

THE POETRY PROJECT NEWSLETTER

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II. Chorus

Soprano I
Diana

Soprano II
Pales

Tenore
Endymion

Basso
Pau

Cor. I, II.
Ob. I, II.
Tutti, Fag.
Viol. I, II.
Va. Vc.
Violone grosso,
Continuo

Ob. I, Viol. I

Ob. II, Viol. II

Tutti, Va.

Fag., Vc.

BACH SAMPLE, JOHN CORBIN

FEATURES:

Consumer Response

-Michael Brownstein

RAP Since 1960: From Political Ideology to Popular Culture

-Kofi Natambu

BOOK REVIEWS:

Bendable Siege, Albert Mobilio

-Richard Graziade

Big City Primer, John Yau

-Joe Donahue

Don't Think: Look, William Corbett

-Barry Schwabsky

Edwin Torres Flux(with)U.s.: I Hear Things People Haven't Really Said, Edwin Torres

-Christian Hays

Just Space: Poems 1979-1989, Joanne Kyger

-Tom Clark

Licking the Fun Up and Other Works, Max Blagg

-David L. Ulin

Love Uncut, Poems: 1986, Bill Kushner,

-Maggie Dubris and

-Elinor Nauen

New York Hello!, Vincent Katz and Rudy Burckhardt

-Susie Timmons

The Simplicity of the Unexpected Without Warning, Patricia Donegan

-Pat Nolan

POETRY/PROSE:

Drinking From the Weirdwomans Glass

-Gail Schilke

Eve

-Mike Topp

Eyes Beyond the Border

-Indran Amirthanayagam

Holding One Another in Suspense

-Barbara Einzig

Leaves Half Fallen

-Mick Vranich

Negocio as Usual

-Ed Morales

RAP SINCE 1960: FROM POLITICAL IDEOLOGY TO POPULAR CULTURE

BY KOFI NATAMBU

What follows is an excerpt from Kofi Natambu's book-in-progress entitled: **WORD! RAP & the HIPHOP Aesthetic in the United States—A Critical Study.**

What's truly significant about RAP as a form of public discourse in the United States over the past three decades is the fact of its transition from a pop culture context (e.g., radio broadcasting, novelty recording and vernacular communication within the community) to a more formal and intellectualized political format during the mid- and late 1960s, and its even more complex evolution into a form that today encompasses both social ideology and popular culture. From Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and H. 'Rap' Brown to Richard Pryor, Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets in little over a decade (ca. 1963-1976) is quite a leap even for the extraordinary pace of most black cultural change in the U.S. during the 20th century. That these major innovations in the form and content of language use have taken place in a social context that has been as strained and tension-filled as the explosive cultural terrain of American life since the 1950s only highlights the intense *aesthetic seriousness* and commitment of RAP to social and cultural transformation. This examination of the "modernist" roots of RAP in the period before the seemingly "unprecedented" appearance of the New Wave of rappers since 1980 also helps to clarify just how integral and profoundly influential these pioneers from the 1960s and '70s have been.

A good place to begin this investigation would be the political styles and behavior of the leading advocates of 'Black Power' thinking and activity during the volatile 1960s. What is distinctive about the public rhetoric of such important political figures and activists as Malcolm X, H. 'Rap' Brown (dig the nickname!), Stokely Carmichael and Bobby Seale (as just four representative examples) is that they all consciously used and included in their public speech and writings, phrases, cadences, tropes, rhythms and stances that come directly out of the RAP tradition. These particular techniques and values also characterized the cultural aesthetics and politics of such leading African-American writers and intellectuals as Amiri Baraka (aka Leroy Jones), Henry Dumas, Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, Don L. Lee, Etheridge Knight and Ishmael Reed.

A case can be made that the widespread public appeal of these political and cultural figures in the black community was precisely their perceived ability to communicate in the vernacular mode as well as use the "King's English." This double-voiced quality of black verbal and cultural expression is characteristic of rappers who rely heavily on innuendo, irony, satire, inversion of tropes and what is known as the "put-on" (and "put-down") to subvert and manipulate conventional significations. This highly creative and innovative approach to language allows these speakers and writers to connect with their audiences on a visceral level that often enhances and gives deeper social-cultural resonance to what they say.

As Henry Gates points out in *The Signifying Monkey*, this double-voiced discourse is designed to critically examine and question the mainstream as it simultaneously celebrates an alternative vision. Much of this so-called "boasting" done by black male and female rappers alike is derived from ancient African rituals of verbal expression that invokes a playful yet highly serious response to the complexities of human behavior. In this way parody, ridicule, in-jokes, punning and double-entendre serve to create and sustain an independent universe of social and linguistic communication. The act of refiguration in language leads to a fundamental revision and transformation of what is received or given. Thus black vernacular modes like RAP actively seek to

intervene on and thereby revise previous texts or modes of expression. The very idea of *sampling* is concerned with just this kind of implied celebration and critique of the past since as a method it consciously "brings back" the past while communicating on its presence in the present. This is accomplished through using melodic and rhythmic material from earlier songs as an integral part of the rap's structure. Through the textual manipulation and restructuring of the sound-text we encounter an understanding of the actual root meaning of the word "text" which is derived from the ancient Latin root-word *textus* and the past participle *texere*, which means "to weave." In a major study by Walter J. Ong, entitled *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (Methuen, 1982) we get a definition of the significance of this etymology:

"Text" from a root meaning "to weave" is, in absolute terms, more compatible etymologically with oral utterance than is "literature," which refers to letters etymologically (*litterae*) of the alphabet. Oral discourse has commonly been thought of even in oral milieus as weaving or stitching—*rhapsoiden*, "to rhapsodize," basically means in Greek to "stitch songs together." (1)

In any event, it is the intersecting dimensions of orality and literacy that constitute the real form and content of all rapping regardless of context. This is what characterizes speech and writing styles of African-American cultural and political figures who are compelled to be fluent in both areas because of their heavy involvement in public media. But what is fascinating in this synthesis of writing and oral expression is that they are used to not only "communicate" certain ideas and feelings, but to *involve* the listener (or reader) in a total experience that allows them to *respond* in a direct, visceral way to the information being presented to them. This transmitter/receiver relationship in black cultural settings is crucial to any examination of these language modes as both *expression* and *critique*. For the fundamental purpose of most black discourse in this context is precisely to engage in critical theory about *what* (and *how*) meaning is conveyed. In fact, much of the often vociferous white academic and media response to the use of these methods of black "signifying(g)" is a result of them not understanding or liking what is being said/written. This is important to acknowledge in as much as one of the major codes of the ideology of racism is that blacks are intellectually incapable of just this kind of subtle parody, satire, and critical examination, especially of the sacred philosophical and aesthetic cows of the (white) Western tradition.

Masters of this (re)codifying strategy include the RAP group PUBLIC ENEMY and their extraordinary wordsmiths CHUCK D and FLAVOR-FAV, as well as LL COOL J, KRS-One, ICE-T, KOOL MOE DEE, ERIC B & RAKIM, QUEEN LATIFAH, MONIE LOVE, MC LYTE, ICE CUBE, and RUN-DMC, all of whom have emerged as leading cultural figures in the past 5-7 years(!).

But suffice it for now to say that these "new" rappers (as distinct from the previous generation of the 1960s and '70s) represent a decided leap forward in the complex semiotics of figuration and (re)figuration that characterizes innovation in language use during this epoch. In the 1960s the black cultural nationalist and revolutionary nationalist movements as represented say, by the Black Panther Party and the US organization; the Nation of Islam and SNCC, as well as such fundamentally black Marxist groups as Detroit's League of Revolutionary Black Workers, all used rapping strategies to translate and express complex political ideas and philosophies involving the dialectics of "race," class, gender and political economy to a popular audience of blacks (and even some radical whites) who were well-versed in the signifying traditions of Afro-America where meaning is derived from historical experience and the myriad ways in which this experience is *inscribed* (figured, translated, interpreted, expressed) in language. The importance of italicizing this idea is that much too often critics and theorists mistake or substitute *sociology* and (*pseudo*) *psychology* for linguistic and cultural phenomena when dealing with black cultural reality. This is the result of venal racial mythology which attempts to reduce the "identity" of African-American culture to extremely narrow, predetermined *essences* of authenticity and "naturalism." What this acknowledgement foregrounds is the awareness of the *signifier* as being integral to any ongoing, indeterminate conception of the *signified* in black culture. This is accomplished, of course, at the level of a crea-

LEAVES HALF FALLEN

maybe there are no more lines just the rapid changes where the moon and sun adjust the chemistry of metaphysics the abstracted cells have a life of their own for the span of time it takes for the change to happen then the rolling steel wheels on the rails crashing through your set of props falling into each other like a flash flood comes through the kitchen window you thought you were on high ground but you couldn't see the mountain because the air was too thick with smoke and flying debris spellbound or handcuffed from the moment when you open your eyes to the sun. they rattle around here at night and i say fear just doesn't decide to be everything all at one time always writing the same words the same version of things leaving the rain soaked coat on a tree to dry next to the gravel road can still feel the wetness can hear the voice be out in all of it see the same words over and over each other before we go to sleep with the cloud of darkness the empty room before the explosion out just in time to see the darkness leave a trail into the western sky, many windows break against the wind shaking the house an entire lifetime the same as hammering a stick into the ground and the stick wears away after awhile falls over and joins the rest of the stuff on the earth around it the entire lifetime a stick in the earth a pile of stones ending up where they are by the slowly moving ice and claw marks on the snow covered cliffs above all this is how the dawn looks today

-Mick Vranich

tive and signifying challenge to the *sign* of meaning itself as encoded in the conventional English word *signification*. In other words, the black use of the word "signifyin(g)" *signifies* on (that is revises and transforms) the very term *signification* (i.e., meaning) itself!

