

POETRY PROJECT

NEWSLETTER



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**News and Announcements**

3

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Letters

4

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Poem

6

"Ode to Planetarium"
by Marcella Durand

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Feature

7

"Doubt" by Fanny Howe

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Interview

10

Heather Ramsdell

Feature

14

Susan Noel on Joanne Kyger

Calendar

16

Reviews

20

Lorenzo Thomas, Bill Berkson,
Jarnot/Luoma/Smith, Anne Waldman,
Elena Rivera, Ronald Johnson, &
Chris Tysh.

Questionnaire

25

Our interactive feature.

Books Received

30

A mere sampling.

News and Announcements

Thanks to everyone who contributed responses to the questionnaire (especially the rhymesters). Here is a sampling of the results:

What is your idea of happiness?

Ronald Palmer: My idea of happiness is sky diving naked on acid. I know that's stupid, but I can't think of real happiness except maybe kissing a beautiful man in a hot tub while receiving a massage, but that's stupid too... So I think reading Woolf: warm in bed: without noise: will have to do.

Lila Zemborain: Idleness.

Ed Smith: If I could read as fast as Harold Bloom or retain 99% of what I read would be great, really.

Edwin Torres: A perfect fall day in new york like today so i can / fall in a perfect new york like today.

What is your pet aversion?

Dale Smith: Working the room.

Lila Zemborain: Cats.

Jack Collom: Whiny Cats.

Edwin Torres: His name is Harry and I feed him a version of food.

What is your favorite motto?

Dale Smith: Think in the morning. Act in the noon. Eat in the evening. Sleep in the night. AND The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.

Lila Zemborain: *No por mucho madrugar se amanece más temprano.*

Jim Behrle: With Six get Eggroll.

Edwin Torres: Look not to the new day, old no longer

or

"I am a dancer, the universe is my gown"—Kazuo Ohno.

If not yourself, who would you be?

Mei Tremblay: I would be a waitress in Idaho or Dubuque or Albuquerque.

Dale Smith: Geronimo or Christopher Marlowe.

Ed Smith: Jack Kerouac or William Carlos Williams.

Ronald Palmer: I would be Michelangelo even though he's long dead, it would be great just to have been inside that head.

Edwin Torres: The person who wonders if not who.

What is your favorite virtue?

Mei Tremblay: The virtue of questioning.

Dale Smith: A quick eye.

Ronald Palmer: Patience.

Jim Behrle: Patience.

Edwin Torres: Silence & truth.

Your favorite heroes/heroines in fiction?

Mei Tremblay: Bone in Bone—Thorn in Bone (graphic novel), Kabuki in Kabuki (comic book).

Edwin Torres: Vladimir Khlebnikov's Zangezi (who heard birds speak beyonsense and rode horses at the dusk of humanity) & Linda Carter as Wonder Woman.

Jack Collom: The Boston Slasher/Bette Davis.

Your favorite food & drink?

Lila Zemborain: Bread and butter, glass of cabernet sauvignon.

Ed Smith: The hot dogs at Trenton Thunder or Baltimore baseball games are fine or Seattle's sockeye salmon if I am on the West Coast.

Nothing beats Portsmouth Brewery (New Hampshire) dark brown ale on tap delicious!

Edwin Torres: Pierogi & wartbombs.

Jim Behrle: Gyros, Pabst Blue Ribbon.

Jack Collom: Beer.

For what fault have you the most tolerance?

Dale Smith: Paranoia.

Ronald Palmer: My first reaction is fear: but is this a fault? I also have an exceptionally high tolerance for rage.

Lila Zemborain: Laziness.

Jack Collom: San Andreas.

Announcements & Calls for Manuscripts:

The Associated Writing Program (AWP) Award Series is soliciting entries for its poetry competition. Winners will receive book publication and \$2000 in cash. Manuscripts can only be submitted between January 1st and February 28th. For contest guidelines, send a business-size SASE to

AWP Award Series, Associated Writing Programs, Tallwood House, Mail Stop IE3, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030.

The Bronx Writers' Center is seeking first chapters from unpublished novels and works-in-progress. The winner will receive \$500.00 and be invited to give a reading. Submissions must be received on or before December 1st. Call The Bronx Writers' Center at (718) 409-1265 for submission guidelines.

Final Wishes is seeking short stories and poems in English, French and Spanish for an anthology dealing with medical treatment at the end-of-life. The submission deadline is December 15. For more information, or to submit work, visit their web-site at www.finalwishes.homestead.com.

A publication party for the newly reprinted *The Hasty Papers* is scheduled for Nov. 12 at the Walter Reade Theater, 6-8 pm. Host Publications has reprinted *The Hasty Papers*, the seminal "one shot review" produced by Alfred Leslie 40 years ago with work by Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery, Alan Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, Terry Southern, Jack Kerouac, and many others. Contact jbratcheriii@earthlink.net for more information.

