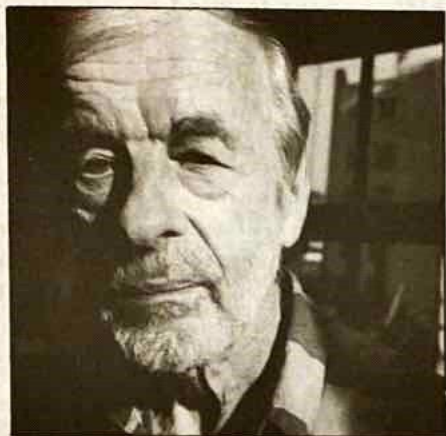
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# Tribute to RUDY BURCKHARDT



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## FIRST THOUGHT

*for Rudy Burckhardt*

As lens as moonlight as camera's informal eye he gets inside the room and out of it again again again and again a woman's back a woman's nipple a woman's laugh again a woman's spotted dress or Alice's poem she reads aloud now there are some things in it he likes there is a window in her poem and some figures and some feeling there is a tone that is both humorous and baffling and throws you back to things that are strewn everywhere about in his mind and in his fashion which is very particular very limber very painterly and you could say moody antic metric trisyllabic geometrical Swiss gloomy a Buddhist offering gets made sexy not done yet roomy painterly agin it is a New York City street like no other the time is yesterday the time is now as lovely as sudden emotion.

Splotch he raises it higher a stroke a single word a circle of paint of pleasure in Yvonne out in birch and rock of Maine again. He is a concentric energy filed now he is moving he is not drowning in moonlight he wants to move on asserts another sign reveals light to himself takes water in it's germane to his seeing light the cool light of Bardo germane to being alchemist germane to being a sanctified neighbor a citizen that speaks a mind gets cobbled together curious attentive imagination moves on. Like and unlike dear Edwin's resonance in summer to end a life begin a life will he he will and display of wonders all vignettes the metaphysician can conjure think up unsolve where sentiment is stolid where it is true no mere niceties the charnel ground richer for him dear eye dear man what lasts is seen and shed the body

—Anne Waldman August 1, 1999

## ABOUT RUDY BURCKHARDT

About once a year Rudy gave me credit for bringing him and Yvonne together. It was at a big party in Nell Blaine's studio in the grand old incomprehensible days of dancing and drunkenness. I was dancing with Yvonne and it occurred to me that she might like to meet Rudy and that he might like to meet her. For this impulse of an instant while uncertainly sober and conscious I apparently always occupied a place in the legend of their lives, which made me happy whenever Rudy (or Yvonne) brought it up. If I did indeed introduce them (as I think I did), it was fair enough, and could be considered as a repayment (though it did turn out to be a very big one! as if over the years of knowing Rudy his kindness, generosity, and humor — and genius! — had been piling up a lot of interest) of what Rudy, in himself and by his work, had done for me. Rudy even gave me a fresh way to appreciate the charm of my (first) wife Janice. Upon meeting her and seeing her beautiful smooth and apparently untroubled face he immediately wanted to put her in one of his movies, which he did: Janice walks in a crowd down Fifth Avenue (or up) past the New York Public Library. I looked at her again, and again, in this film and felt Ulp! how lovely! Many things Rudy did and said were like that. A big sympathy and a strong intelligence beaming through the odd, unexpected window made the familiar mysterious and fresh and helped to move it into a new (extraordinary) place. Rudy did this for certain parts of New York, and he did it for his friends. He was a great man and a lovely one. I miss him a lot.

—Kenneth Koch

The Rudy I knew was a kind, gentle and easygoing man. These characteristics masked the steel in him, the determination to go his own way in his art, in his movies most of all. I interviewed Rudy in Maine for *Modern Painters* two weeks before his death. The subject was his "Paints a Picture" photographs for *Art News*, but we got off that and on to movies. Rudy said that he had no use for close-ups, plot, quick cutting, conventional film scores, conventional film length—what makes most movies movies. Rudy was no gasbag.

He did not argue against what he disliked but simply went out and made the movies he wanted to see. Rudy was, I now realize, as ruthless as the true artist must be. Where many posture and fuss Rudy shrugged his shoulders and got behind his camera. He did not need to prove that he was right nor did he need anyone's permission to do what he did. He just did it. No wonder his movies are so fresh and inspiring. They are as free of cant as was the man himself.

—William Corbett

Most of the time we think that if someone's a good person or if they are living a happy, fulfilled life they shouldn't die. We have been trained to think of death as the ultimate bad end and punishment. Rudy showed me another way to look at death. We don't have to read dense sacred texts to understand that Rudy didn't consider death something to fear, something to avoid. We don't have to know for sure whether or not we lose consciousness at the end or forget who we are.

Death is inevitable.

Rudy embraced it and we can presume that he did so with little or no resistance. Thinking of him brings me joy.

On a lighter note I'd like to share with you, reader, something useful he taught me and my daughter Irene. She was 8. Rudy, Yvonne, Irene and I were at their gracious dining table enjoying a typical Jacqueline/Burckhardt meal of fresh fruits and vegetables, interesting grains, healthy sweets. Rudy found a piece of paper and taught us a game that we now play regularly and enjoy teaching to others.

Fold the piece of paper in thirds. The first person draws a head secretly and indicates only the position for the neck on the second third of the folded sheet. With the head hidden the second person draws the torso and arms, indicating the placement of the hips for the third person. With the two upper thirds of the body hidden the third person draws the legs. The resulting figure is a surprise to all!

Rudy's sense of humor, his trickster quality, his ability as a teacher, his artistic creativity, his generosity, his sense of what really matters in life, all were shown to us that afternoon at lunch on 29th Street.

—Annabel Lee

o

Rudy Burckhardt's art isn't overtly political but I always thought of him as the ultimate socialist (possibly "a socialism of the heart," to use Billy Bragg's phrase). I remember a story that impressed me a lot about a meeting of the Friends Committee of the Poetry Project (Rudy was a member of this committee) where someone suggested that the Poetry Project become more glitzy and that Rudy walked out in protest. "Glitzy" in the sense of being more exclusive and star-oriented—as opposed to an organization that operated on a level which included everyone. On Rudy's terms you weren't going to do anything to get an audience except present your work. This is practically a revolutionary concept given this moment in time where art often seems subservient to something in the culture that begs it to be a certain way. Rudy's art—his photographs, paintings and movies—were contradictory

in the sense that the transience of the images was also what made them so enduring.

Rudy once said to me that when he heard people talking about "the sixties" he assumed it meant people who were in their sixties. (I guess he was in his sixties at the time.) Although his photographs evoke and document a particular time there's nothing dated about the work. The contradictions in his art are subtle and not without risk. The word that keeps coming to mind is "ultimate"—that he knew ultimately that what he was doing was creating art that was intuitively sublime.

It's not necessary to use words to be a poet—we all know that. In his movies and photos Rudy came as close to creating poetry as one could imagine without using language. His use of poetry as a soundtrack always gave pleasure but functioned more like an accessory than a necessity, as if he was simply trying to add more beauty to what was already there. His movies inspired me to write poetry that would somehow resemble his movies—to see how one image could follow another and to get the effect of never knowing what was going to come next.