(continued on page 6)

CONSUMER RESPONSES

BY MICHAEL BROWNSTEIN

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Introductory rant to **CONSUMER RESPONSE**, a videotape concerning George Bush's use of language and imagery in order to sell the Persian Gulf War to the American people. **CONSUMER RESPONSE** was shown on January 17, 1992 at 10:30 pm at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery.

I know I'm not supposed to do this, but it ties into my videotape tonight. I mean it's kind of embarrassing for me to stand here and mention what everybody knows already, that it's been a year since the start of the Gulf War, which was so embarrassing everybody tried to forget about it as soon as possible. Last spring, however, I was still embarrassed enough by the war to make a videotape about it. Somehow I decided that the two facts were related, so that only by continuing to embarrass myself could I remain true to what the war meant.

Because the war was embarrassing. George Bush is embarrassing. Norman Schwartzkopf, who earned 76 thousand dollars a year until he got a five million dollar advance from Bantam for his memoirs, is extremely embarrassing. It's quite embarrassing, the 100 or 200,000 Iraqis he had to blow up in order to score that contract. Now, in addition, he goes around the country giving speeches to business groups, which must be very embarrassing for all concerned. Apparently, Norman never heard of the Son of Sam law. Even the fact that "we" (as they say) lost 111 soldiers to enemy fire while their casualties were in the six figure range, plus so much devastation and the bogey man still in power—that's more than embarrassing, it's obscene.

But the most embarrassing thing is our own situation, I'm afraid; I hate to mention it, but somehow we've also suffered memory loss about the fact that we seem to be completely powerless where it counts, jerked around by politicians and Madison Avenue...I know it's not fashionable to say it. But we're the most well-fed slaves in the history of the planet and we don't know what to do about it. So I'd like to apologize in advance for my embarrassing videotape. I couldn't help myself. Usually I'm into creating high art, but this time I couldn't see straight due to a little rage. I told myself to make it as personal as possible—no agitprop. I said, "Finish it as quickly as possible—no art, no Robert Wilson." Because I admit that I'm embarrassed to be an American, and I hope that someday the trance of nationalism will go the way of the dodo bird and there'll be no more borders...There's a line in a Peter Handke novel that goes, "The country which, unlike the state, has no laws but only customs..."

BIG CITY PRIMER: READING NEW YORK AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

John Yau
Timken Publishers, Inc.
(225 Lafayette, New York, NY), 1991.
132 pages, 100 photos;
\$25.00, paper; \$50.00 hard.

Photographer Bill Barrette and poet John Yau have composed a text in which their arts intersect at a variety of angles. At times the visual text and verbal text illustrate each other. At times the two are intent on their own separate lesson plans. The book is, after all, a primer, though it's one which insistently disconnects words from their contexts. Presumably we learn to read, but the city set out before us as a first text seems one abandoned by its citizenry in complete despair.

Barrette's photos are stunning. They spare nothing of New York's grimness. His New York is a living ruin

which the camera excavates. Barrette's point is clear: we are shaped by the shapes we inhabit. What passes for human relations in this book is summarized in one shot: Family Court building, on a rainy day. An archaeologist of a very late afternoon, Barrette would reconstruct the whole range of our ritual life from mortarwork and bones. His cities include centers of commerce, places of worship, homes, monuments, graves, and most especially bridges. Recalling, perhaps, the heroic architectures of Hart Crane, Barrette foregrounds the street level pilings—the unsightly rivets and metalwork, which seem oblivious to the ideals of freedom and transcendence, which they quite literally support.

Everywhere in this "Big City" the millennial aspiration suggested by the book's subtitle lies entombed. New York is not just the residue of past glory but also the wreckage of a future that has lost the heart to arrive. We read the city in one sense quite literally. Barrette's cities often bear inscriptions. A movie theater named *Utopia*, a pharmacy named *Lourdes*, a garage burnt out, alone on a spit of mud against a gray urban backdrop where someone has spray painted the word "happy" across the one patch of door bright enough to bear further defilement. But this is not the reading that Barrette ultimately has in mind. His photographs struggle for priority against the verbal text the city proposes. Anxious about the ability of words to signify, and, we infer, about the power of images to call up the New York he has located, Barrette offers us with wicked humor an emblem of his own predicament in his photo of a family tomb. Here Barrette's lens contemplates its own demise, taking in the cleanly chiseled patronym: Camera.

Barrette tends toward the word in his choice of image. John Yau's poems examine the image making power of words. This poet of the visual seems spurred on by the memorial silences Barrette's photographs suggest attend the word understood as icon. Yau must constantly remind us, therefore, that in poetry the visual is mediated by the linguistic. An exuberant range of tones highlight Yau's wit, anger and despair as he warms to his subject. Disguised as

a "bone lender *bon vivant*," Yau ransacks a range of discourses in an effort to catch the passing colors of a fun city that is also a necropolis. Yau's texts imagine ads for new products (Clubbed Slober, for example, what else could it be but a "new paycheck cleanser") that promote businesses essential to the psychosexual economy of the city (Pyrenees Mountain Clocks, Jerusalem Cooling, Walla Walla Concepts, and, of course, Ninth Circle Psychotherapy Referral). His *paideuma* includes guides to the social world where penguins are the ones to watch ("There are seventeen varieties found on the northern tip of Manhattan"). Our consolation for the violence, pathos and inanity of urban life in all honesty, so Yau suggests, cannot be much more than an overwhelming gnostic vertigo ("All dogs are human souls trapped within their logical consequences").

Yau's work here manages to be both inclusive and intense. Particularly notable in this regard is "Western Rectangle." The title tells it all: an abstract shape, geographically and culturally located, which could stand equally for a coffin, or for that matter, a coffin factory. In a series of dream vignettes New York blurs into all other modern cities: "Stolid faces, bodies lacking the raw materials." After summarizing a wide variety of tropes for modern urban life, Yau sends us back to the origins of the city, and perhaps even of poetry itself: "Sixty years ago Manhattan was nothing more than a campsite overlooking hundreds of corrals. Pastoralists roamed through the open countryside, looking for evidence of communication from the boreholes." This is a perfect Yau moment: fantastic, dismissive, yet sounding an isolation so extreme that the word "communication" reaches us with surprising emotional force.

The immediate lesson that *Big City Primer* spells out is that a crisis of signification touches city, picture and words. Words can neither be severed from their histories and cultural dilemmas nor redeem them. They are, to steal a figure from some of Yau's recent work, trapped angels. Powerful enough to animate an earthly city, but impatient to be elsewhere.

-Joe Donahue

NEGOCIO AS USUAL

In the sweet snowfall on Sixth Street
Where revelation horse-men and apple-bobbing women somehow connect in the dark
Negocio was everywhere
Business as usual
And the long homey-home Los Angeles Raiders parkas
Provide little warmth to the hungry
Veins collapsed, lips betraying desperation
Jolted out into the 6 a.m. drug drill by a phone call
Bringing news of murdered uncle
Shot through the neck in El Barrio, Jesus
He was a fast-talkin man
Sold you a bike when you were ten years old
When you realized what hot meant
His great ambition, like yours, became
Having friends
And money
And friends you call money
Looking good on the block
Keeping the wife and kids happy
Plotting, planning, spying, applying, drinking too much
As the frail strands that hold your mind together
Begin to unravel
While the lookout makes small talk about the weather
"Tato Bien, Ta-to, Ta-to"
Long Island punk wondering who is Tato
And you explain he is not your cousin from Brooklyn,
It means the coast is clear
And a runner appears to feed the line with dimes
In the sweet snowfall on 6th Street
It's business as usual
Negocio is everywhere

-Ed Morales

NEW YORK HELLO!

Vincent Katz and Rudy Burckhardt
Ommation Press, 1990.

Comprised of poems by Vincent Katz and photos by Rudy Burckhardt, *New York Hello!* strikes me as a collaboration of a very subtle sort. While the poems and pix contained herein were not evidently produced simultaneously or in response to each other, they do correspond by virtue of their cosmopolitan coexistence in this book. *New York Hello!* not only attempts to greet the city, but is constructed in such a way as to replicate the method of the city's ongoing experiment with juxtaposition.

Lewis Mumford thought the city was a container of networks. You can choose to focus on the container or the networks. Vincent Katz moves back and forth between whatever these two things represent, sometimes awkwardly, sometimes with grace, as in these quatrains from the first part of the book's title work:

I kiss New York Hello! like a sexy wet kiss/its
monuments rising in flash//I grapple with the
dusty giant//beneath ailanthus and beech

and

because suddenly you're on a jet, and you//land
in JFK and the hot air rushes up//to meet
you, the black customs woman chats, //someone
meets you, a guy makes a crack,

I want to touch everything in the//day-glo
evening. The bodies, the pizza//the music, the
garbage, the flash: Everyone's//Insane! New
York Hello! I love you again

Vincent's commitment to motion is optimistic and true hearted. These poems approach the city from inside and out, bringing to light the fact that the whole world is a container of networks, too. From "Spring Frost:"

Such a warm light, as in Greece descended//but
flying with snow, not sand, along//this April ice
on window appended.

Or, from "Independent Day:"

...finally all the history//and things you read
about, art, become real, part of you, //and it's
nice to find them in others too: July 4th at the
Brooks Fair//in Brooks, Maine, makes me think
of Jefferson, who was a great writer...

or, from "Turning Inside London 1/1/87:"

...we could all grow//together, to a different
lightness, wet leaves//on the sidewalk, a
smashed can in the fresh//gutter, //light on
the building's forms, //in film, details, then you are
alone//and it all pulls together into times//of
other people, //who mattered//the way//they
talked (to you), different lights//in other countries'
rooms)...