The new *Exquisite Corpse*, Numero 7, is up and running at www.corpse.org. "See Tom Robbins smoke a cigar, Ed Sanders pare down American history with his shiv, watch Ferlinghetti fight for reality atop his Rosinante..."

Contributions to News and Announcements may be addressed or emailed to Newsletter Editor at the Poetry Project. Responses to the questionnaire are most welcome! See this month's questionnaire and respond by December 15.

Letter



Dear Ange,

The one small matter of record that I would call to your attention has to do with the curious statement about there being “no overlap between the participants at the poetry conference and the academic conference about poetry at the University of Maine....”

I can gather from your phrasing that you are hoping for a neat separation between the immediacies of Boston and the academic “aboutness” of the 60s conference, but it takes some fudging to get to that claim: beyond the fact that Lee Ann, the Waldrops, Linda Russo, Bill Howe, Douglas and others all performed at both events, a look at the composition of our program would show that as many, if not more, poetry readings took place here in those five days as Aaron squeezed into his weekend. Some of my favorite sets were by Mark McMorris, Wieners, and Keith, but there were literally hundreds of readings—short and long, bad and good—to choose among.

As I say, it is a small thing, the result perhaps of your reliance on second-hand knowledge about the 60s conference, but I thought I'd mention it by way of trying to keep things as complicated (and therefore, at least sometimes, as interesting) as they really are.

All best,
Steve Evans

FROM ELIZABETH TREADWELL (SAN FRANCISCO):

San Francisco and the Bay Area continue to produce and accumulate loads of terrific writers and literary projects, amid the dotcom boom which leaves many of us floored, some employed, and tosses, or half-thinkingly tries to toss, nonprofit cultural groups by the wayside. Luckily for Small Press Traffic, we've got housing at the new California College of Arts and Crafts campus (nicknamed Battlestar Galactica by some for its airy, imposing, reposing architecture), and I can see glimpses of Potrero Hill from the office. We've recently hosted 2 great combos, Carol Mirakove and Rae Armantrout, and David Baratier and Chris Kraus, in our grand 21st century lecture hall. But that's not all that's happening, to say the least: Blue Books, Brandon Downing and Michael Price's fabu-

lous bookstore at New College on Valencia in the rapidly-upscaling yet still heartwarmingly familiar Mission District, not only houses and sells a fantabulous selection of small press books, magazines, and ye olde ephemera, but also puts on bunches of readings, including recently, local poet Sarah Anne Cox with the visiting Alan Gilbert, as well as art and book art shows. The energy is quite amazing. We've also got our needs filled with the luxury and thrill of chapbooks beautifully produced by Renee Gladman at Leroy Press, Jerrold Shiroma at duration press (he also hosts about a million small press and mag websites at durationpress.com), and Jill Stengel at a+bend press. Jill also hosts a reading series at Blue Bar, and as I've said elsewhere, it's a swell joint to read and listen in, though the beers are a touch pricey. Stengel's tenure at Blue Bar/a+bend is coming to an end as she moves on, after producing 40 chapbooks in 20 months, to other projects, but we're promised the reading series will continue. If you're in San Francisco around 2 pm on a second Sunday, this venue is highly recommended, on Kearney Street in North Beach (public transportation or your feet also highly recommended). Stop by good old City Lights bookstore, just a block or so away. Watch the jazz-bar screens of weird tie-dyed digitality if you're one who can't listen well whilst actually watching the author. November's readers there will be Martha Ronk, up from LA, and Patricia Dienstfrey, over from Berkeley; with her (collaborative) press, Kelsey St., still trucking along. Also in Berkeley, Lyn Hejinian's Atelos Press, and in Oakland, Leslie Scalapino's O Books, and in Sausalito, Simone Fattal's Post-Apollo Press, are just some of the beloved perfectbound venues, with Jocelyn Saidenberg's Krupskaya in San Francisco in its 3rd year of publishing lovingly-designed books. Among the local projects I'm looking forward to are the launch this spring of giovanni singleton's new magazine, *Nocturnes*, and the second issue of Lauren Schiffman's magazine, *Crack*. If you're in San Francisco on a Thursday night, check out the readings at Blue Books; Thursday afternoon, at the Poetry Center at SFSU; Saturday night, at New Langton Arts; many a Friday night, at Small Press Traffic. At work at Small Press Traffic, I'm getting our newsletter going more frequently, so's to be a further organ of discussion cross regionalities. Check out our website to see a recent issue, or better yet, subscribe (Double Lucy Books & Outlet Magazine), <http://users.lanminds.com/dblucy>.