I knew him for over thirty years, but never intimately. In the early 90s we had dinners together often and I appeared in a segment of one of his movies (a staged argument with Wang Ping in Times Square) but mostly we had brief encounters at readings and openings, always preceded by a warm kiss. A few years ago he came to a reading of mine at KGB and David Lehman, the host of the readings, made a point of announcing the fact that Rudy was in the audience. It made me wonder whether Rudy wanted the attention or whether he was embarrassed by it—the fact that the moment even inspired such a question seemed indicative of his art and life. (Possibly you can have it both ways, I wondered—the freedom of being a spectator in the play of the spotlight's glow.) It's rare that another person's way of being should be an occasion to measure your own life and work. Rudy's art makes me ask myself these questions all the time.

—Lewis Warsh

o

Rudy improved my life. His films make me wonder and cherish the available. His photos offer the glory present in the glimpse and his paintings have a cartoonish zest in transforming what we know into what we'd like to know more.

Rudy was an inspiring and fun presence. Enlisting dancers, poets and visual artists to appear in and collaborate on his films, Rudy nurtured a little ideal downtown community, often gathered at the Poetry Project. By dedicating himself to making art and ignoring fame and power, Rudy's example mentored a great many younger artists to see the creative process as an ennobling and worthwhile, fulfilling activity.

—Greg Masters

## EULOGY FOR RUDY BURCKHARDT

If you look in any of the comprehensive surveys of 20th-century photography, you won't find the name Rudy Burckhardt. To many of us, this seems a surreal oversight, which is, painfully slowly, being remedied. A similar situation exists in regard to Burckhardt's 16-millimeter films, of which he made over 90. Partially, this state of affairs is due to Burckhardt's own choices about how to live his life. He always shied away from photography's commercial side, preferring instead the freedom of making art for no ulterior motive. His friends were not photographers or filmmakers but painters, sculptors, poets, dancers, musicians. Rudy was a friend to everyone honoring him tonight, often a collaborator, someone who supported, attended to, and understood, their art. Red Grooms has said that Rudy Burckhardt was a triple threat. The sports metaphor is appropriate, as Rudy was never one to stay on the sidelines of life, watching others play. Rudy lived life on his own terms, and he left life on his own terms. My only addition to Red's comment would be to say that Rudy was at least a quintuple threat, or as they say in baseball, he had five tools. In addition to the three arts to which Red referred—photography, filmmaking, and painting—I would add those of collage and writing, for Rudy was a skilled and humorous collagist and a perceptive, moving, author. Before beginning tonight's celebration of the life and art of Rudy Burckhardt, I would like to leave you with a quotation from his writing—his account of a Greyhound bus terminal in Boston in 1975, which presents a picture as vivid as one of his photographs. Like the New York School poets who learned from him and from whom he in turn learned, Rudy had the uncanny ability to see the beauty in a moment that most of us would not even notice:

*A small plump black-haired woman sat watching four or five exquisite little girls who jumped up*

*and down or leaned against each other resting just like kittens. A timid derelict, sober, asking for a handout from prospects he hoped wouldn't rebuff him too rudely. An elderly blonde crazy woman in a long flowered house dress, with traces of prettiness in a thin delicate face, pushing a shopping cart piled high with colorful junk talking softly to a tall very black woman in a gleaming white pant suit holding a well scrubbed little girl by the hand. Unmoving like a statue she was looking over the head of the crazy lady.*

—Vincent Katz

## INTRODUCTION

"In a long career he has distinguished himself as a photographer, filmmaker,"—  
(don't forget painter)  
"painter, and writer"—  
(good to include that)—  
I look at him  
in the front row  
and he looks at me—  
"and... do I need  
add anything else?"—  
(like how remarkable he is,  
to be here  
even in death!)—  
"No, I think I've  
said enough."  
These last words  
describe him best.

—Ron Padgett

## HOW TO THROW AN EGG OUT OF A WINDOW

When the egg flew out of the window,  
I was sorry until it broke.  
When the egg flew out of the window,  
It was like a total eclipse of the  
moon.

Only the word egg flew out of the  
window.

A leaf would startle one a parachute a  
joke  
An egg that neither cracked nor  
spoke.

When the egg flew out of the window,  
my son stood up on the roof  
With an egg inside a ball inside the  
Crystal Palace waterlily  
basket.  
And like a lie it landed.

—David Shapiro

## SHOOT UP, LITTLE BIRCH for Rudy Burckhardt

Birch-tree, may your skin fall off  
to the ground next to the other trees.  
You have family next to you that give  
you  
love when you were a small birch  
until a  
mad person cuts you down for paper.  
You get to see the sky and make  
beautiful homes for homeless  
animals.  
When you die no-one gives you  
credit to a birch-tree  
that gives us paper and life to us,  
but thanks for risking  
your life for us. Your roots will  
spring out  
and will have babies who will be  
raised with your  
love and care. Shoot up to Heaven  
little birch-tree.  
Shoot up like the Tower of Babel did.  
Shoot up and meet God, because  
birch-trees should live  
forever.  
—Daniel Shapiro

*For readers who are unfamiliar with Burckhardt's work, a good resource is: Talking Pictures: The Photography of Rudy Burckhardt, by Rudy Burckhardt & Simon Pettet. Zoland Books 384 Huron Ave, Cambridge, Mass 02138. \$26.95. (248 pages, 142 duotone photographs, ISBN 0-944072-42-9)*

*Many thanks to Simon Pettet for help in preparing this tribute.*



Photos top (an untitled photo), and bottom ("Crossing New York," ca. 1970s), courtesy of the Estate of Rudy Burckhardt. All rights reserved.

# What's News?

## SUBPRESS

by

Sherry Brennan

SUBPRESS germinated during a listserv discussion of the merits of self-publishing. I think we were discussing Gertrude Stein and Charles Reznikoff, decreasing venues for first book publication here in the U.S. with the savaging of NEA funding, and the time-honored practice of publishing one's own work.

Reznikoff writes of his own thinking on this matter: "It seemed to me that it would be best to print, whatever I managed to write, privately just to get it off my chest rather than to keep hunting for a hospitable magazine or publisher."

In the usual meandering of virtual conversation, someone floated the idea of a joint venture in self-publishing. The idea gathered steam, so that three separate projects developed: an annual self-publishing project, a collectively financed small press, and a magazine.

Those of us who work 9 to 5 have more cash, and those of us who have chosen another route have more time. It seemed like we might accomplish something useful if we banded together to publish some books.

After much discussion, we decided that we would form a press made up of members of the listserv who wanted to contribute time and income to a publishing venture. Nineteen poets agreed to contribute one percent of their annual income, and after more discussion, we decided that each contributor would edit one volume and that we would need to contribute for at least three years to finance 19 volumes. Names were drawn from a hat, and each of us was

assigned a spot in a three-year rotation.

Each editor chooses his or her own book project and carries it through to completion. He or she is also responsible for raising any additional funds necessary to print a volume, as our annual contributions make up only a minimal fund that provides seed money.

Early on, we had some discussions about the kinds of poetry we might be publishing, but we decided not to make any group decisions about individual projects. Some of us will publish our own first manuscripts. Others have chosen to publish collections or out-of-print books. Some of us want to publish first books by new poets, and others of us have simply chosen a book that we want to see in print. The point all along has been the collectivity, rather than any over-arching aesthetic mission.

This project would be unthinkable without E-mail. The press is virtual, literally. We live and print across the globe, from Hawai'i to the U.K. Our discussions, agreements, and day to day business are carried out on a listserv. There is no centralization. When we need collective decisions about process or finances, we reach them slowly and with differences, by dis-

cussion and voting on the listserv. With so many editors talking virtually, decision-making is often unwieldy, yet this virtuality is a strength that allows for the wide differences among us and our projects.