The obvious question of all time is: "How are cities different?" Boston-NY, Chicago-NY, Athens-NY, London-NY, and Maine-NY are some of the resonant polarities explored; also love, then and now, summer-fall, day-night, parent-child, and departure-arrival. Networks of transportation are featured prominently: pavements, subways, and airports.

In her charming introduction, Eileen Myles makes the point that Vincent Katz has a very detached attitude toward his youth; this is true:

My father said, "Enjoy your 20's."
-(part VIII, "New York Hello!")

Nonetheless, evidence of youth is everywhere in these poems. A tremendous amount of energy is required to embrace New York as ardently as these poems do; as a citizen grows older, the demands of New York may become a drain rather than a source of inspiration, rendering the poet ever less inclined to name a poem: "New York is My Wife." Vincent Katz is not so jaded:

Yet, when one arrives in New York, every-
thing//evaporates//into a fresh thrill: that skyline
(from whatever//angle)//Makes the heart swoop
in expectation and longing.
-(part IV, "New York Hello!")

While Vincent plunders syntax from antiquity, I do not believe these poems are-classical in an overall formal sense, for even inside the most technically straightforward works occur wild zig-zags, sporadic bursts of progression from trivial to crucial.

On the whole, the poems in *New York Hello!* are overflowing with intriguing shifts, tawdry sexuality, tender surfaces, and poignant depths. *New York Hello!* is not a chronological collection. The poems date from 81-87, and it will be very interesting to see what is next from Katz.

For me, Rudy Burckhardt's photographs can be about the morality of looking. Precisely "What" is that impromptu, furtive quality? His subject matter is hardly scandalous, in this age of mutilation. The frame of his presence is always-felt, his watchfulness in the oblivious crowd, and it goes two ways: you feel as if though you are being watched while looking at the photos! Sometimes scowling ferociously, mostly innocent of being photographed, the people in these pictures remind me of how physically near we get to one another in the press of the city, at times shockingly, intimately so. Even the two naked women featured are completely unskilled at projecting a glossy, pornographic sex object image, and so seem nervewrackingly intimate. Most of these pictures are of people in transit: a subway grate radiating significance, feet on pavement, desultory observation of shoe styles, pocketbook styles, and a dark woman poised like a black doorway before a heap of rubble. Rudy is a genius of sidewalk. His gritty pavements are rich in lost narrative, enveloped in the layered aura of the used city. Riding the train, or the sudden flash of excitement, derived from a beautifully exposed back or neck, all is fleeting transition, the startling moment when a crowd resolves into a person. These pictures are monuments to curiosity. The centerfold is a two page spread of a bank of crowded "down" escalators, in the subway would be my guess, all the people gazing off, looking, thinking, worrying. This is what we look like as we go along about our business, unaware of being observed, recorded.

The factor of Rudy and Vincent's friendship adds a special dimension to this book. The poems and pictures converse--the New York thing again that different views may, or must, or happen to exist side by side, generating conflict and the galvanizing possibility of living a whole new life every day.

-Susie Timmons

JUST SPACE: POEMS 1979-1989

Joanne Kyger
Illustrated by Arthur Okamura
Black Sparrow Press (Santa Rosa, CA), 1991.
146 pages; \$20.00 cloth; \$12.50 paper.

Notwithstanding her decision to conduct a life largely free of the type of self-promotion of which successful poetry careers are currently made, to the more experienced of her poetic peers Joanne Kyger's talents have long been no secret: her rangy, sinuous and elegant line; her intimate, West-Coast-Zen illuminated gift for wacky cosmic chatter; her vernacular grace of phrasing, tuned by a brilliant ear for the deep gossip of the American female consciousness; her light-fingered adeptness of telescoping inner and outer worlds.

The publication of Kyger's first major book of verse in over a decade is therefore a real occasion. *Just Space* confirms her place, along with her teachers Robert Duncan and Philip Whalen, as one of the great pure lyricists of that group of poets who came to be identified with the "San Francisco Renaissance."

Just Space is a poet's journal. Its hundred-or-so, often-untitled pieces flow together into a single long poem, built incrementally and cumulative in effect. The serial form suits Kyger perfectly; she is a poet, not of hard content and serious message, but of the shape of the mind, its subtle unfolding mimesis of the shape of the world.

While Aram Saroyan & W.S. Merwin/debate
the paucity of their fathers' feelings//in New
York Times reviews//the deer//coming down
the pathway still//are my startled guests...

Exploring the *samadhi* of everydayness as discovered in the biomorphic continuum of the poet's

Point Reyes peninsula neo-tribal-village hometown, Bolinas, the writings to be found here are wide-spirited, diaristic, contemplative, funny, and charged with a marvelously particularized quotidian lyric truthfulness that celebrates the unique procession of moments, the places and spaces that make up a life in one loved niche of the planet.

Mist on the orchids//and Mist across the ridge
warm/sun at the door come in

The pun beneath the book's title gives away the essential redemptive proposition underlying Kyger's special art. This is writing that acknowledges and asserts a basic equity among all the forms of life that we know, indeed establishing a "just space."

I knew this was a day for rainbows//in a field
of raptors busy // for lunch // And so what's
'Buddhist'// about all this // landscape con-
sciousness//and its fragile human frequency?

In the idyllic pastoral locale of ocean, mesa, lagoon and town here portrayed, plant, animal and human denizens share equal sway. And Kyger's notation of the transitory gestures and intonations of spoken language is so delicate that her Bolinas poems seems at times to take on the lyric voice of the place itself.

Kyger offers a poetry of radical conservation and spiritual recuperation, inviting us with nervy, disarming playfulness and deceptively casual musicality into that collective lyric space which might be our last refuge.

-Tom Clark

DRINKING FROM THE WEIRDWOMAN'S GLASS

the weirdwoman waits
and never gives up
asks herself questions
she never answers
wears black lace boots
to tie back her hair

she hops on one foot
knocks stars
out of her ears

the weirdwoman drops
crumbs of bread
along her path
birds pick them up
fly them away
so no one can follow

the weirdwoman opens
her legs then her
arms then her mouth

revealing the same place
wet and yearning

the weirdwoman floats
on still water
marks the place
her heart sank
then rose
to the surface

the weirdwoman laughs
alone to herself
an echo without reply

but the last laugh

-Gail Schilke

EYES BEYOND THE BORDER

Eyes beyond the border
cry bullets.

Leafing within the mattress
I found a hair
after many months looking.
It lay still in my hand
like a hand grenade.

Going to Volcanos National Park
I buried the hair under a cactus plant.

Later, I played billiards for money,
dreamt of cancer eating my flesh
and used language like shrapnel.

Injured a few passers by
going to the park
with fruit and wine
to appease the volcano.

Chattering sputtering
bullets and grenades
lava flows over fruit
and wine, cactus plant.
To appease or not to appease.

In this house
five miles as the lava flows,
old letters and other memorable fancies,
bangles, breath mints,
screwing in graveyards,
a second hair
under the floorboards.

-Indran Amirthanayagam

DON'T THINK: LOOK

William Corbett
Zoland Books
(384 Huron Avenue,
Cambridge, MA 01238), 1991.
111 pages; \$9.95 paper.

The stoutly empiricizing title of William Corbett's new collection of poems echoes William Carlos Williams' call for a poetry of "no ideas but in things," and, like the Williamsian motto, it lends itself perhaps too easily to being read as good old-fashioned American anti-intellectualism. The writing itself, however, demands that we re-read the title in the light of a chastened awareness of just how successful language can be in providing distraction from the sense, avowedly vital to Corbett's mature poetics, of "how resistant the actual can be." Sometimes, the solution can be to make poetry from just the things that "tempted me from poetry" ("Walk Across Boston") to "lose the world/in its details/one by one" ("Melancholy"). But the radical simplicity of this writing finds its reason in the gap that separates it from any reading we would ordinarily be tempted to call simple. Corbett's "simplicity" would be more closely related, for instance, to Louis Zukofsky's notorious "complexity," in that what is at stake in both cases is a completely conscious and precise utterance, and so, despite the fact that Corbett's tone is rarely anything other than "natural"--just as its substance is often almost "naturalist" (in the sense that Gilbert White of Selborne was a naturalist)--we are never invited to be less than fully aware of the artifice by which this tone is produced, the tension toward structure that deflects all apparent conversational freedom of association.

I am not necessarily interested in Corbett's images, still less in the stories he tells. What attracts me is rather the physicality of his words as they pass through the shaping motion which is the poem. His

precision takes ordinary words at odd angles: "slime" and "sleeve" and "razor" are all common enough, but what about "aslime" and "ensleeved" and "razory," none of which my PC's spell-check recognizes but all of which I find in a poem called "Slipped twice and"? (Corbett's deployment and canny omission of punctuation is even more telling, though harder to quote out of the context of a substantial passage.) I was almost about to revert to a venerable topos of classicism and compare the turning from word to word here to the carving of stone in sculpture, but that's not right exactly, although the trope's evocation of cutting, a subtractive gesture, is right; rather, Corbett works like a collagist, not so much with reference to the combinatory aspect of that practice (though this is not irrelevant) as in the sense that his words feel like things cut out of or into the page with a blade. Their sharpness of aspect derives from a certain haiku-like suspension of meaning, or rather of what might be called "meaningfulness," that is of a blunting overloading of meaning sadly common in poetry. Everything in these poems is immediate, personal, open even to the sentimental--but they are neither diaristic (they blessedly lack that sense of facts dutifully noted for their own sake or for that of the simple discipline of noting them) nor "confessional." The writer is not trying to draw me into his life or freight it with broader significance. He's simply piecing his terse, slender lines together from material at hand, from everyday talk (of an unusually thoughtful and perceptive kind, surely) about everyday happenings. These are very much the poems of a middle-aged man, one who has been capable of deep attachment to people, places, and things he has known long enough to lose or become disenchanted with. So they are consistently elegiac in feeling, their repeated subject a "mind racing loss" ("Dejection"). A miniaturist perhaps, but no minimalist, Corbett broaches the compensatory fiction of "a world conceived/in memory alone" ("Jade Flower palace").