WHAT YOU'RE READING

BILL BERKSON:

"The talk was artful, with formal principles at work. The urbane, politically aware conversation was notable not for its discursive unity but for its juxtapositions: it was pastiche of speech, a bricolage, a collage. Lack of cohesion was the fundamental principle, random items and topics from the vast range of American life assembled with tonic excitement. It was an aesthetic exercise in daily life, a quotidian American corollary to a European high-modernist aesthetics of language: think of Joyce's fascination with how words bobbed about in a modern city, unloosed from fixed referents. Broadly speaking, the linguistic play of *Ulysses* and the urbane stream of consciousness of Greenwich Village talk were fostered by similar urban forces: a booming print culture, the spread of advertising, and the compression of polylingual populations, all touching off an explosion of language."

This is plucked from Christine Stansell's new book *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century*, sent me by a friend in Winnetka, Ill., Bill Haddad. It follows Stansell's earlier *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*—a book David Meltzer tells me he has kept handy for his New College classes. Stansell is good news, an exacting historian, an elegant writer with a keen, sympathetic world view. Amazing to consider the intellectual and personal histories of the first two decades of the 20th Century—featuring the wondrous likes of Emma Goldman and Randolph Bourne, and incidentally Mina Loy, William Carlos Williams and Man Ray—against the modernity, and "modernisms," normally accredited in academic literature, and also in the light of some of our own histories from the 1960s on.

KRISTIN PREVALLET:

One of the best poetry investments I've made this past year was to subscribe to Renee Gladman's Leroy chapbook series (17A Chattanooga Street, San Francisco, CA 94114). You get four unbelievably substantial books, bound by electric wire, for only \$18. *the epics* by Summi Kaipa was one of my favorites. I love all of Kaipa's selves that are projected into the *Mahabharata*, the 88,000 line sacred epic of India. *the epics* is a wonderful convergence of old texts and new contexts: an ancient king in love with a river goddess becomes our sex-starved president, an old oathmaker debates whether he wants to be a TV star. But these layers of past upon present are complicated by Kaipa's own presence in the poetically challenged narrative. Her own identity as a rock star, a poet, and a girl looking for love is comprised of the many mythological selves that have been passed down to her from Indian tradition.

Kaipa's smart, witty, and playful prose fast-cuts between references, so the fragmented process of soul-searching is matched by the writing. This book is also remarkable in its assertion of a woman's story into what is characteristically a male defined epic tradition. Taking the sacred stories of Hindu gods and re-writing them into her own text is nothing short of punk-rock, a blasphemous and declarative move that sets the terms for Kaipa's own process of becoming an artist and poet in the world.

DIANE DI PRIMA:

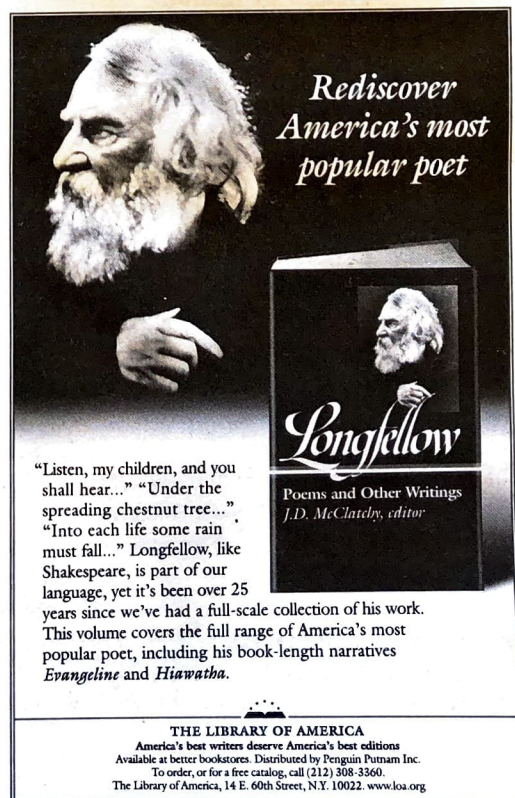
American Rambler by Dale Smith (Thorpe Springs Press, 1400 Cullen Ave, Austin TX 78757). Book-length poem based on the peregrinations of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca from 1527-36.

Spare, understated work, vastness with a fine eye / ear for detail. Heraclitan, in a way: Dale Smith points out in no uncertain terms how the "way down" and the "way back" are the only ones still open. And them barely.

Time line of European history runs across the bottom of the pages like some new-fangled "Heads of the Town".

Fine & unnerving drawings by Philip Trussell. Includes a "tribute" essay to Paul Metcalf, a map of inclusions and connections. And a list of sources for the hungry-minded.

Dig it.



*Rediscover
America's most
popular poet*

Longfellow
Poems and Other Writings
J.D. McClatchy, editor

"Listen, my children, and you shall hear..." "Under the spreading chestnut tree..." "Into each life some rain must fall..." Longfellow, like Shakespeare, is part of our language, yet it's been over 25 years since we've had a full-scale collection of his work. This volume covers the full range of America's most popular poet, including his book-length narratives *Evangeline* and *Hiawatha*.