Financially we operate under the umbrella of the 'A 'A Arts Foundation, a non-profit organization that also houses the journal *Chain*, which is not affiliated with our project. We do not have a warehouse, a home base or a distribution center—yet, and recently this question of the physical location of books has proved to be a knotty issue. From where do we mail books? Where do buyers send their checks? We find ourselves making provisional decisions.

We have now completed one round in our three-year editorial rotation. Four books have appeared, several are forthcoming shortly, and 6 new editors have just begun their second-year projects.

As poets, we do not have the same aesthetics; we vary widely in our approaches and interests and our reasons for being interested in publishing. Our books will be as varied as our membership. This is our strength. Quite simply, we have just one object in common: to put more poetry into print.

*Subpress books are available through Small Press Distribution or from 'A 'A Arts, 2955 Dole Street, Honolulu, HI 96816.*

### **In print:**

Catalina Cariaga, *Cultural Evidence*, \$12  
John Wilkinson, *Oort's Cloud*, \$15  
Edwin Torres, *Fractured Humorous*, \$10  
Prageeta Sharma, *Bliss to Fill*, \$11

### **Forthcoming:**

Scott Bentley, *Occasional Tables*  
Daniel Bouchard, *Diminutive Revolutions*  
Brett Evans, *After School Session*  
Ben Friedlander, *Covenant*  
John McNally, *Exes for Eyes*  
Caroline Sinavaiana, *Alchemies of Distance*

# poetry project

events

# calendar

## DECEMBER 1. WEDNESDAY

Michael Gottlieb & Jen Robinson

Michael Gottlieb's most recent books are *Gorgeous Plunge* (Roof Books) and *More Than All*, a collaboration with Ted Greenwald published in London. Jen Robinson is the author of *For Conifer Fanatics*. Her work has appeared in *Lungfull*, *Cocodrillo*, and *A Gathering of the Tribes*. She has curated several reading series, most notably the Poet's Web at the Internet Cafe in New York City.

## DECEMBER 3. FRIDAY

Lydia Lunch & Nicole Blackman

Multigenre artist Lydia Lunch began her career at 16 as a guitarist and singer for the "no-wave" band Teenage Jesus and the Jerks. Since then, her many projects have included collaborations with musicians Nick Cave, the Birthday Party, Kim Gordon, Thurston Moore, and Einsturzende Neubauten; underground films with director Richard Kern in the 1980s; and the formation of her own production company (Widowspeak Productions). Nicole Blackman's first full-length collection, *Blood Sugar*, was just published by Incommunicado Press. Blackman appeared in January at the De Nachten festival, where she opened for Nick Cave, and headlined in Budapest and Vienna. She was the vocalist and lyricist for the Golden Palominos album *Dead Inside* and was featured on the KMFDM album *Xtort*. (10:30 pm)  
[Note: this reading is \$12, \$9 for students and \$8 for members]

## DECEMBER 6. MONDAY

Open Reading, sign-up at 7:30 pm (8:00 pm)

## DECEMBER 15. WEDNESDAY

George Quasha & Charles Stein

George Quasha is the author of *Ainu Dreams* (1999). Quasha has co-edited several anthologies, including *America A Prophecy* (with Jerome Rothenberg), *Open Poetry* (with Ron Gross) and *Active Anthology* (with Susan Quasha). With Charles Stein he is the publisher of Station Hill Books. Charles Stein is the author of ten volumes of poetry, including *The Hat Rack Tree*, and *The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum: The Poetic Cosmology of Charles Olson & His Use of the Writings of C.G. Jung*.

## DECEMBER 17. FRIDAY

A Night of Taboos Part II: Closet Cases, Addiction, & Toilets

*A Night of Taboos Part II* with readers Cheryl B., whose work appears in *The World in Us: Gay & Lesbian Poetry of the 21st Century*; Sharon Mesmer, the author of *Half Angel, Half Lunch*; Brian Blanchfield, whose work appears in *Barrow Street*; Morris Kurzman, co-facilitator of the Manhattan Slam at CBGB Gallery; and Douglas A. Martin, whose novel, *Outline of My Lover*, is forthcoming from Soft Skull Press. (10:30 pm).

## JANUARY 1. SATURDAY

Annual New Year's Day Marathon Reading 2000 (2:00 pm to midnight)

Spend the first day of the new millennium with the best of downtown poetry, performances, dance, music, multimedia and more with over 120 readers including Richard Foreman, Dael Orlandersmith, Peter & Emma Straub, Sally Silvers, Taylor Mead, Maggie Estep, Edwin Torres, Todd Colby, Penny Arcade, Nick Zedd, Jackson Mac Low, Regie Cabico, Anne Tardos, Paul Violi, Ed Friedman, Marcella Durand, Anselm Berrigan, and many, many others! [\$15; \$12 for members and students]

is writing a dissertation on cults and countercultures in the 1960s.

## JANUARY 14. FRIDAY

Fall Workshop Reading

Readings from the participants of the Poetry Project's Fall Workshops. Workshop leaders are Larry Fagin, Frank Lima, and Patricia Spears Jones. [10:30 pm]

## JANUARY 19. WEDNESDAY

Elaine Equi and Gary Sullivan: sign-up at 7:30 pm (8:00 pm)

Elaine Equi's latest book, *Voice-Over*, received the San Francisco State Poetry Award for 1998. Her other books include *Surface Tension* and *Decoy*. She teaches at City College and The New School and is an editor at *Conjunctions* magazine. Cartoonist, poet, and former Californian Gary Sullivan is the author of *Dead Man* and two forthcoming books: *The Art of Poetry* and *Correspondence* (with Nada Gordon). He is the editor of *readme* ([www.jps.net/nada](http://www.jps.net/nada)).

## JANUARY 21. FRIDAY

King's Untied: Drag King Spoken Word Show

Regina Cabico, hostess, model, actress, and poetess, lets drag kings Niss Igny, Madame Bra, Ms. Ter, Alix Olson, Lizerace, the Backdoor boys, Dred, and Emma Gay wail.

## JANUARY 24. MONDAY

Leslie Bumstead & Jean Donnelly

Washington DC residents Leslie Bumstead and Jean Donnelly are the co-founders of the journal *So To Speak: A Feminist Journal of Language and Art*. Leslie Bumstead is the translator of *The Clandestine Jails of El Salvador* by Ana Guadalupe Martinez, a book about Martinez's capture and imprisonment by the National Guard in 1975. Her *trip* was a finalist in this



## DECEMBER 8. WEDNESDAY

David Henderson & David Cameron

David Henderson is the author of *Neo-California* (1999) and *Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky: The Life of Jimi Hendrix*. He is currently at work on a CD which collects many of his performances with composers such as Sun Ra, Butch Morris, and Bert Turetsky. David Cameron is the author of two short collections of false translations from Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal—Flurries of Mail and Dirty Mom*—and a sequence of variations on the Lord's Prayer, L.P.

## DECEMBER 10. FRIDAY

A Night of Taboos Part I: Private Parts, Therapists & Eating Disorders

A Night of Taboos Part I with readers Elena Georgiou, a 1999 New York Foundation Poetry Fellow and 1998 Astrea Lesbian Writers Fellow; Jaclyn Piodik, a resident poet through Teachers & Writers and the Poetry Outreach Center; Kathleen Ossip, founding editor of the journal *LIT*; Anne Elliot, publisher of *Big Fat Press*; Daniel Nester, contributing editor to *Painted Bride Quarterly*; and Ragdale Fellow Shira Dentz. (10:30 pm)

## DECEMBER 13. MONDAY

Daniel Bouchard & Marcella Durand

That which ordinary poets are fit for, Daniel Bouchard is qualified in, and the best of him is diligence. Situations Press recently printed his poem, "Wrackline," as a chapbook, and his book *DIMINUTIVE REVOLUTIONS* will be published this month by SubPress. Marcella Durand is the author of *City of Ports* (Situations Press), the poetry editor for Erato Press in New Orleans, and the program coordinator and web-site editor for the Poetry Project. She has collaborated with artists Richard O'Russa and Karoline Schleh on book-sculptures, prints, and broadsides.