-Barry Schwabsky

BENDABLE SIEGE

Albert Mobilio
Red Dust Press
(POB 630 NY, NY 10028), 1991.

The age or the ages of color--a syntax of smudges rubbing shoulders--diction combed together while looking into three different mirrors. These are the phrases that come to mind immediately after reading Albert Mobilio's *Bendable Siege*, a chapbook of tightly constructed, mortised-and-tenoned poems. At first I was under the impression that there was some intricate scheme in progress, not a rhyme scheme--that idea did occur as a result of the musicality of the language--but rather more like a scheme of color. It is as if a painter has mixed pigments on a palette and has chosen to exhibit that palette in lieu of the paintings made from its colors so as to intensify the passion existent within any mark:

An author's Robitussin kiss//A cheat disclosed as seraph" ("A Letter Double Sharp is Told"); "Punctuation stains the blown//debris, the killed heart clenched in a fit of//adoration" ("Criminal Code"); "A brushstroke stills//the wavering plot://I fake myself beneath its tilt. ("The Portrait Tests Its Lines")

Numerous presences flash their urban neon explicitly and their urbane rural delicately. The neon has neither violence nor anger of color, and the urbane rural is the sunset the synaesthetist finds tasty enough to be savored on the salty, on the sour, and on the sweet areas of the tongue. Light stands as the reference, as we read in "Inflected Scheme" that:

Dreams are read//by the light of a scientific thigh//I paint their exits in a flawless rain.//In candle's milk, spilt ghosts, guises//that I've sewn and worn and swung.

One of the two-part questions these poems ask is this: "Who keeps whom entertained, and which makes its sexuality put its flame to the dubious?" I would, however, argue *sensuality* rather than *sexuality*. The touch, sweet corporeal touch, with or without available genitalia, is the issue. Hand in hand we sit and ask who's holding the wooden spoon to stir up a new batch of bakers. And the entertainment spreads throughout the poems in an I-kicked-the-bucket-but-the-bucket-kicked-back beat of affirmation. There are small smiles spreading their wings in these poems.

The tightness of control in this writing is in itself an occurrence as it unravels and rewinds, continuously resolving that there be no ellipsis. One color bangs against its anomie, hugs tight with lover, shakes hands with a new neighbor, the spectra growing confrontational with ice to be melted in the currency of discursiveness. These poems are made, made to halve the happenstance to blood on bone, synapse on a stage:

CONVERSATION PIECE

Whenever the calm
requires an unmade yes or key
to the larger things, so much

so you cannot steer
the pitcher to the glass without
spilling, then the perfect

goes down hard, its quiet
uncracked and broken as hours
are broken, as breathing

what there is to breathe must
think the body down
to hammered blur and lamplight.

And here we go, going home, being followed through a courtyard by an empty Bud tallboy pushed by wind in winter, places taking place of places.

-Richard Graziade

LOVE UNCUT, POEMS: 1986

Bill Kushner
United Artists
(Box 2616, Peter Stuyvesant Station,
New York, NY 10009), 1990. \$6.00.

Reading *Love Uncut*, by poet Bill Kushner, is like driving through a summer night with a very old and dear friend, the world dark and infinite around you, full of everything you could ever want:

Night so long on the prairie gotta find me
somebody to swallow love//We make a wish on
falling stars our eyes like a lake mists over//He
was an army & the navy all rolled into one I had
him once, so long//Under the covers & over the
drawbridge & into the awful sweaty dawn.
("Cheers").

Mr. Kushner writes as though he were freezing bolts of lightning. Each poem is spectacular on its own, but gathered together they magnify into a storm of irresistible intensity. He writes directly from his heart like a line of white fire into your own.

Readers may make the mistake of thinking that because Mr. Kushner writes graphically about gay sex this is the only experience he represents. But what he writes about really is love in the face of all odds. He speaks of a world where things flash into view and disappear, where men come into fast focus and then blur away, the underworld of the heart:

I come from a place where no man has ever
been//Once I was a small-town tramp & now
gee I've hit the Bigtime//Once anyone could
have me for a song & now anyone//can have me
for a song ("Rio").

His vision of love seems almost innocent in its purity and willingness to face the future with arms flung open. He hasn't had his spirit broken, a great thing for anyone but especially for a gay man in this, the era of the betrayal of the body:

Men! men everywhere love each other reck-
lessly, soon they die//& what, if anything, do
they leave behind them? ask the sky ("Kiss").

Mr. Kushner is a master of the last line. "Once I was here & no one cared, so hello from the wind" ("Mouth"). He knows how to wrap it up without overdoing it. His last lines don't close the poems as much as they open you up to them. His poems become your story:

&I//Who have climbed so many stairs in my
awful short lifetime//Must start again! O secret
of secrets! we begin to start again ("Cause").

-Maggie Dubris & Elinor Nauen

April/May 1992

THE POETRY PROJECT

The Poetry Project, Ltd.

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Morris Golde, Yvonne Jacquette and
Paul Schmidt

Spring is here, and as we intimated in this space two months ago, signs of acceleration are everywhere. The internal contradictions defining our situation become clearer over time. First, it's the indoor bulbs blooming - miniature iris, narcissus - on the exterior window ledges. Then, we see the crocus and forsythia near the brownish lawns. The National Endowment for the Arts will have a new Director because artists pursue our real interests even as political hacks attempt to defend the interests of a privileged few. Attempts at mass confusion will only temporarily forestall the recognition of the real contradictory forces at play here. Writing, of course, thrives on contradiction, the opportunity to articulate the instances of present conditions that comprise history. Explorations of accuracy. Odes to intelligence and intimacy. New possibilities arise!

THE POETRY PROJECT WISHES TO THANK ITS NEW AND RECENTLY RENEWED MEMBERS AND CONTRIBUTORS:

Maris Abelson, Vivian Marie Ackerman, Brooke Alexander, Peter Bushyeager, Todd Colby, Connie Deanovich, Anne Delaney, Alexandra Dobbins, Bruce W. Eaken, Jr., Raymond Foye, Dr. and Mrs. Alan J. Friedman, Cliff Fyman, John Godfrey, Shirley and William Greenwald, Yukiheide Maeshima Hartman and Susan Green, Jane Freilicher Hazan, Eric Holman, Steve Levine, H.H. McCain, H. Bruce McEver, New Directions, Ron Padgett, Marjorie Perloff, Nick Piombino, George Reichenau, Simon Schuchat, Daniel Shapiro, Ira Silverberg, Deborah Smith-Bernstein, Albert and Alice Stratton, Lorenzo Thomas, D. von Muettling, Ken Wagner, Susan Wheeler and Steve Zolotow.

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Yes I wish to become a member of The Poetry Project. Here is my tax deductible membership gift:

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No, I do not wish to join at this time but here is my tax-deductible contribution of \$_____.

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Choice of *The World Record* or John Ashbery's *Flow Chart*, if your gift is \$100 or more (please specify):

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\$500 FREE admission for a year for yourself and two others to all Poetry Project events PLUS *In and Out of the World*, a historic anthology of the Poetry Project's influential literary magazine AND grateful public acknowledgement.

\$1000 All of the \$500 membership benefits AND all 1991-91 Poetry Project publications.