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The Library of America, 14 E. 60th Street, N.Y. 10022. www.loa.org

Ode to Planetarium

Because I could not be there
your sphere hanging in green light
steel supports & tubes, hands cradled
interior, gears coppered & cushion.
Because your truth is heated full
and charges out of the tunnel
under the mountain called think
and on this long journey thru the alps
we remembered the dishes and the
extraneous minerals. When I arrive
with hands dipped in iron & gems
and the station moves down
the tracks to greet me. When the
greeting has to do with pistons &
rivets. When bolts are held by nuts,
and nuts fly back in the wind of valleys
& polar caps. You are a nut and look
at me thru the glasses of fission
& combination. Because I would
be there if the guitarists and the
orchestra played the tunes from
the crinkling of our pillows. If
you handed me a glass of champagne
and saw thru the bubbles a whole
new way of building traintracks
thru the ruffled sides of geological
monuments. Would I be there if
the house swayed slightly on
stairways suspended over space?
Would these matchstick supports
guide a full band, tuxedos and
all, into the constellations of
snowfalls & a train stuck
between tunnel & border?
In the iron thought of age,
guide my hands onto an
arrival platform, a constructed
dance as intricate as a
steam engine plowing thru
the wake of thoughts.

Marcella Durand



Photo by Erica Soehngen

*Marcella Durand has a book, Western
Capital Rhapsodies, forthcoming from
Faux Press in 2001.*

Doubt

(some sections from an essay)

by Fanny Howe

Editor's Note: Last summer, the on-line magazine *How2* featured correspondence from Fanny Howe in which she asked some provocative questions about the writing that women are now doing: "The issue that at present really presses on me is that of the proliferation of perfect poems coming out of everywhere. It is as if a certain level of education, mixed with a certain amount of time to think, produces a certain kind of construction in language...What I am getting at is the feeling that it is time for life itself to matter again. That is, the life of the poet.... I...wonder what happened to the stench of reality that used to cling to certain works/words. Gone! So it is partially an aesthetic response I am talking about, but also one about the actual human, lived life of the poet. We used to know something of that, and care about its content." I wanted to hear more.

Some kinds of writing, having issued from a lived event that shattered all trust in a safe future, are too personal, too particular in content to be influential on others in the same field.

This kind of writing is not a test or an experiment, but the result of an experience that the person endured.

Usually in this work there is an obsessive chronicling of details or a repetition of themes. Over and over again, the same subject is approached from a variety of angles.

Words are repeated, discarded, repeated, discarded, revisited, replaced, erased, replaced, polished, all in the pursuit of a focus that will lower the level of dread.

Because such an activity is both superstitious and bold, it has given rise to the myth of the poet and writer as victim,

lonely voice, fool and prophet. This myth has some foundation.

But it certainly does not guarantee social legitimacy for anyone, or ensure that the writing will ever be included in the canon of its time.

Or if it is included, it will still remain inviolate, leaving little trace of its aura on the books around it.

...

Because writing like this is more of an outcome than an object, it is rarely part of a movement, and is often avoided as a subject of critical discussion. I know people who talk about their writing as "an experiment" in certain genres constructed from other texts and ethnographies, marginalia and philosophies.

Their work is an experiment because by being at a third

remove from the source of the materials, it offers a technique that can be replicated.

This way the piece of text can be influential within its field.

Writing that can't be replicated is not an experiment but a result. In this way it resembles a conversion narrative more than a work of literature. But it is literature anyway, and what has generated the conversion is not a conviction, but a loss of confidence.

...
This experience of catastrophic uncertainty occurs first of all in childhood, to all children, but a recurrence can be postponed until a person finds out that they are dying. (This final hour is, according to some happy philosophies, the time when one achieves enlightenment.) It certainly hits with the force of that horrible moment when you first have to do something you don't want to do at all.

I think that even in certain less extreme literatures it is a drive for conversion—for wholeheartedness, salvation, enlightenment, whatever you want to call self-annihilation—that generates the writing. The demand on the materials is supernatural.

Proust is the most famous example of this.

Because the same words have to work for the most banal request as for the most spectacular, this disturbing and inimitable "result" is a conductor for something that is stranger than either ingenuity or education can provide.

"I yam that I yam," says the narrator when he undergoes a spectacular liberation from convention, in *The Invisible Man*, and he allows himself to eat a hot yam on the streets of Harlem. The little twist of linguistic humor is not written to be "revolutionary" because the revolution has already occurred in the life of the narrator of this inimitable novel. He knows now he is nowhere and that there is no reliable point of reference.

...
Whoever some of these particular poets and writers are, I won't name them because what I have said here is just an idea. But you could even place some of the famous ones (Joyce and Beckett) on the list.

They left home and got lost like the others. Being uprooted starts as a fact of life and ends as a condition.

...
Some people want to protect the Divine from the horror of the human because of their own fear of the human.

These people want to protect God from people's attempts to sanctify and train it.