## JANUARY 3. MONDAY

Open Reading, sign-up at 7:30 pm (8:00 pm)

## JANUARY 5. WEDNESDAY

Raymond Patterson & Jill Rapaport

Raymond Patterson is the author of *26 Ways of Looking at a Black Man*, *Elemental Blues* and an unpublished book-length poem on the life of Phyllis Wheatley. He has been anthologized in numerous collections, including the seminal *New Black Voices*, edited by Addison Gayle. Jill Rapaport has had work in *The Brooklyn Review*, *Sensitive Skin*, *Crimes of the Beats*, *The Unbearables Anthology* and the *Nuyorican Symphony CD*. She is currently teaching and working on a MFA at Brooklyn College, and writing an extended work on the urban underground.

## JANUARY 10. MONDAY

Alicia Wing & Brendan Lorber

Poet and actress Alicia Wing runs a poetry reading series at Beyond Baroque Literary Center in Los Angeles, where she also lives. She is currently performing in the play *Rude Restaurant*. Brendan Lorber is the editor of the waterproof magazine *Lungfull* and the co-curator of the Zinc Bar Reading Series. His chapbook, *The Address Book*, was just published by Owl Press.

## JANUARY 12. WEDNESDAY

Rick Moody & Susan Noel

Rick Moody is the author of the novels *The Ice Storm* and *Purple America*. He is the co-editor of the anthology *Joyful Noise: The New Testament Revisited* (with Darcy Steinke). His novels and short stories have received numerous awards, including the Aga Kahn Award and the Addison Metcalf Award. Susan Noel is the author of *Bronze Age* and *Autobiography in Words*. She

## JANUARY 26. WEDNESDAY

Anne Stone & Michael Franco

Anne Stone is a Montreal-based writer and performer who mixes genres of fictional memoir, fairytales, and myth. Her books include *jacks: a gothic gospel*, *Sweet Dick All*, and most recently *Hush*. Her work has appeared in several anthologies, including *Poetry Nation*. Michael Franco is the author of *How to Live as a Single Natural Being: The Dogmatic Nature of Experience* (1998). He is the director of the Word of Mouth reading series and the Oxford Street Talks & Reads series, both in Boston, and the publisher of *dromenon* press.

## JANUARY 28. FRIDAY

Premonitions: New Asian American Poetry

Contributors from the groundbreaking anthology, *Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New Asian North American Poetry*, celebrate its 5th year anniversary. Featuring Timothy Liu, Cathy Park Hong, Mina Kumar, Sesshu Foster, le thi diem thuy, Lisa Yun, Ishle Park, V.K. Mina, and others. (10:30 pm).

## JANUARY 31. MONDAY

Wanda Phipps & Regie Cabico

Wanda Phipps is a poet, journalist, dramaturg, and translator. She is a contributing editor for the online zine *Big Bridge*, a founding member of the Yara Arts Group, and the author of *Lunch Poems* (Booglit). She has published her poems in over 30 magazines, and performed her work live throughout the U.S. Poet and performer Regie Cabico is the co-editor of *Poetry Nation: An Anthology of North American Fusion Poetry* and the Cyberjay on *Gopoetry.com*. He is the current coordinator of the Poetry Project's Friday Late-Night Events Series.

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All events are \$7.<sup>00</sup>, \$4.<sup>00</sup> for seniors and students, \$3.<sup>00</sup> for members and begin at 8 PM unless otherwise noted. Programs are subject to change. For information call 212 674-0910

# To Buffalo and Back

with

## RENEE GLADMAN

Interview by  
Magdalena Zurawski



Gladman and Zurawski on the road

RENEE GLADMAN IS A YOUNG POET FROM SAN FRANCISCO. She has had two chapbooks published, *Arlem* (Idiom Press) and *Not Right Now* (Second Story Books) and her first perfect bound book, *Juice*, is forthcoming from Kelsey St. Press. She was the editor of *Clamour*, a journal for experimental writing for queer women of color, and is currently publishing a series of chapbooks by emerging writers through her press, Leroy.

I conducted this interview with Renee during her trip to the East Coast in October. The interview was done in a diner during a road trip to Buffalo, where we read together with Jordan Davis at the Corner Shop gallery, and in the car on our way back to NYC.

M: You manage to write a shitload. I'm extremely impressed by that especially because you work full time. I mean, you have two chapbooks and a full-length book coming out. Not to mention a few works in progress and a press. And you're only 28.

R: Well in 1996 I started writing about being out in the city and coming home half the person and having to sort of fill in the parts that you lost during the day. That was the starting point of the writing...

R: Let's just not go to Buffalo. Let's just sit at this table all day...

M: And talk about how shitty jobs are.

(Renee laughs)

R: I actually have a good job in a lot of ways. But back to the question. So then I would recreate this sort of narrator in the city.

M: You'd come home and recreate what you lost?

R: Yeah. I realized that that was the basis of my approach

to writing. The sense of being out during the day, in the city, having a series of experiences And then returning home having lost my sense of self or having had a sense of a cohesive self tested. So I would come home and write these narrative pieces that are sort of re-cre-

ations of this narrator in the city. My writing has changed a lot over the last couple of years, but it's still this kind of thing of the person in the city. And the negotiation of self-recognition in the home, in the street, and then back in the home.

M: I was reading *Not Right Now* last night and it definitely struck me as the "I" trying to defend itself against the world. It's interesting that it's a first person narrative, but the "I" isn't really pointed to at all. It's as if the rest of the narrative is taking apart the "I". And the "I" is trying to absorb what's going on around it without being eaten by the surroundings.

R: The work prior to *Not Right Now* and including *Not Right Now* is a series of short prose blocks that were glimpses at attempts at being a person in the city. And I think that after that, in the *Juice* manuscript, I sort of decided to take that for granted. After I wrote all of them, I realized they were all about loss. I didn't realize that before. It's weird because I didn't approach any of the pieces thinking that I was going to write about specific kinds of loss, but it's like some kind of transition happened between making these attempts at being a person. It's like once you accept the fact of the person then the experience becomes the center of the question.

M: The fact of the person?

R: Existing. The fact of the person existing. If anyone would ask me what my writing is about, I would say it's

about the problem of the person.

M: And what would be your next statement after that?

R: The problem of the person period. And then they would say what the hell do you mean by that?

M: That's what I just said.

R: Right. And then I would say, Um, this thing about recognizing oneself and communicating this self that one recognizes to another person. And then having the other person see that and see you next week and be able to see the same person. And then for you to be able to recognize consistencies in the other person and be able to recognize them. But I feel like that is usually not very successful and then the narrator does something that doesn't make sense or sees something that doesn't make sense and then to me that's the problem...

M: That's the sentence in your writing that seems to come out of left field.

R: Yeah.

M: Those are my favorite parts. I've been meaning to ask you (because you write prose) do you consider yourself an experimental poet or an experimental prose writer?