THE POETRY PROJECT



Drawing: *On Thin Ice*, ©1992 Lori Landes

APRIL

- 1 JIM CARROLL & EILEEN MYLES**
Poet, prose writer and rock 'n roll musician JIM CARROLL's books include *The Basketball Diaries* and *Living at the Movies*. *Praying Mantis*, a spoken-word album, recorded live at the Poetry Project, was released this year by Giant Records/Warner Bros. Poet and performance artist EILEEN MYLES is a candidate for President of the United States. She has published five books of poetry, including her most recent, *Not Me* (Semiolotexte). **Wednesday, 9 pm.** [This is the second of five programs supported by a national touring grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.]
- 3 TRIBUTE TO HARRY SMITH II**
Home movies by Jonas Mekas & Patrick Hulsey, films by Harry Smith & guest speakers. **Friday, 10:30 pm.**
- 5 AERIAL MAGAZINE READING FEATURING JOHN CAGE**
John Cage, Charles Bernstein, Melanie Nielson, Joan Retallack and P. Inman will read at this publication celebration for the Washington D.C.-based journal edited by Rod Smith. **Sunday, 3 pm**
- 6 OPEN READING**
Sign-up at 7:30. **Monday, 8 pm.**
- 8 JOHN ASHBERY & PIERRE MARTORY**
The author of fourteen books of poems, JOHN ASHBERY received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. His book-length poem, *Flow Chart* was published in 1991. A new collection, *Hotel Laurdumont* will be published later this year by Knopf. Poet, novelist, translator and journalist PIERRE MARTORY is the author of a novel, *Phébus ou le beau mariage*, published by Denoel, and a book of poems, *Every Question But One* (Intulfo Editions). Forthcoming from Editions POL in Paris is a new collection of poems. **Wednesday, 8 pm.**
- 10 ANGRY WOMEN**
Inspired by the book of the same title, a warm evening of rants by women: Nicole Breedlove, Sharon Mesmer, Dana Bryant, Jasmine, Cheryl Boyce Taylor, Cynthia Nelson, Veronica Webb, Iletayo Folami, & more. **Friday, 10:30 pm.**
- 13 YAU CHING & LANA LIN**
An emerging writer of prose, poetry and fiction in Hong Kong, YAU CHING is also a film/video artist whose work has been shown at the London Film Festival and on PBS, among other places. LANA LIN is a film/video artist. Recently she has been writing short fiction and poetry, and is currently working on a script about a Japanese geisha who drifted to Hawaii after being lost at sea. **Monday, 8 pm.**
- 15 MICHAEL FRIEDMAN**
Author of the recently published *Special Capacities* (Intermezzo Press), MICHAEL FRIEDMAN is the publisher and literary editor of *Shiny*. **Wednesday, 8 pm.**
- 20 EMMANUEL HOCQUARD & RAY DIPALMA**
An eminent French writer who has edited two major French anthologies of Contemporary American writers, EMMANUEL HOCQUARD has a new book forthcoming entitled *Theory of Tables* translated by Michael Palmer. RAY DIPALMA's recent books include *Mock Fandango* (Sun & Moon), *Night Copy* (Stele), and *Raik* (Roof Books). He has two new books forthcoming in 1992. **Monday, 8 pm.**
- 22 BAPSI SIDHWA & JIM KRUSOE**
Pakistani writer BAPSI SIDHWA is the author of *The Bride*, *The Crow Eaters* and *Cracking India*. *The New York Times Book Review* describes *Cracking India* as "a memorable book, one that confirms Sidhwa's reputation as Pakistan's finest English-language novelist." JIM KRUSOE is the editor and founder of *The Santa Monica Review*. His most recent book is *Hotel de Dream* (Illuminati Press). **Wednesday, 8 pm.** [This is the third of five programs supported by a national touring grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.]
- 24 MALCOLM X READING**
Organized by Mosaic Books. Writers pay tribute to the late leader: Nate Tate, Dael Orlandersmith, Sabah as Sabah, Hillary Kay, Paul Schiff, Dana Bryant, The Jones Twins, Rashidah Ismaili, Darius James & Jocelyn Taylor. **Friday, 10:30.**
- 27 KATHY PRICE & DAEL ORLANDERSMITH**
KATHY PRICE is part of Sisters Under the Sun: a forum for multi-cultural women writers. Her work will appear in an upcoming anthology by Long Shot Press. DAEL ORLANDERSMITH is an African-American writer, actress and poet whose work defies all sexual or ethnic categorization. She's working on two plays with one pending for production. **Monday, 8 pm.**
- 29 JAY WRIGHT LECTURE**
A rare appearance in New York by this remarkable and innovative poet. JAY WRIGHT is the author of *Boleros* (Princeton U.), *Selected Poems* (Princeton U.) and *The Double Invention of Komo* (Texas Press). He was a recipient of a 1986 McArthur Fellowship and the subject of a special *Callaloo* issue on his work. **Wednesday, 8 pm.**

Admission: \$5 (contribution), except where noted.
All programs subject to change.

MAY

- 1 VICTOR BOCKRIS & MICHAEL LYDON**
Reading from his upcoming *Keith Richards: The Biography*, to be published by Poseidon in August, VICTOR BOCKRIS' books also include *The Life and Death of Andy Warhol*. LYDON is the author of the rock classic, *Rock Folk*, which was reissued by Citadel Press in 1991. Along with Jann Wenner, he was a founder of *Rolling Stone*. **Friday, 10:30 pm.**
- 4 OPEN READING**
Sign-up at 7:30. **Monday, 8 pm.**
- 6 LECTURE: DAVID SHAPIRO**
A professor of art history at William Paterson College, DAVID SHAPIRO's most recent books are *Mondrian's Flowers* (Abrams) and *After a Lost Original*, with Terry Winters, (Solo Press). He will lecture on "Maximalism Against Manifestos." **Wednesday, 8 pm.**
- 8 GIDEON D'ARCANGELO & THE BLISSFUL KISSFUL**
Songs that have gnarly roots & gnarly branches. Face-twisting, body-shaking melodies. Songs that stretch around the curve of the earth. **Friday, 10:30 pm.**
- 11 AMIRI BARAKA & JUAN FELIPE HERRERA**
Poet, playwright, critic, essayist and fiction writer AMIRI BARAKA recently had his work gathered in *The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* (Thunder's Mouth Press). Winner of the American Book Award in 1987 for his collection of poems *Facegams*, JUAN FELIPE HERRERA has been described as a storyteller, surrealist, polemicist and "natural poet." [This is the fourth of five programs supported by a national touring grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.]
- 13 ALLEN GINSBERG & KENNETH KOCH: ABOUT WALT WHITMAN**
Co-sponsored with Teachers & Writers Collaborative, RON PADGETT will moderate "About Walt Whitman: A Poetic Dialogue with KENNETH KOCH and ALLEN GINSBERG." Focusing on Whitman's life and work, the dialogue will be followed by questions from the audience. This program is part of a city-wide "Democracy Poet: A Walt Whitman Celebration". (Made possible by major grants from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund and the National Endowment for the Humanities, a federal agency. Additional support was provided by The New York Times Company Foundation, Inc.)
- 15 A TRIBUTE TO LESTER BANGS**
LESTER BANGS was a frequent contributor to the *Village Voice*, *Creem* and *Rolling Stone*, whose most memorable childhood fantasy "was to have a mansion with catcombs underneath containing, alphabetized in endless winding dimly-lit musty rows, every album ever released." Readings by Billy Altman, Robert Christgau, Richard Hell, Georgia Christgau, Nick Tosches, Dave Marsh, Legs McNeil, M. Mark, Ben Edmunds, Lenny Kaye & more. **Friday, 9 pm.**
- 18 MELANIE NIELSON & JESSICA GRIM**
Co-editor of the literary journal *Big Allis*, MELANIE NIELSON's book *Civil Noir* was recently published by Roof Books. JESSICA GRIM has two books, *The Invertebrate Life* (O Books) and a chapbook entitled *Intrepid Hearts* (Coincidence Press). She's also co-editor, with Melanie Nielson of the magazine *Big Allis*. **Monday, 8 pm.**
- 20 ANN LAUTERBACH & BARBARA GUEST**
A contributing editor of *Conjunctions* magazine, ANN LAUTERBACH's most recent book is *Clamor* (Viking). She is a professor at the City College of New York. A member of the original "New York School" of poets, BARBARA GUEST's books include *The Blue Stairs*, *Moscow Mansions* and *Seeking Air*. Her most recent book of poems is *The Countess From Minneapolis* (Burning Deck). **Wednesday, 8 pm.**
- 22 A READING BY HIGH SCHOOL POETS**
Marta Weiss, Jerome Annum, Bess Wohl, Tim Morrison, Joy Kaplan and Matt Blades. **Friday, 10:30 pm.**
- 25 JOSHUA GALEF & DAVID CAMERON**
JOSHUA GALEF's work has appeared in *Mudfish #6*, *Pome*, *Cheap Review* and *Cover*. Liberating text and transforming it into non-sequential verse, DAVID CAMERON's translations of Baudelaire involve chance, choice and the dictionary on a word-processing program. **Monday, 8 pm.**
- 27 JIM BRODEY & JOHN GODFREY**
Described by Clark Coolidge as "one of the last of the word-slingers," JIM BRODEY is the author of, among other books, *Blues of the Egyptian Sky* (Big Sky) and *Judysim* (United Artists), among others. JOHN GODFREY's collections of poems include *Dabble*, *Where the Weather Suits My Clothes* and *Midnight on Your Left* (The Figures). **Wednesday, 8 pm.**
- 29 RICHARD FOREMAN**
A reading by RICHARD FOREMAN to celebrate the publication of *Unbalancing Acts: Foundations for a Theater* (Pantheon), a book of essays, an interview and five recent plays. His play *The Mind King* recently completed a successful and critically-acclaimed run at the Ontological at St. Mark's Theater, where he is now the resident director. **Friday, 10:30 pm.**
- 31 A MEMORIAL FOR DOUGLAS WOOLF**
Readings and reminiscences by Sandra Braham, Fielding Dawson, Alice Notley, Robert Creeley, Ammiel Alcalay, Michael Stephens, Lewis Walsh, Russell Banks, Martha King & others. A videotape of Douglas Woolf, reading at the Poetry Center in will also be screened. **Sunday, 3-6 pm.**

The Poetry Project • St. Mark's Church • 2nd Ave. & 10th St. • Manhattan • (212) 674-0910

The programs of the Poetry Project, Ltd. are made possible, in part, with public funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the City of New York's Department of Cultural Affairs. The Poetry Project's programs are also made possible with funds from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, the Rex Foundation, the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, Inc., the Witter Bynner Foundation, the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation, Morgan Guaranty Trust Company of New York, Axe Houghton Foundation, Consolidated Edison, the Kulchur Foundation, the New Hope Foundation, U.S. Lithograph, the Cowles Charitable Trust, the Gramercy Park Foundation, Apple Computer, Inc., Vicki Hudspeth & Wallace Turbeville, Ada & Alex Katz, Michael Friedman, Susan & Peter Straub members of the Poetry Project, and other individual contributors.