In the Vedic Brahmanic tradition, sacrifice is a way of acting in relation to Reality that is both respectful and anxious

Food is eaten in a spirit of faith as a sacrifice, because it drops into the furnace of the body; a child in the womb is the last stage of a cosmic sacrifice; and speech is continually sacrificed to breath, because the spoken word is tossed out into

silence.

Sacrifice is part of even the most modern motive because it is fired by the breath of death.

There are artists who implicitly experience the repetition of gesture, of theme, of image as rites of sacrifice.

There are even still people who sacrifice themselves for others, whose lives are offered up to others, and strangely, while they are mocked for doing so, they are also deeply admired after their sacrifice is complete and they die.

...
Jules Girardi asked: "If God is habitually silent in history, is it surprising that man does not listen to him?"

...
All of this is silent:

A bug on a leaf that is floating to the ground sees everything around it moving, while it stays still, pressed into the green.

But a child on the ground watching the bug sees that the bug is falling with the leaf, and the child feels safe and still.

Only some witness very far up in the sky would see that both the bug on the leaf and the child on the ground are moving with the movement of the earth to which they are bound by invisible gravity.

This distant witness might be the final one (as we know it) for all movement and judgment, this witness might be called consciousness.

...
Consciousness has layers, and is finally still. But long before it gets there, it establishes plot as the relation of place, nature and time to a human being. Plot is a system that sees a pattern and interaction between those three, as if distantly.

Plot in narrative is the equivalent of form in poetry, which came first.

The story-line determines every word that emerges.

...
The appropriation of other people's experience or their writing about it, in order to write something that has the memory of both living and dying attached to it, is taking plot and form to a third remove.

Only forty years ago, appropriation was an issue in politics, literature, art and music—never the appropriation of works written by powerful people into the works of the dispossessed, but always the reverse.

Appropriation was the kind of assimilation that belonged to people with power.

It was a theft. "My life is your material," was what the appropriated cried.

Appropriation was a way to mimic and exploit the conditions of fear and suffering without ever having to live them.

"So what does living it matter if I can read about it?" people might wonder.

They mean that if they can imagine the way something felt, by reading a version of the event, then they have actually had the experience of that event, while remaining safe,

They can pass judgment on the wicked and the weak through aestheticized materials.

This might be what "experimental" as opposed to "experiential" must mean.

Prisons have cells that are organized according to maximum or medium security.

Maximum is better for loners, readers, unrepentant and questing individuals.

The appropriation of that experience by someone who never lived it, and yet who articulated all the discomforts associated with it in a convincing voice would not be unusual.

Artists and writers do it all the time, and so now do journalists, historians and biographers.

The person living in max, daily and for life, may be further isolated by the activity of these well-intentioned writers.

Their texts could fill up an graveyard. Granite and script, erected in memory of a life, a lived. . . .

Written work can be opposed to the incarnational, not as difficult as a visit to the living.

Not as good.

But unavoidable.

The imagination is a vocation. You don't choose to have an imagination out of desire. You have to live out the consequences of its domination over your time. Much like the monastic calling, the imagination forms a cell around your person and you dwell in it.

...

By now the concept of justice is so secularized, beginning with inherited genes, primary school, aptitude tests, looks, popularity, economic class, ethnic category, that its conclusion in capital punishment is only too predictable.

And a simultaneous aesthetic of No Experience Necessary can actually increase the distance between those living hellish times and those enjoying writing about them.

Such clear and cold consciousness can become a stand-in for failure on earth.

What is "the divine"? What is the meaning or use of calling one thing "sacred" and another "holy" when there are prisons, hospitals, and massacres?

The casual use of religious language can be a form of appropriation that functions as a stand-in for action.

As Goethe wrote, "Gray, dear friend, is all theory
And green the golden tree of life."

Fanny Howe has written several novels (Saving History, Nod, The Deep North) and collections of poems, most recently Selected Poems (University of California Press). She lives in California.

WINTER 2000 / SPRING 2001

☉ JOHN ASHBERY: 100 MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

On the 30th anniversary of its original publication in an obscure literary journal, *Adventures in Poetry* is proud to re-present John Ashbery's legendary whatsis. What more can we say? It's vintage Ashbery. Read it.

November 2000 / ISBN 0 9706250 0 6 / 6.75 x 6.75" / 32 pp. / \$12.50

☉ CHARLES NORTH: THE NEARNESS OF THE WAY YOU LOOK TONIGHT

Recent poems by a poet of whom James Schuyler wrote: "His joy in words, and the things words adumbrate, is infectious: we catch a contagion of enlightenment. To me, he is the most stimulating poet of his generation."

November 2000 / ISBN 0 9706250 1 4 / 5.5 x 8.5" / 52 pp. / \$12.50

☉ CLARK COOLIDGE: FAR OUT WEST

"39 poems of humour and duress, written while attending to remnants of my childhood on satellite waves, realizing an inherent wackiness in these accounts of men descending from horses before buttes or saloons, speaking lines like "This town got a sawbones?" They had me so dreaming that I took aim and wrote."