R: Does it matter? It's just names. I don't think the distinction between prose and poetry is very important. I think what connects everyone is this interest in language. I just wonder if when people go to write, if they have this idea of difficulties in their minds in the way that I do. I say the difficulties and then people surprise me by saying, well what do you mean by the difficulties? But I would call myself a poet then because that's my definition of poet. One who is negotiating their space in the world in language. What does a writer do? Who wants to be a writer? In any case, I use the writing to deal with philosophical issues. That's what happens for me in

writing. I have these philosophical dilemmas. It's getting late. Should we go to Buffalo?

*Car Ride from Buffalo to NYC:*

M: I'm doing 78 mph at the request of Renee Gladman, who is hoping to arrive in New York by 7pm.

M: All right Renee. It's Sunday and we have nothing on tape.

R: We've got plenty on tape. We need to frame the interview.

M: Why don't you ask me why I'm interviewing you?

R: But I have a question, "Who cares, Maggie, about this interview, why?"

M: Well, I can't say that anyone cares about it. Well, I care. But why are we having this interview?

R: Yeah.

M: I wanted to do this interview because I think your work and your publishing activities represent at least one view, one angle of what our generation is interested in or becoming interested in and I thought it was important to put that in a public space. I'm especially interested in how identity politics and experimental writing are less complicated to put together in one space for our generation.

R: You think they're less complicated?

M: I think that people who are interested in experimental writing are less anxious or more interested in dealing with identity issues at the level of language than people of our previous generation. And I think your magazine *Clamour* is one example of our generation trying to negotiate that. What made you start that magazine?

R: Before I answer that question, I'm not convinced that our generation is necessarily dealing with identity poli-

tics any more than previous generations did. I think that our generation is more interested in narrative. The "I" and the possibilities of the "I" have returned. And I think it has a lot to do with where we are in time. I think that in the Sixties and the Seventies it was time to put the self away and try to deal with more theoretical aspects of writing.

M: For what reason?

R: Well, I'm thinking the Language Poetry movement is all white for the most part and I guess there was some feminism, which I guess is kind of identity politics. But I don't think that there were a whole lot of other negotiations that needed to be made. I think that the difference now is that there seem to be more writers in general and there seem to be more writers of color and queer writers who are operating in the experimental communities.

M: Maybe that's what I'm trying to say. The strategies that Language Poetry brought into writing are being used to discuss or to address issues that maybe so-called identity writing was dealing with previously. It's bringing the conversation to a new place.

R: The past confuses me. I'm surprised or confused that experiment has been historically relegated to white writers. I think historically writers of color felt this need to give history, to put stories where there were none or where they had been denied. And that was going on. But I feel like we've reached this point where the tone of the stories are set. Now I feel secure enough in the past that it's time to sort of interrogate what it means to try to tell those stories. What it means to try and express one's identity and I feel like all writing is identity based because it's perspective. I think that experimental writing is the perfect situation for people who have existed in this country on the margins. Because there is no narrative, there's not an accepted narrative

# book reviews



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## Cultural Evidence

BY CATALINA CARIAGA  
Subpress, 1999,  
88 pages, \$12

We were asked to write a literary background of Filipino American works, to make sure that the publishers would say, "Yes, let's help them, it's unjust, they need to be exposed." Here is our stand. We cannot write any literary background because there isn't any. No history. No published literature. No nothing.

—Oscar Penaranda  
Serafin Syquia, Sam Tagatac,  
AIIIEEEEE!

Be it ours to lift them from the low estate of unwilling subjects to the high plane of independent citizenship, to extend to them the knowledge of our beneficent institutions, and to help them onward and upward to the realization of the loftiest ideals of perfection in human government and the universal happiness of mankind.

—Jose de Olivares  
*Our Islands and Their People*

Even though Filipino Manilamen who jumped ship in New Orleans in 1763 were among the earliest Asian settlers in the US, Filipinos have been slower to assimilate into the American mainstream than other Asian Americans, and thus find them-

selves lagging behind in terms of material success.

There are many reasons for this disparity. Among them are the immigration and recruitment patterns that not only kept many Filipinos from entering the US at all, despite the Philippines being an American colony as a result of the Philippine-American War of 1898-1902, but, even during the major waves of Asian-American immigration, kept their numbers low. By the time Filipinos arrived, established Chinatowns and Little Tokyos served as congregation points, minimizing the need to create Manilatowns.

Phillipino immigrants tended to be single, young, and male, and would move up and down the West Coast following the crops as field workers or finding seasonal employment as Alaskeros, laborers in Alaskan salmon canneries or crewmembers of commercial fishing boats. Finally, balik-bayan practices meant sending money back to the Philippines to help out their native communities.

If, collectively, material success eluded Filipinos early on, representation in Asian American literature has also been slow to materialize. Try to think of a well-known Filipino-American book. What did you come up with? Has it been made into a movie? In the Asian-American canon, Filipinos have been forgotten (who's forgetting?), silenced (who's silencing?), or, as has been pointed out implicitly in the introduction to the Filipino American section of AIIIEEEEE!, are not writing in the first place. Yet Filipinos are writing, have written. Catalina Cariaga's new book, *Cultural Evidence*, adds an exciting and promising young voice to the

still nascent Filipino-American canon.

Cariaga's collection of poetry owes more to experimental forms of writing like Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* or Jessica Hagedorn's splintered and polyphonic *Dogeaters*, than to the traditional novel or poetical forms of Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*, Peter Bacho's *Dark Blue Suit*, or even the more recent anthology of Filipino-American writings edited by Luis H. Francia and Eric Gamalinda. Filipino identity emerges piecemeal from the text as Cariaga sifts through the evidence of memory embedded in personal letters, fishing, dubious *National Geographic* articles, and family history, among other topics.

From the outset, Cariaga rather playfully addresses the dog question/accusation that seems to attach to the American stereotype of Filipino culture: Do we eat dogs or not?

Of course  
they didn't eat dogs.  
They didn't have dogs.  
If they had dogs  
they would have eaten them.

Interestingly, this poem, "Dogmeat," follows a striking visual of a Spam can opener superimposed over quotations from *Dictée*, suggesting a sly connection between the poem dogmeat and Spam. The Spam key functions as "cultural evidence," a reminder of hybridity (the fact that Spam is composed of a mish-mash of different meats), and the possible danger that assimilation ends only in blandness and tastelessness.

In the cycle of poems called "No Tasaday," Cariaga looks at the alleged discovery of a Stone Age tribe in the Philippines and

the zeal with which the Western world vis-à-vis *National Geographic* rushed to accept what turned out to be a hoax:

on real people, the name  
of "the tribe" invented,  
imposed, then, disposed of

siblings teasing the youngest  
child:

little brown girl  
in the Magazine  
looks a lot like me—

could be cousins.

An uneasy connection emerges between US-born Filipinos and the Philippines in the drive to authenticate primitivism, to verify a putative Stone Age tribe in the country known at one point as the US's "showcase for democracy." This uneasiness stems from shame and embarrassment, the possibility that despite being American born and raised, the child of the immigrant of color is only one "scientific" discovery away from dubious origins.

In "The Language," Cariaga explores the complexities of maintaining cultural continuity between Filipinos as English becomes privileged over Ilocano, American individualism over Filipino community. She tosses in English words and phrases, "an egg," "it was I," "time is of the essence in this contractual agreement" with Ilocano, "mangan tayan!", (let's eat!), to explore the disparity between the current generation's obsession with success (they've become eggs; though yellow inside, they try to pass off as white) and the previous generation's emphasis on community. In response to *mapan ka diay balay!* (come to my house!), the children of the manongs can only reply in "the one true language," English, "may I?"