WRITING WORKSHOPS

POETRY AND PROSE WORKSHOP

Experiments in poetry, including prose, exercises, rehearsals, practices, intentions. Taught by Bernadette Mayer. Thursdays at 7 pm (ongoing through the end of April). The workshop will be limited to 25 students. Register, in person, at the Poetry Project office or by mail.

THE WRITER AS TRANSLATOR OF EXPERIENCE

A workshop for writers who are interested in exploring in fictional terms the texture of their lives – what is commonly called experience. The participants will be asked to focus on some aspect of their preoccupations, and to explore them in fictional/memoir form to discover their unique voices. Taught by Jaime Manrique. Fridays at 7 pm (February 7 through April 24). Register, in person, at the Poetry Project office or by mail.

Jaime Manrique is the author of several books of fiction, poetry and criticism in English and Spanish. His most recent novel, *Latin Moon in Manhattan* is being published by St. Martin's Press this winter.

REVIVING THE WORLD

The workshop will edit and produce four issues of *The World*, the magazine of the Poetry Project. Taught by Lewis Warsh. Saturdays at noon (October 19th through the end of April). This workshop is filled. Names are being held on a waiting list should there be any openings.

REGISTRATION FEES

Registration for the workshops costs \$150; \$50 for regular annual membership in the Poetry Project plus \$100 annual workshop membership. Those enrolling in workshops who are already members of the Project and have paid for workshop memberships need only renew their memberships upon expiration.

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

BOOKS:

Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics*, Harvard University Press (Cambridge Mass, 1992). 232 pp, \$15.95 paper, \$34.95 hard.

John Henrik Clarke, *Rebellion in Rhyme* (Africa World Press, Inc. POB 1892, Trenton, NJ 08607, 1991). 98 pp; \$9.95 paper; \$24.95 hard.

Holly Day & Paul Weinman, *Paul & Holly Went Up the Hill to Fuck Each Other Over.* (Drew Blood Press Ltd. 3410 First St. Riverside, CA 92501), 20pp.

Michael Friedman, *Special Capacity* (Intermezzo Press, 219 E. 12th St., New York, NY 10003), 81 pp, \$8.95.

Norman Filzman, *The Catering Hall, 7 Vignettes* (Low Tech Press, 30-73 47th St. LIC, NY 11103) \$2.00.

Michael Fournier *Einstein* (Northern Lights, 493 College Ave, Orono, Maine 04473, 1991). 32pp, \$4.95.

Robert Hunter, *Night Hunter* (Viking Penguin, 357 Hudson St, New York, NY 10014). 94 pp. \$10.00.

Andrew Levy, *Values Chauffer You* (O Books, 5729 Clover Drive, Oakland, CA 94619, 1990). 87 pp.

David McNaughton, *The Pilon* (Blue Millennium Press, POB 958, Bolinas, CA 94924, 1991) \$7.00.

Effie Mihopoulos, *The Moon Cycle* (Ommation Press 5548 N. Sawyer, Chicago, IL 60625, 1991). 68 pp, \$8.00.

Maureen Owen, *Imaginary Income* (Hanging Loose Press, 231 Wyckoff St, Brooklyn, NY 11217, 1992). 47pp, \$9.00.

Sheila Huxley Potter, *Heritage* (225 Elm St. Ithica, MI 48847)

Donald Schenker, *High Time* (Clear Mountain Press, 12 Drake Place, Oakland, CA 94611, 1991). 66pp, \$7.50.

Elio Schenceman, *Along the Rails* (United Artists Books, Box 2616 Peter Stuyvesant Station New York, NY 10009). 71pp.

Barry Silesky, *The New Tenants* (Eye of the Comet Press 2696 Summit Ave, Highland Park, IL 60035, 1992). 96 pp. \$6.95.

Askia M. Toure, *From the Pyramids to the Projects* (Africa World Press) . 77pp, \$7.95.

Tom Whalen, *Elongated Figures* (Red Dust, POB 630, New York, NY 10028, 1991). 32pp, \$4.00.

MAGAZINES :

The Americas Review: A Review of Hispanic Literature and Art of the USA (University of Houston Houston, TX, 77204-2090). \$5.00

Appearances #18 (Wiltz, Lewis, Mutter, eds., 165 W, 26th St. New York, NY 10001). \$5.00

Babyfish (POB 11589, Detroit, MI 48211).

Brief # 10 (Jim Hydock, ed. POB 33 Canyon, CA 94516). 2.50

English No. 3 (Detroit Writers Project c/o Wayne State University English Department, 51 Warren, Detroit, MI 48202).

Giants Play Well in the Drizzle # 29 (Martha King, ed 326-A 4th St. Brooklyn, NY 11215).

Long News in the Short Century Vol.1, #2 (Barbara Henning, ed. POB 150-455 Brooklyn, NY 11215). \$5.00

New American Writing #8 & 9, 26 New British Poets + Kenward Elmslie Interview, (2920 West Pratt Boulevard, Chicago, Illinois 60645), \$8.

New Observations #87: Instant Classics (Steve Kane & David L. Ulin eds, 142 Greene St., New York, NY 10012). 5.00.

Peu Sensible #2 (B. Kold ed. POB 20822 New York, NY 10009). \$2.00

Public Illumination Magazine (Zagreus Bowery ed, Bazzano Superiore 29 06049 Spoleto [PG] Italy). \$1.50

Pygmy Forest Press: Erotic Quartet, Platonic Sextet (POB 591, Albion, CA 95410).

Temporary Culture #6 (POB 43072 Upper Montclair, New Jersey, 07043). \$5.00

THE WORLD 43

CONTRIBUTORS:

Vyt Bakaitis
Susan Barnes
Wayne Berninger
Laynie Browne
Lee Ann Brown
Jack Collom
Xue Di
Mitch Highfill
Bob Holman
Vincent Katz
Bill Kushner
Kimberly Lyons
Bernadette Mayer
Gillian McCain
Sharon Mesmer
Murat Nemet-Nejat
Alice Notley
Douglas Oliver
Wanda Phipps
Gerard Rizza
Ed Roberson
Bob Rosenthal
Christy Sheffield Sanford
Sparrow
George Tysh
Paul Violl
John You

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LICKING THE FUN UP AND OTHER WORKS

Max Blagg
Aloes Books
(69 Lancaster Road, London N4 4 PL), 1991.
63 pages.

It's not easy to do what Max Blagg does. Over the years, he's chosen to take on two of the toughest literary forms around--long poems and short prose--and he's done it so well that once you've read him, he'll stay with you forever. Blagg's stuff is irreverent, playful--marked by a love of language, of the music of language, and a willingness to let words discover their own form. At the same time, though, he writes from an acute intelligence, giving his efforts a weight and a depth that transcends mere linguistic gamesmanship, pointing out with a sharp eye and a brutal sense of humor the traumas and vicissitudes of the everyday.

Blagg's third book is *Licking The Fun Up*, a selection juxtaposing poetry with some stories to showcase his author's unique talents. Divided into three parts, *Licking The Fun Up* features material that, until now, has been available only in a variety of local periodicals and publications--among them: *Bomb*, *Downtown*, *Appearances*, *The Village Voice*, and the anthology *A Day in the Life: Tales from the Lower East*. The writing here is Blagg at his best: relentless, nearly acrobatic, full of daring line breaks and appropriated references, swooping and flying on currents of sheer expression.

Licking The Fun Up starts with a bang--the poem "Body Armor," a paean to life in the Big Apple that exclaims, "It's too easy to die in New York," then goes on to celebrate "Spring in this fantastic city," where "the hum of morning motors turning over" is "the slash and burn music of...[the] streets." This mix of fatalism and exuberance appears throughout the book, from "Get Well Soon"--"It's just New York the way it turns everything to fever and nightmare//and that's just the way you like it!"--to "You Might As Well Drink White," with its stunning death fantasy of "a small funeral pyre in Battery Park//followed by a party//with much drinking//and a limited amount of substance abuse," to "Watchers At The Pond," in which a pastoral description of fishing at a small French pond degenerates quickly and explosively into an odd, imagined violence. Even "Gathering Bruises," written in memoriam for Cookie Mueller and Vittorio Scarpati (to whom the volume as a whole is also dedicated), vacillates between the tragic and the joyous, moving from the present--"I still can't believe that you are gone"--back into memory, to those long-gone days when "we were gunning it, no mercy...and you/looked so incredibly lovely--//like you would live forever."

Yet as riveting as *that* is, nowhere is the dichotomy between present and past, between fatalism and exuberance, more vividly explored than in the title poem, a sixteen page, multi-sectioned work asking the musical question: "Baby, baby, where did the fun go?" In it, Blagg pulls out all the stops, examining the way we live "neckdeep in a world of plastic," where "you need gloves for your nerves//just to walk out the door." Amid laments for the "perfect October day...a time when dying seems impossibly far off," and litanies of the things we should *really* say no to, Blagg's idea that we "must go on," that we must "mend the shredded nets of [our] spirit catcher[s]," is as enlightening as it is unexpected. And by placing the poem as the last in the collection, he creates a real feeling of continuity, giving its final line--"and all will be well"--a resonance that extends back throughout these pages as reflection of everything within.

You see, in the end, that resonance is the true measure of this book, the very thing that *Licking The Fun Up* is most about. It's an affirmation--of life and of language--something that'll stick to you, something to believe.

-David L. Ulin

HOLDING ONE ANOTHER IN SUSPENSE (after Paul Schrader's *The Comfort of Strangers*)

They were not with each other but circling around each other and in this way were holding one another in suspense. She kept a picture of her children in her purse and she asked him whether he liked children, and in this way she used the children to hold him off from her as she held the photograph away from her while she looked at it. She was not where the children were and she called the children with difficulty, and the calls did not reassure her but were merely used by her to create an idea of a home that was not with her, where they were. She could not then be at home, if they were there, and if they were here where she was she could not really be with him, as she would be distracted.