March 2000 / ISBN 0 9706250 4 9 / 6 x 9" / 52 pp. / \$12.50

☉ JACQUELINE WATERS: A MINUTE WITHOUT DANGER

Agitation, determination, fierce confusion, and a pitch-perfect sense of humor all interact chemically in Jacqueline Waters' first book of poems. We sense the "scientist" behind these experiments, which are conducted with unflinching curiosity: "Nature is great: it forgot it was chaos."

April 2000 / ISBN 0 9706250 3 0 / 5.25 x 7.5" / 52 pp. / \$10.00

☉ DAVID PERRY: RANGE FINDER

"I have nowhere to go / that isn't automatically written language." Is there such a thing as surrealist meditation? Non-narrative autobiography? In David Perry's elusive yet eminently chaseable poems, "hallucinations prowl the baseboards and molding, never to see in themselves any sense except subliminally." Under shifting, disjunctive surfaces, Perry examines self, history and language, reminding us of the insupportability of each.

April 2000 / ISBN 0 9706250 2 2 / 5.25 x 7.5" / 52 pp. / \$10.00



ADVENTURES IN POETRY

began publishing in 1968 as a "little magazine," with pamphlets featuring work by John Ashbery, Ted Berrigan, Frank O'Hara, Bernadette Mayer, Jack Spicer, and numerous others. After a hiatus, we begin again as a series of books by established and new innovative writers.

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Heather Ramsdell

By Marcella Durand

Heather Ramsdell is the author of *Lost Wax*, which was chosen by James Tate for the National Poetry Series in 1998. She is presently working on a new manuscript, titled *Vague Swimmers*. This interview was conducted Friday, September 29th, 2000 at Marcella Durand's apartment in Manhattan.

MD: I had this great idea of starting with the title of your book, *Lost Wax*. It's one of my all-time favorite titles for a book. There are so many facets to it, especially with process—the wax melting away into form. When I learned about your art background, it added a whole new dimension to it.

HR: The title just was one of those things you come upon and suddenly it makes sense in all of these ways. I don't know if you know what the "lost wax" process is...

MD: Yeah, it's the process of making bronze sculpture. I saw it in a documentary about Rodin. This university was trying to cast [Rodin's] Gates of Hell—did you see this?

HR: Uh-uh.

MD: It was unbelievable. It's this huge sculpture that was never cast, so sometime in the 1980s they decided to do it and they built this huge sand cast. It was a complete failure—everyone was crying, these students and the professor.

HR: That's an awful story!

MD: I know.

HR: And no trace of it exists?

MD: Except this video.

HR: They all impaled themselves on the spikes—whatever spikes were there.

MD: Well, it looked like the Gates of Hell—all this glowing bronze bubbling up out of the cracks in the sand. So yeah, I do know the process. It's not exactly just about process, but about something that is ephemeral giving something else form.

HR: I love that the original thing has to get destroyed. That there's no trace of the thing that was touched by hands. It turns it into this completely shapeless blob. Then there's this permanent replica that replaces it.

MD: So does this mean your mind and soul were destroyed by the process of writing this book?

HR: Yes, the original Heather is dead. No, but honestly it does have to do with my process. A lot of what I do is wreck what was originally there. My intention isn't to wreck it, but I edit my stuff really heavily. The process of composing for me is mostly editing. Whatever material I start out with, I don't consider really anything. It's raw material—mostly from journals. It's modified overheard conversations or faked tones from different places like advertising or instructional text or journalism. It never just comes out. I work mostly in the computer so that things are cut up and sliced and resliced and resliced—partially because I have a real aversion to pronouns and things that help a lot of writers, or sentimental things or tricks that I can't tolerate. So often I remove everything that was lifelike about the piece and then it's just all ruined. And everything that went into it is all ruined because I just can't see it anymore.

MD: So what's going to happen with *Vague Swimmers*?

HR: I imagine the same thing will happen in a more macro way. I don't know what your process is like, but it is really painful to keep ending up with—to have the

Looking at painting is not such a different mental experience than reading a poem.

process be primarily destructive. To be like breaking a bone or something, and you crush it and mangle it until it's inscrutable in a certain way. One of the reasons I set that project as a whole book was to try and retain some larger, more identifiable chunks of original material, and to try to leave more of the language on a scale that you'd encounter in real life. To leave more of that intact. I guess to alleviate some of that "OK I started out with 40 pages and now I've wrecked it all and I have no idea what I'm doing."

It's in a stage where the form is half thought out—I just started working on it more intensely. I hadn't been working on the project for about a year. I had just been working on journals, whatever. Because I started it so long ago, I can see it in a way that's like somebody else wrote it. I can see there are huge problems, huge areas of missingness in the form and plan

for the book. It's kind of like starting over. Starting with this big hunk of material that has been edited on a line level to a degree that I'm not unhappy with. A very big piece of it is intact. I don't know what's going to happen. I'm excited about it. I'm not bound to destroy the whole thing. I'm more bound to break it apart and figure it out what's there.