Though a brilliant exploration of the specific cultural problems facing Filipino's today, *Cultural Evidence* is a work with multiple entry points for different audi-

ences. Cariaga surveys the boundaries of contemporary poetry in this work, and strides over them as she puts the lip in Filipino.

—Carlo Arreglo

*Carlo Arreglo is an M.A. student of English at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa.*



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### Stealer's Wheel

BY CHRIS STROFFOLINO

Hard Press, 1999.

109 pages, \$12.95

Chris Stroffolino's *Stealer's Wheel* presents nothing less than an epic tragedy of contemporary urban daily frustration, social and interpersonal. That misunderstanding, misconnection, blind emotional projections, deception and hypocrisy pervade ordinary experience may seem exactly the opposite of the grandness of epic material, but it is contradictions of this kind that *Stealer's Wheel* thrives on, even as it sends readers spinning into oblivion. Stroffolino's narrator is sort of a contemporary urban Charlie Chaplin, unable to move without falling or knocking somebody over. Comic as it often is, *Stealer's Wheel* is a disturbing book, leaving no darkness unexposed, no ground to stand on, no helpful exit to run toward. If there's love here, it seldom lasts long.

Yet the book manages far more than mere description of such a condition. Mixed metaphors, slips of phrase, unexpected dead stops, and purposeful incomprehensibility send the poems, however lyrical, twisting

past representational language into the startlingly raw experience of frustration itself. *Stealer's Wheel* enacts its own condition through a non-transparent, disruptive surface that only seems to want to communicate, and that knows poetry is no solution.

Stroffolino highlights interpersonal struggles, although such struggles inevitably embody and extend the struggles of the more public world. Many of the poems feature the standard "I address you" of lyric poetry. Several of the book's most powerful poems directly address women with whom the narrator is having confused and ultimately impossible relationships, in which the parties don't understand each other any more than they understand themselves:

Then my respect for you grows  
like a new wing  
of a hospital that'll never get off  
the ground  
because you rejected the way I was  
it seems aeons  
ago, the surface not the depth, but  
would only hold  
a grudge if it could hold water like  
a person who has  
to be a name or fate in order not  
to be a disguise, a corpse.

The narrative voice in these poems is decidedly male and heterosexual, not a popular point of view for love poetry these days. But Stroffolino undermines all stability in such categories; maleness and heterosexuality become not natural but highly artificial performances, which the narrator can't stop performing even as he exposes them. The result is a male heterosexuality questioned through self-consciousness of its condition.

There's no interpersonal without the social, Stroffolino knows, so even the most pained and intimate confessions reach out to engage the hypocrisies of the outside world. The social environment of *Stealer's Wheel* reveals layer after layer of irony until irony itself becomes only another disease. If the narrator can't get along with anybody, that's only because nobody's getting along with anybody, confused as they are about the

boundaries in charge everywhere but holding nowhere, as in this section from the book's title poem:

It's harder to live in reputation  
Than in friendship so we call our  
Professional relationships  
friendships  
And our friendships love  
until love  
Seems professional and  
whirling around  
In the expediency of the  
moment where  
All names are nipped in the bud...

In this poem, as in many others, it becomes impossible to distinguish between genuine confusion and willed hypocrisy.

Stroffolino wants to do more than to describe the anguish caused by such situations; he wants the language itself to ache with it. Perhaps his signature linguistic twist is the mixed metaphor, one comparison undermined by another and then another until comparisons are shown to be no more than temporary and partial:

If only now you were to emerge  
from  
the shelter of the bell whose  
clapper  
has been using you as a  
punching bag,  
the hurt which merges with  
the headlines,  
as long as we're content to  
listen  
in every form but speech,  
would be the leaves that wouldn't  
have fallen had you not gotten  
such a kick out of shaking the tree.

The weakness of metaphor—that one thing is never really another—becomes its strength here, as metaphor after metaphor is used and discarded and fails to get at the whole truth, which doesn't exist anyway.

This kind of twist occurs so constantly in *Stealer's Wheel* that, except for occasional sections, many of the poems are incomprehensible in the traditional sense; if one tries to read Stroffolino for what he's trying to make clear, one quickly finds the poems going nowhere. Instead,

beyond representation, the language becomes a raw surface of emotional and intellectual chimeras that endlessly torment each other. One poem seems directly to discuss this technique:

Yet we live  
in such seeming, the feeling  
of fire become word,  
the tyranny of mimetic de-  
notation subverted  
by aesthetic connotation.

*Stealer's Wheel* enacts this "feeling of fire" through aesthetic connotation that destroys any illusion of stable meaning in a world in which no meaning is stable.

Writers like Kafka, Beckett, and Jabes enact their abysses through inflation, using grand, overarching singular metaphors: the inability to reach the castle, get up from the ditch, read the book. Stroffolino creates a similarly endless abyss through deflation, by exposing the smallest local detail—the impossibility of connection during phone calls and in restaurants, at poetry readings and professional gatherings—in situations all overwhelmed by language that uses us more than we know. Like the work of those writers, such relentlessness raises the question of whether the world is really like this. But, also like their work, as an evocation of its own condition, *Stealer's Wheel* is brilliant, compelling, and terrifying.

—Mark Wallace

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

Dear Mark,

9/29 NYC

Re yr last sentence of the McGain Religion review — I've never believed or said that "line breaks are a waste of time." I, too, like it (poetry). Prose poems are just one kind of thing to do. No? Otherwise, I love your funny, perceptive take on Gillian.

Peace out,  
Larry

## Rocks on a Platter: Notes on Literature

BY BARBARA GUEST  
Wesleyan University Press, 1999,  
58 pages, \$12.95

Barbara Guest's most recent book of poems can be read as a "Defense of Atonal Lyric Poetry"—an essayistic treatise by way of poetic enactment.

Composed of four untitled poems (symphonic movements), in which the words on each page are arranged like rocks in a Zen garden (or notes on a musical score). The book's philosophical framework can be mapped by the epigraphs that precede each poem: 1) Hölderlin's "To live is to defend a form"; 2) Samuel Johnson's view of poesy as an activity "to invest abstract ideas with form"; 3) Hegel's skepticism of empirical fact's ability to account for the truths inherent in art; 4) Adorno's notion of aesthetic progress as the transcendence and reestablishment of new limits. Guest argues for a theory-savvy lyricism without eschewing faith in a mythic tradition.

In the opening section, Guest takes on tradition by way of a fairy-tale. In the story, a king prefers "BAKED APPLES" to the "JONQUIL TALES" favored by "THE KITCHEN MAIDENS." Guest reverses the notion on a *felix culpa* by taking us from cooked (and fallen) apples back to the virginal pungence of non-fruit-bearing narcissi—a lyrical self free from patriarchal self-consciousness, "a fragrant narration" that exults: "ASTOUNDING BEING ALIVE!" But such fresh innocence necessarily ends up getting sullied in literature's "contiguous/ treatment of time" which is "suspicious/ of fragmentation." One way Guest circumvents history's linear choke-hold is by arranging her words ("shattered rocks") spatially on the page.

*Rocks on a Platter* offers up a logic (though theorists like Kristeva, Derrida, and poets like Artaud have already been hard at work exploring such matters) that desires to transcend the very world it has created. When all is evanescence, how to keep "the seismic sway of existence" from eroding sentences into mere words

like an "OLD SHOE" ready for disposal?

Even the rhyming epizeuxis of "Hullabaloo, Hullabaloo" hot on its heels is able to offer only a mild sense of comic relief. What comforts us in the end is not the Edenic "pear-shaped manuscript" left behind as a *memento mori*, but our ability to discover "Alas, its honied drip." Guest demands from readers a hermeneutic commitment to finding their own salvation in this riparian parable of stasis and flux that signs off with a "Nietzschean thumb on/ the trout/ and they disappear."