He also circled around her, since he could not make up his mind if he really loved her or merely found her incredibly attractive. Thinking about this kept him from touching her, as when he touched her he felt he must know if he really loved her or was merely sleeping with her, but he did not know and so did not touch her. The tension of not touching her kept him from really concentrating and so he could not really think to make up his mind as to whether he really loved her and wanted to live with her.

They both liked to look at each other very much as each thought the other possessed a very beautiful body but neither felt much pleasure in their own. It was necessary to care for the body and decorate it and this then appeared tedious to them. Yet they were always very well dressed and appeared sexual although they never made love.

Seeing those who were cruel or who seemed estranged from them made them feel closer to each other and they began making love with each other. Yet while they were doing so each appeared as the children in the photograph had appeared, as if held out there at a distance being looked at.

What is pleasing gives no pleasure and there is no clue as to why this is so, only that something is missing in every place they go, and yet the thing that is missing cannot be obtained in another place and then brought back, for by the time they return the place will have changed and one other thing will be missing. This is like the story of the children from the southern hot countries who went to go get snow and brought it back in a truck where it first changed to water and then disappeared.

They seem to say that looking at something can never have as its object the understanding of the thing one is looking at, but merely that the eye derives pleasure from certain lovelinesses. Yet no pleasure is given and the eye merely registers certain lovelinesses. By inference we might know that the film is held before us like the photo of the children, images of people who are not here yet are speaking to us, not to each other but to us, knowing they are in a movie and getting sick sometimes from traveling but this not making it any more real.

-Barbara Einzig

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RAP SINCE 1960:
CONTINUED
FROM PAGE 1...
BY KOFI NATAMBU

Thus in the rapping tradition we find a different conception of how and why any particular meaning is conveyed through language. In the context of black political and cultural activists like Carmichael, Brown, Huey Newton, Kenny Cockrel, Baraka, Cortez and Scott-Heron, we encounter the continually creative (re)appropriation of conventional English words and phrases that are consciously revised, transformed and redefined to construct an entirely new or fresh approach to projecting meaning in society. The classic model for this kind of quick-witted revision and dynamic use of language was the great Malcolm X whose speeches, writings, and public statements are suffused with copious references to, and modern take-offs on, traditional folk expressions, tales, tropes and values. The highly personalized 'spin' that Malcolm would put on these modal elements was the adaptation of the urban hipster persona who through inside knowledge (the very definition of the word 'hip') and a razor sharp manipulation of irony, paradox and innuendo laced with a wicked sense of humor could slyly redefine and frame the terms of discourse in any given situation.

As a past master at the subtle and sometimes brutal art of signifying, Malcolm X excelled at the droll practice of what the English call "one-upmanship." One of his favorite ploys was asking a seemingly innocent question then, when the person he was addressing couldn't come up with an answer (and of course any response that they gave would be the "wrong" one), he would delight in what in African-American culture is called "smacking someone upside their head" by giving the devastating "right" answer to his own question. One question that he often asked of stuffy, pretentious black intellectuals (or any black authority figure) who he was debating in a public forum would be the following:

Malcolm: Sir, what do they call a black man with a Ph.D.?

Respondent: I don't know (or some other response)

Malcolm: A Nigger!

The point of this exchange would be to frame the very terms of the discourse by establishing immediately that racism was an ideological and social force that didn't go away or become less destructive merely because an individual black person had 'succeeded' at something in the general society. Malcolm's discursive strategy here was to foreground his critique of American society by including even the person(s) he was debating as an example of that which he was indicating. The fact that he did this equally with black and white men and women (either to make a negative or positive point) meant that he was highly conscious of, and adept at, using the power of language to tell complex truths about the society and culture. That this was largely accomplished through the practice of signifying only made Malcolm's ideas and perspective more accessible to the largely young audience that he was trying to reach.

The rapping aspects of Malcolm's oratorical style were most clearly demonstrated in the syncopated cadences and staccato phrasings that he often used. Alternating with a sly, sometimes sinister sounding chuckle and highly dramatic, almost ominous silent pauses, Malcolm would often keep an audience spellbound by deftly weaving a pastiche of historical allusions, folk proverbs and admonitions, ironic jokes, satirical puns, the inversions of tropes and indirect discourse (a prime element as we've noted in the art of signifying). He was also a brilliant storyteller whose allegorical tales epitomized the innovative use of the rapping tradition. As the linguist Mitchell-Kernan points out (in Gates): "Signifying does not always have negative valuations attached to it; it is clearly thought of as a kind of art—a clever way of conveying messages." (2)

In Malcolm's most famous collection of speeches *MALCOLM X SPEAKS* (Grove Press, 1965), we find many examples of just this sort of artful "cleverness." In fact this book and the world famous *AUTOBIOGRAPHY* published after his death by assassination in 1965 (and now in its 40th printing!) are classic texts that clarify exactly why Malcolm is

revered as a major sampling source for the current generation of rappers.

What most impresses the current generation of RAP artists is precisely Malcolm's ability to transgress cultural and political sacred cows through his mastery of the verbal modes of parody, satire, circumlocution and mockery. Many of Malcolm's speeches consciously set out to revise and transform conventional ideas about the nature and meaning of American history through the art of troping. By (re)figuring standard notions of what constitutes historical and social reality in the United States, we get a critical narrative of the content of race relations, cultural expression, political philosophy and economic theory through a withering investigation into the mythology of these structures within the institutional parameters of the larger society. Malcolm was extremely adept at using indirect discourse and the implied or highly suggestive statement or phrase in lieu of literal minded posturing. The emphasis would always be foregrounding the actual reality of conflict and contradiction in American culture vis-a-vis the given or received myth of how things "should be." The result was often provocative and insightful.

The inspiring example of Malcolm X in the glaringly public arena of national and world politics led the next generation of African-American activists to base their oratorical and writings styles in the tradition of the vernacular. The bold, brash and scathing verbal expressions of such well-known figures as Stokely Carmichael, H. 'Rap' Brown, Bobby Seale and the great boxer/poet Muhammad Ali were the very epitome of the rapping tradition in that humor, irony, parody, troping, and ingenious turns-of-phrase were the very content of their "messages." The fact that rhyming, repetition, riffing, and indirect discourse (as well as scatology, insults and folklore) were so integral to their cultural speech put them and others (like the comedian/philosophers Richard Pryor, Redd Foxx and Bill Cosby and the legendary singer/musician/dancer James Brown) right into the "mainstream" of the signifying styles so widely used in the general black community.

The vernacular is a powerful and effective tool in African-American culture. In terms of language, the vernacular mode does not separate meaning from form. The manner in which one talks or writes is as important to the structure of what is being written or spoken as the words themselves. Thus style and content are never seen as fundamentally different entities. This observation goes a long way toward explaining why rappers today are so aware of, and involved in, consciously synthesizing the elements of music, sound, scientific technology and semiotics in their raps. What results is a fascinating collage-of-effects that enables the speaker/writer/performer to play against and comment upon the juxtapositions of language, sound, rhythm and technology that are 'framing' what is being said as it is in the process of being expressed. What the listener/viewer/reader experiences is thus "more" than just the words being said at any given time. That is, the totality of meaning(s) that are being transmitted is dependent on the whole environment of effects and techniques that the rapper is using.

This explains why RAP as a "form" can't possibly be reduced to either the received or given categories of "music" or "poetry." It would be more accurate to say that the great majority of raps are neither totally one or the other. Metamusical and metapoetics would be more like it. In fact, like jazz and blues in the early 1920s, or "rock 'n' roll" (or rhythm and blues) in the 1940s and '50s, RAP represents an entirely new and different conceptual idea about what aesthetics means in terms of the established conventions of what is called "music," "poetry," or "performance art."

With the advent of television, video, computers and microchip programming, we now have a richly enhanced environment for the transmission and creative expression of information and desires that simply did not exist before. The notable link between vernacular language and technology (and its profound implications for a clear understanding of what RAP is in American culture) is uncannily stated in one of the most subtle and insightful books ever written on American cultural studies, *The Beer Can By the Highway* (1961) by the late cultural critic and theorist John A. Kouwenhoven:

It is my conviction that the society we live in marks a really new epoch, but that it is shaped not by technology and science alone, but by a unique combination of forces, a compound of scientific technology and the spirit of democracy. Some years ago I tried to suggest that these twin forces had been revolutionizing

man's conception of his relations to nature, his fellow man, and his gods, for more than a century, and that the elements of the emergent environment produced by these twin forces were for many years shaped not by our artists but by untutored citizens working without any "artistic" pretensions. (italics mine)(3)

Kouwenhoven goes on to suggest that this combination of elements—technology and the quest for democracy—created an entirely new kind of "folk art" that wasn't dependent on the tradition bound folk arts that were the products of formerly isolated cultural groups essentially cut off from the "mainstream" of contemporary life. However, unlike these older parochial folk expressions, these new conceptions were the result of a living dynamic relationship to contemporary social reality by people caught up in fundamentally new forms and patterns that had no historical precedent since the environment to which they gave shape simply didn't exist before.