MD: See what's inside.

HR: Yeah, slip things inside of it. I had originally conceived of it as this five-section piece exploring certain subjects using types of language across these subjects. Hell was one of them, repetition was one of them, crowds was one of them. It has nothing to do with what's actually there. I'm sure it's not going to be there when it's done.

MD: I found the crowds. I found it really interesting because a lot of poetry is about the "everyday," exalting the everyday, and your poetry flips that on its head in what I think is a Beckett sort of way, the everyday as this grotesque experience. This process of bumping into people, and overhearing garbled words. It definitely has to do more with people, a cast of characters. I may be completely off the mark here, but *Vague Swimmers* seemed theatrical. It almost seemed like a stage set with characters and voices...

HR: Yeah, it is. Not that I want it to be a piece of theater, but how you might use medical lingo. It's a style of something that's interesting to me as a style. But like Carla Harryman's fake plays—even though she also produces some of them—a lot of the writing takes place in a play format that could never be produced in any way. I like Beckett's plays in writing a lot more than the actual productions.

MD: I'm interested in your art background.

HR: I went to Cooper [Union]. I started as a kid always thinking that I was going to be a visual artist, that I loved drawing. I actually didn't read very much at all. It's just my secret shame that I'll carry throughout my life.

MD: And it will be exposed here for 4,000 people. [Laughs]

HR: Excellent. But when I went into Cooper, I started

out as a painter and I ended up as a sculptor. My work got more and more conceptual as I went through my education, primarily because the teachers I was interested in studying with were conceptual. Studying with Hans Haacke affected me and the people most interesting to me were working in some sort of conceptual mode where the art involved the viewer. I loved the place of the viewer, and the question of the place of the art being part of it. It was something more interesting to me than whatever emotive thing that the art produced. I guess I always wrote. In high school it was part of my identity, but a miniature part. I was really a painter but I secretly wrote poems. And then when I graduated...because it was such an intense critical environment...I mean, the training there is about justifying your work and analyzing other people's work, and it was incredibly hard to continue making work. The pleasure of making the thing was really avoided, and the pleasure of looking at the thing, it wasn't respected.

Anyway I continued to write. I'm definitely a poet, but I still don't feel like I belong there altogether. I think my visual background affects the way I go about making poems. Making a painting is not all that different from writing a poem. I just don't think that the forms are as isolated as our culture seems to make them. Looking at painting is not such a different mental experience than reading a poem.

MD: I think there's a way of thinking about poems that's neglected, in terms of critical discourse and interpreting poems. There is this whole way of looking at and writing poems that I think has to do with art in a major way—composition, looking at textures, feeling the weights and balances and gravities that go beyond simple linear, emotional, political, critical interpretations.

HR: For me it's also that you can use all of this other tackle. There's a whole history of all other kinds of critical language and historical frameworks for thinking about various forms of art, and it's limiting to think "this is literature, this is the history of literature, and this is where this thing sits in the history of literature." Let's just say the Wooster Group probably

affected me a lot more than any single poet affected me, and reading Wittgenstein affected me much more. I've certainly been affected by poetry and my work exists in that place and it comes out of that place. I was taught by poets and I hang out with poets. It's not that I reject that, but there are all kinds of other factors that make the state of the art what it is. Poetry is a pretty isolated part of the culture, and I think that's too bad.

MD: Although sometimes I've had much better reactions to my work from painters than poets. In fact, quite often. I mean, they don't have this kind of pressure or responsibility that I think poets do. Painters can just come to it as this art form that's riding alongside their art form. They have a much more abstract response to it.

HR: Yeah, that makes sense. There's so much more pressure if it's in your media.

MD: So when did you actually make the move? When

HR: Going to art school in the '80s, there were a bunch of people making tons of money.

MD: Yeah, when stockbrokers were leaving Wall Street to be artists...

did you move from the apartment of art to the apartment of poetry?

HR: Pretty soon after I graduated from Cooper. And then I was working for Roy Lichtenstein, whose friend was Frederic Tuten, who was the director of City College. I would go out to lunch with him and suddenly I found myself attending City College's Master's program in writing kind of by accident. I hadn't intended to become a master. Though I was writing, I was very intimidated because art school is well known for not stressing literature. And Cooper has a tiny humanities department. I didn't expect to end up in that program. But I did and suddenly it was very easy to identify myself as a poet because there was such a thing and there were others who were doing this. I met Ann [Lauterbach].

MD: You were in quite a class too, I mean, Joe Elliot.

Garrett Kalleberg...