For Guest, the passions inherent in a physical world must be met by a metaphysical response. Reminiscent of her previous book, *Quill, Solitary APPARITION*, Guest's third poem addresses the aftermath left by an absent beloved: "PHANTOM/ (reverie)/ (passion) /in canoe /of twelve-tones / or Helen in Egypt." Floating down the same river as H.D., Guest situates her own poetics by way of lineage. In the poem that Guest alludes to, H.D. reminds us that "Helen of Troy was a phantom, substituted for the real Helen by jealous deities. The Greeks and the Trojans alike fought for an illusion." And of course, both H.D. and B.G. are but phantoms hovering over their own embattled texts.

But why all these allusions to atonality? Perhaps because a composer like Hindemith, a musician's musician impatient with the postromantic tradition (and a contemporary of H.D.), managed to bridge old classic forms with his twelve-tone scale. Bridging two worlds herself (life/ art, tradition/ avant-garde), Guest concludes with an image of a dolphin riding on the "flotsam of the world of appearances/ drifting by and out of the picture." To root postmodern transgression within a mythic framework infuses her experimental lyricism with a classical vitality.

—Timothy Liu

Timothy Liu's most recent book of poems is *Say Goodnight* (Copper Canyon Press, 1998).

### Disarming Matter

BY EDMUND BERRIGAN  
The Owl Press, 1999,  
82 pgs, \$12.50

### The American Pragmatist Fell in Love

BY TOM DEVANEY  
Banshee Press, 1999,  
69 pgs

### Came Like It Went

BY GREG FUCHS  
Buck Downs Books, 1999,  
54 pgs, \$10.95

Why do we chart poetic lineage? Perhaps we need reassurance that certain bodies of work, to which we have devoted so much time and attention, are still relevant. And if younger poets are taking influence from these bodies, or 'schools,' then they are also validating them. Through a reworking of tradition, our shared history becomes a little bit firmer, a little more reliable. We can also place a poet in his or her poetic context, to a degree, by looking at what he or she is influenced by—be it literary, cultural, or biographical. Finally, one might posit that a given poet's influences—and the tradition from which they come—are what allow him or her to reach the threshold of innovation.

In the tutti frutti swirl of late late-century American poetry on the East Coast, then, younger poets are thriving under the influence of a number of major poetic strains: Beat poetry, New York School and Language poetry (with liberal doses of French surrealism, itself a major influence on these poetries), and this influence is manifesting itself in a variety of ways. Three recent first collections attest to the surprising ways in which tradition with a capital T is being reckoned by promising younger writers, two currently based in New York, and one on the fly between New York and Philly.

First on the agenda is Mr. Edmund Berrigan, who, of the trio, sits most squarely at the convergence of the three veins mentioned above. The poems in *Disarming Matter* range from semi-abstract autobiographical lyrics to cut-up style poems à la the late Berrigan senior, his father—to dense Language-inflected

pieces. Every poem seems to evince some sort of influence, but happily, none is merely 'derivative.' Berrigan is too frenetic, too innovative for that. To generalize, however, it does seem that the happiest convergence of New York School and Language poetry is a kind of hard lyric, which Berrigan deploys brilliantly. The spine of this hard lyric creature is a defining experience, and the motor, an intense need to get at some difficult emotional truth. A dense language latticework hangs over the contraption, creating an abstract portrait that has few, if any, transparent links to the original experience. This from "Fortress":

Eight, nine, I can't memorize the clouds around. I certify that nothing is the nothing & memorialize. Oh, but never, I have something, a major contribution to the record of life, in a world winter-obscene, that works when fingers peel back a series of inventions for mortality. Armchair comfortable to those who desire it. Absence from the physical being as strong a security as any.

The heart of the book, which is broken into four sections, is the exclusively titled third section, "Cross House," which, through the course of fourteen sonnets (the duplicated form echoing the familial emotional—dark, bereaved, skeptical—torque of many of the pieces) attempts to come to terms with a family situation in which the father is dying. Berrigan is a man haunted—both literally and figuratively—by his father's ghost, and the struggle to alternately fuse with and detach from it is a powerful aspect of the book. To his credit, Berrigan the poet has largely moved past the formidable innovations of his protean father by focusing on a density of language that draws as much on Language poetry's suspicion of identity as it does on the rhythms of New York School and Beat poetry. With this density, Berrigan attempts to parse or purify—or pulverize—a self beset by uncertainty, as exemplified in a passage from "To Eddie & Myself": "I've heard artificial/

absence uncode itself to upset the nature of its/ relation... I haven't made it anywhere, I feel, as if on my own."

The language in these poems can be gummy at times, but such gumminess often seems necessary in the face of complex emotional dissonances. Besides, any poet who can use the first line, "Umbrellas are guns in dress," and run with it for a twelve-line surrealist political manifesto has my vote. Berrigan is our rough-hewn guide on the wild safari into language's unexplored darker realms; the Frank Buck of this particular and particulate jungle.

Tom Devaney's book, *The American Pragmatist Fell In Love*, is much more clearly a product of New York School techniques, though no less committed to innovation and energy. (Devaney had the privilege of being one of the late Allen Ginsberg's last students.) The book is permeated with the same autobiographical jousance that O'Hara popularized, though Devaney often takes this to an extreme comic absurdity. A terrific example is the Donne take-off "Kill-Spray," which depicts the battle between poet and flea, and contains the couplet "Anyway, I'm bigger than you,/ but that just means you can see me better,/flea." He even has a narcissistic poem about rubbing olive oil on his face, reminiscent of O'Hara's "Autobiographia Literaria." It's all fun.

Devaney displays his knack for surrealist juxtaposition in the poem "David Kirschenbaum: a sketch," in which he uses Baseball metaphors to depict his eponymous friend; or in the mystical "No one I know and the Tree," which echoes the enigmatic logic of O'Hara's "Why I Am Not a Painter." There are five delightfully delirious sonnets, too, with fun titles like "Bee Beard Sonnet" and "Sunday Big Movie Sonnet." Devaney is trying everything here, and having fun with all of it.

But Devaney can also be serious. In the most heartfelt of the poems, "Secret Scribbled Notebooks," he manages to capture a New York poet-

ic manic-ness in long, crowded lines, yet maintain a moving sensitivity to his teacher's death:

At 14th Street platform Lou's tan  
overcoat, against iron pillar  
his face flushed red he looks  
terrible.

Say "hey" and he starts to start to  
talk, for a moment  
touching his face and forehead  
with mine, it's sweaty.  
The 2 train's crowded, sit snug talk  
of Allen's ailments,  
his affection, "Being Present"  
when you spoke,

said he'll miss hearing his voice,  
that voice,  
his mighty energy level  
performing "Songs of  
Innocence & Experience,"  
his weakness afterwards—I'm  
sweating too by now  
thinking not thinking, a hundred  
blocks before we speak again.

In short, Devaney is a legitimate heir to the New York School. Now that he has romped through its playground with aplomb, let's hope he takes it somewhere new.

Finally, we come to Greg Fuchs, the most overtly romantic of the trio, yet the least stylistically identifiable. His poems have a voice all their own, though one can detect the blithe spirit of the Beat generation—its mantra of 'Go till you drop'—as the ethos behind them. The poet states this ethos well when he notes that the bags under the eyes of his friends "store the knowledge discovered/ between 5 and 9."