It is this aspect that the current generation of RAP artists has inherited from their immediate historical predecessors of the 1960s and (especially) the 1970s. For if there is one major characteristic that is shared by a wide spectrum of rappers in our present era, it is a situation in which people have been caught up in fundamentally new forms and patterns, and out of which have created an entirely new social contract between art and life. As Kouwenhoven has pointed out, this new set of environmental conditions was the contemporary result of the confluence of the forces of technology and the struggle for cultural democracy in the largely unprecedented context of post-industrial/postmodern structures and realities. It is instructive in this regard to emphasize that the new aesthetic dynamic was, as Kouwenhoven also pointed out, forged initially not by artists but "untutored citizens" working without any "artistic" pretensions. Significantly, these patterns and forms derived from vernacular cultural materials have been taken up and "arranged" by "artists of our time" (the rappers) in ways that do indeed express the values and attitudes "appropriate to [this] new epoch." After the political uses of figurative language by black activists of the 1960s began to permeate general cultural communication networks within the national black community, the 1970s saw the perfecting of signifying and rapping traditions honed in the social arenas of sports, entertainment (particularly comedy), and popular music by the artistry of such figures as Muhammad Ali, Richard Pryor, Gil Scott-Heron and James Brown. In each of these individual artists, one found the same love and command of language in all of its creative dimensions as one found in their historical precursors (e.g. Langston Hughes, Sterling A. Brown, Zora Neale Hurston, Redd Foxx, Louis Jordan and the Last Poets).

What distinguished the artists of the '70s was a precise attention to the specific details of black vernacular conceptions as practiced and experienced in the period since 1945. That is, what the rappers of this time zone were concerned about was bringing back to the national black community (through such African diasporic forms as rhythm and blues, reggae, ska and "dub" poetry) what were considered the "endangered" arts of orality and folklore. The ironic fact about all this, however, was that it was now being done through the high technology of the mass media. Thus the most crucial and relevant aspect of Marshall McLuhan's visionary edict that the "medium was the message" was being realized by those sectors of the national culture in the United States that were perceived as the most marginal, but were actually the most central to its identity. The accomplishment of this by citizens who were not only not "professional artists" but not classical "intellectuals" only made Kouwenhoven's analysis seem more prophetic when he stated that:

Vernacular forms, whose elements are the materials and processes of technology and the attitudes and interests of democracy, will continue to be improvised wherever technology and democracy make themselves felt... They will of course be modified in each region by physical and social actualities and by the local cultural heritage which becomes part of the fabric of what we build. But they will share the quality of immediate responsiveness to the driving energies of the new epoch...(4)

- (1) Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. Methuen, 1982
- (2) Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford University Press, 1988.
- (3) (4) John Kouwenhoven, *The Beer Can By the Highway*. Doubleday, 1961.

**EDWIN TORRES Flux(with)U.s.:
I HEAR THINGS PEOPLE
HAVEN'T REALLY SAID**

Edwin Torres
(120 E. 4th St., New York, NY 10003), 1991.

Any true poet must be bilingual. Edwin Torres rests comfortably in the chair of two languages: sight and sound. In *I Hear Things People Haven't Really Said* Torres detonates an amalgamation of sounds and words or the sounds of words or the sight of words, no, the sight of sounds:

I abuse the Cocoa-Liszt P-r-r-onunciation of
all batida-shakes.
Citrus-Zappa, zamma twinkling, rare-Beeheart.
Fortissimo-calendro-vibrato-Bel Canto-amigo.
Pianissimo-lunato-solano-and this little piggy-
ANDVRRROOOMMM!!
VAYA PASSIONISTICA!!!
MERINGUE!!!

("UGILANTE")

It is obvious that Edwin Torres is the bastard love-child of Mayakovsky and Parra, midwived by Apollinaire. In this linguistic jambalaya, alternately referred to as a chapbook, Torres transfers the hybrid existence of his Nuyoric background to the diaspora of the left and right sides of the brain. Here are poems that reach out from the page and massage your cerebellum.

How Big Are Your Questions?
If I were you, would I listen to you? Where is
your ear?
I say, it is here! (touch tongue) I.E. it is here!
(touch soul)
There are ears on the surface of your tongue.

("Swallow These Words")

Torres, the winner of the first Nuyoric Poets Cafe Prize for Fresh Poetry, has yet to trip on his tongue. It's too busy in your ear, anyway. Torres is on the road to autonomous poetic bliss and he's taking hostages, I mean listeners, with him.

The times that these are suggest that the gap between the personal and the political is non-existent. A love poem by Torres exists in this gap which is as thin as the space between ink and page. The poet exhibits a masochistic sense of joy in such poems as "INDIAN HAND POEM" and "methodique-A-rotique-Ahhhhhh." The poet utilizes an exhibitionist sexual drive, turned up to overdrive, in "LOVE BOP" and "ATHENADE BOOSTER." Throughout there is a sense of apology which inevitably is presented as the poet pushing tongue through cheek:

You know, I try to do my liberal beste,
but sometimes, something, comes out in jest...I,
realize the only person I should have this,
running commentary with, is me.

("LIBERAL BESTE")

Edwin Torres sells you poetry that is fresher than anything you can find at your local greengrocer or bookstore. All without artificial preservatives or preserverant poetic artifices. *I Hear Things People Haven't Really Said* is poetics for every orifice or aurifice.

-Christian Hays

EVE

Your pets may be plotting against you,
Eve
Isn't it horrible, Eve?
Step not on pets is a palindrome, Eve
Isn't it?
Your pets may be plotting against you,
maybe, Eve

-Mike Topp

**THE SIMPLICITY OF
THE UNEXPECTED
WITHOUT WARNING**

Patricia Donegan
Parallax Press (Berkeley, CA), 1990.
96 pages; \$8.00.

Living and studying in the far East for eight years, Pat Donegan has more than just a passing acquaintance with the classics of Chinese and Japanese literature. Her work reflects this knowledge as well as her passion for the deceptively simple verse forms of these ancient masters. It's as if she had taken Philip Whalen's stanza from "White River Ode" as her esthetic: "I do this on purposes: moon river dream garden wine/Consciously imitating the saints/Li Po, Po Chu-I, Tu Fu, Su-tung Po/Believing it and not believing at all."

THE PERFECT DIALOGUE

March 1987, Guilin/Yangshuo, China

The new moon sets over midnight sky's//late winter night in Chicago//I hunch over the white paper, gaze into space/the hum of the electric typewriter like/the locusts in the flooded rice fields of Yangshuo//last spring, where a bare-foot old man//in baggy blue pants crouched next to his water buffalo//pausing between centuries//and we, too, got off our bicycles & stood together//for a moment on the dusty road//breathing with them in & out.

Donegan was also a student of Trungpa Rinpoche for many years at the Naropa Institute in Boulder. There she practiced and taught meditation. This book is dedicated to her master in spiritual matters who, according to Allen Ginsberg, instilled in his student the esthetic of "first thought, best thought." The spontaneity and verve of her poems is a testament to a lesson well learned. However, before anyone gets the idea that Donegan is merely a copiest of exotic literature, it should be noted that she has applied the lessons of the far East to a solid grounding in Western poetic arts, especially those developments of the last hundred years that have made poetry in American English a unique literature admired and much imitated. She easily blends satori-like clarity of insight with a frank colloquial manner of speech that make her poems, as Creeley describes them, "most personal yet open, sensual yet thoughtful."

SO THIS IS LOVE

Snow//all afternoon//deep, silent

the creek water//barely audible//outside the window

I slammed//the refrigerator door//with everything I've got:

"I don't want you sleeping//with anyone else, //I screamed,

you hugged me//& picked up the broken mayonnaise jar//from the floor

Donegan studied under haiku master Seishi Yamaguchi when she lived in Japan and has also taught haiku at the School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute. This Japanese verse form is a tricky one for Westerners to master. Although everyone's aunt writes haiku, it takes perseverance and a peculiar, educated sensibility to bring it off. Perhaps haiku's popularity among the ice tea garden party literary set has condemned it in the eyes of those who consider themselves serious poets. However, Donegan brings directness, integrity and respect to an often maligned verse form, one particularly suited for the snappy syntax and zesty idioms of American speech. Keeping with tradition, she arranges the selection in "Haiku Studio" by season:

Plum rain//the young prostitute//washes her underwear.

Summer twilight//a woman's song//mingles with the bathwater

I lay down//all my heavy packages//autumn moon.

Winter afternoon //not one branch moves//I listen to my bones.

Another selection of three line poems are entitled "Hot Haiku." These are essentially a haiku related form known as *senryu* which places the emphasis on humor, humans, and sexuality. The delicacy of Donegan's haiku is replaced by a steamy *enrai* that is reminiscent of Marichiko's tankas.

Covers rumped in morning light about to read you a love poem the book falls.

Donegan's work is not limited to the command of ancient Chinese and Japanese verse forms. Two suites of poems, "Prairie" and "Telephone," afford the reader a panorama of vision and of voice. "Prairie" skins about a field of dreams and memories going from sunlight to shadow and back with cinematic swiftness. The evocative place names and lyricism of the landscape echo the stormy joy of Kerouac's *The Railroad Earth*.

I stomped down high yellow weeds//made a nest to be alone//with the grasshoppers, birch trees//& open sky

prairie light branded on my eyes

The always playful, sometimes erotic "Telephone" takes to task that familiarly vile, ubiquitous but somehow indispensable instrument. Ma Bell is the Great Tooth Mother, and the telephone has become a part of the ordinary.


Hearing the voice, unrequited, tantalizing//Sirens rubbing thighs, fingers taut//red fingernails digging into flesh//We need to know a voice is a dial away

Pat Donegan's command of traditional form as well as her propensity for, as Ginsberg calls it, "happy improvisation" inspires the poems in *Without Warning*. These are poems of clarity, precision, and luxurious emotions refined by long years of meditative practice. They are poems of love and spiritual awakening whose epiphany comes about like most of life's big events, without warning.


-Pat Nolan

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