What sets Fuchs apart from any obvious influence is his possession of a constantly surprising lexicon that enables him to depict in visceral sounds and colors the surrealistic world he sees around him. At its most lyrical, the language sparkles in its exotic articulations; from "Indestructible Morning":

I think we should walk in caressing  
ruses and bone dry gullies

in the verdegrired clay of New  
Mexico  
or push a pirogue past  
bayou fronds  
into the Gulf of Mexico  
making a sail of our last shirt  
sail straight for Haiti.

Fuchs is a bard for the post-what-ever era, ready to take on current absurdities and hypocrisies with the universal panache of a hard-drinking medieval peasant or a 40s noir tough guy. There is a hard-won wisdom in the poems, emphasized by images of fatigue, weariness, and the heroic fight that goes along with them. "Nothing matters/ except being a champ for your loves," declares Fuchs in the volume's opening poem.

Yet in contrast to this jadedness is an open-hearted and bleary-eyed wonder at humanity, which is the real fuel rewving these poems. One gets the feeling that what is most important to Fuchs is staying attuned to the visceral world around him. In "L Train to Manhattan," the poet stands on the subway platform and declares "On this platform below this corner/ I fall in love every morning/ with Polish muscle, artistic grace,/ Nuyoricanness, a bagel and coffee for a dollar." A Whitmanesque love of humanity pervades other poems as well: at a holiday fireworks display in Philadelphia, or the "human lifeworld" on South Street, where we witness "The glory of the living/ living to sing about it... ginkgo blooms make love with the night/ Smell it." And at poem's end, the poet muses, "the glory of living/ is getting up close/ with the human lifeworld." Fuchs, whatever his blend of influences, wants us to join him in the smells, tastes, and touches of the world, because, it would seem, only through a fully embodied interface with the world can we find reason to go on.

—Kyle Conner

Kyle Conner co-curates the *Highwire* Reading Series in Philadelphia



## Nature's Maw Gives and Gives

BY MARY BURGER

Duration Press, 1999,

36 pages, \$5

"The obligation of the living? Verify, in solitude, the veracity of perception. Resolve the discontents of desire and repulsion. Find value, pleasure, and significance. Or anything at all." ("Your Golden Gate")

In this engaged, engaging chapbook an inquisitive speaker passes through gaps in syntax and faulty appearances to a set of philosophical problems as elusive as they are familiar. With acrobatic shifts in tone, Burger strikes an effective stance toward her difficult subject matter; an apparent cynicism in many of the poems is belied by a sense of opening often found in their closing lines. Here is "Wives and Husbands Rarely Say 'I Love You'":

the smile often also means  
confusion or embarrassment  
seen as an attractive quality.

, "happy crying," is a sign of life.  
In the back streets of the  
well-known love hotels.

The resistant nature of affect is explored with almost clinical distance, and both the platitudes and the love hotels are well-known—but they proffer back streets, alleys where an unoccupied corner may still be found. This dark corner is the locus of Burger's investigations.

The striking lines "Sometimes I'm wrong: like child porn" occur in "around then under the bay," which seems to recall a conversation real or imagined against a watery backdrop, drawing on its connotative links to "surface" and "predator" (a word that reoccurs in a later poem). The poem speaks to a quest for something not surface-bound—attempts are doubled-over to reach beyond the superficial (and cynicism can be a purely superficial mode).

"I want you to know something/ I'll tell you" points to how the small step from intention to action can sometimes accomplish this leap, whereas at other moments it is insight that is required: "You hope you won't hurt people; really/ you hope they won't hurt you." And consider the title: you first go around the bay, grazing its surface, and only then can you go under. Yet the thrust is not toward dualism, but "around then under" it, as well: "if we could only find the death camp/ we'd feel better"—moral clarity comes at a hefty price, and in this wistful phrasing it becomes a grotesque wish. "I said apotheosis without really knowing what I meant: sometimes I'm wrong, like child porn." The richness of this move—epistemological to ethical, descriptive to normative—is the richness of this collection in general. One can use a word without really knowing what it means, but one risks to use the word "wrongly"; tossing this "wrong" into the stew with child pornography (which shares the death camp's role as an avatar for moral bank-

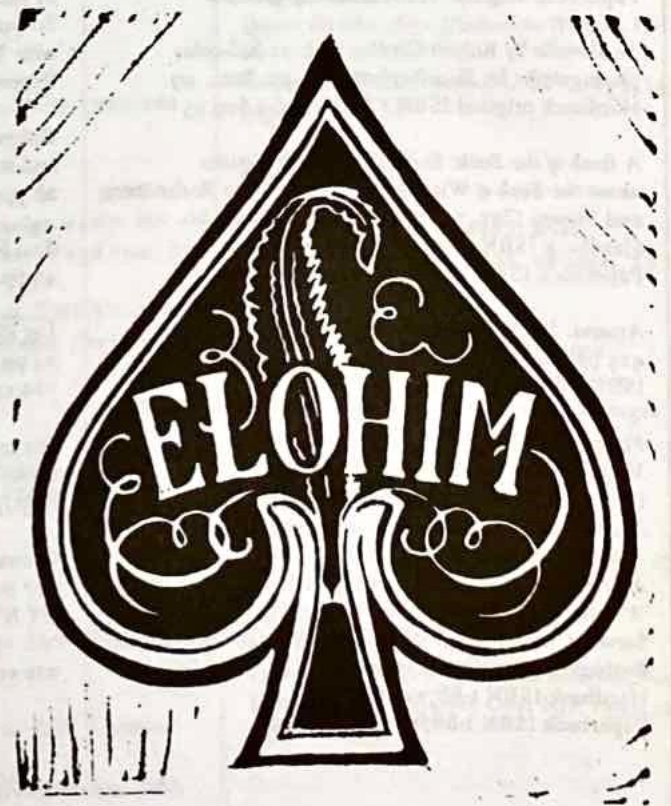
ruptcy) bolsters the story of frustration that closes the poem—a frustration both at the way things seem and the way they are falsely described in dualistic terms: "not divided but that/ people don't know what they're seeing/ when they look at you."

Throughout these poems Burger returns to the themes of knowledge, language, morality, agency, will. "Children/ the fiercest moralists. Repeat the obvious. Explain/ the dangerous..." ("Two Children, 'Go' and 'To'"). But far more personal than these abstract notions, the poems are engaged in the struggle that occurs when one refuses solipsism and cynicism and faces the other (and the anxiety produced by this encounter): "down the corridor you're telling me./ 'be Patient,' and I'm like, "But you/ don't know what it's like for me."// As if knowing would make it any easier. What to name the baby." (*Ibid.*)

"I know what I like," declares the speaker in the closing piece, "Your Golden Gate," reminding us that some knowledge may be unassailable by nature. "Do we learn?" the poem goes on to ask, "or just change our clothes?" By the end of the poem (and the book) we've been led on a tour through the mental and emotional habitat of a subject moved by compulsion—to act, to question, and to reason—and then to question those acts, and questions, and reason itself. It is well worth the price of admission.

—Anna Moschovakis

Anna Moschovakis holds an MFA from Bard. She lives in New York City.



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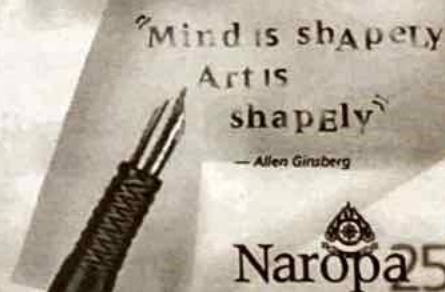
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