HR: Steve Mounkhal, Dan Machlin, Lois Gallagher, Deirdre Kovac. Both Garrett and Deirdre went to Cooper. Who else? A bunch of people were there. It was a fantastic bunch of people. And Ann was an unbelievably good teacher for us. People were very dedicated and she was really dedicated and serious. She's not a "follow-me" guru type. But her conviction in thinking about or using poetry as a filter for all of experience is like a religion or like a life practice thing. I don't know if this is what she would say, but for me it was deeply affecting. It was a valid way to conduct your life. It just wasn't about commerce. You were accountable to these things that you were making. Going to art school in the '80s, there were a bunch of people making tons of money. And there was this weird moneyiness. Being the starving poet wasn't romantic. It was like, I could make a lot of money! And that's gross to even say. But that's part of what was possible. You could possibly make your living making artwork, and not do anything else.

MD: Yeah, when stockbrokers were leaving Wall Street to be artists...

HR: That was horrible. Having to show up to gallery events and having to look good, having to make connections to art people as an endeavor to make a living. In my mind, when I was making work, right after I graduated, I would be thinking, OK, this is a really interesting idea to me—but is it marketable? That question was underneath everything. What gallery will this fit in? To be in poetry, there's none of that; it has nothing to do with anything. Nobody looks at poetry except this tiny group of people.

MD: A Pure Love.

HR: The novel.

MD: If I remember, that whole conversation we had about order and chaos...

HR: Which one?

MD: Order, chaos and extrusion.

HR: Oh god, yes. It sounds so dirty!

MD: You were talking about Pattie [McCarthy]'s manuscript [*bk of (h)rs*]. It had been extruded, so the only thing that was left was—was it meaning?

HR: Weren't we talking about excess and hysteria? In [*bk of (h)rs*], the rules of the form are incredibly strict but everything else is game, every subject is presented on the same plane, which I loved. There's the Ashbery "example of leaving out" and then there's trying to put everything in which is just as hard for totally different reasons. If you include everything, or if all subjects are OK, there's all of this excess and the result is hysteria. I don't know what that means, whatever provisional meanings of hysteria there are, but there must be something.

MD: Do you feel the same process is going on in your work at all? *The Closer*? That's one of your more famous poems.

HR: Yeah, a lot more was allowed into that poem. That poem was like a catalogue of things. That whole series let in more things—Borges has this story where the main character finds this basement at the end which includes everything, it includes ants and the concept of ants, just everything in the universe. It's the location of all things. The perfect union of hell and heaven. If you include everything, then you have to include order but you also have to include chaos.

I mean, I don't know, it sounds really boring and formal, but I've always had a hard time actually leaving nouns and pronouns in poems because I'm terrified of the specific, because it's never about the thing. Talking about the thing is never what I'm trying to do. I feel if I put anything down, anything that's an actual referent, it just pins the entire meaning of the poem to this one set of referents in it. It distracts me from what is interesting to me, which is often a tone or an attitude or a gesture, or how a gesture fits into another gesture. Which is unfair because I love reading specific things in other people's poems. I don't have a theory that nouns are evil. But committing to one is very difficult for me. It could be a stone if that lets me say something else. It could be anything that's kind of like a stone, sounds like stone...

MD: Metonymy. The thing takes on the characteristics...it's not a comparison.

(Cont. on page 19)

Some Choice: Notes On Reading Joanne Kyger

by Susan Noel

I haven't been to Bolinas—the small coastal village about an hour north of San Francisco, where Joanne Kyger has lived since 1969—in over 20 years, but when I read her poems I return to my fragmented memories of being there. It was windy, open to the sun, and eucalyptus-scented. I remember having a “big revelation” involving a tide pool. Poets, painters, philosophers and lost causes lived there in a lackadaisical, tattered, elegant reality. More than a little of that is my nostalgic imagination, no doubt—something which reading Kyger trains me to see with a more informed focus. Bolinas is important to Kyger's work: as a specific place (this is a poetry of specifics) and also as an element in a practice (as opposed to a mere philosophy) of placement. A Joanne Kyger poem most often begins with looking around to see where you are—in the world and in your head (or vice versa). After having had the pleasure, as I did recently, of rereading almost all of Kyger's work, the shape and texture, and especially the purpose, of my memory and imagination seem less remote, more flexible, less earnest. Her consciousness is a good place to visit.

“The world is slippery to hold on to / When you begin to deny it” (*The Tapestry and The Web*, p.35) she writes in her first book, and indeed one of the long threads woven throughout her years of work is one about holding on and letting go. Exasperation, desire,

fatigue, elation, jealousy, whatever comes up, are not good or bad moods to be hoarded or gotten rid of (though that's there too, this is not idealism), but raw material—not necessarily to be “made into” something else, but to be really seen, “things as it is”¹, and then released. That may tend to make it sound too “pure,” too didactic. On the contrary—there's always a sense of come-what-may. Each element is briefly entertained, brought together with others, then sent on its way to continue whatever it was doing (the person writing the poem being only one of these elements). “Normal life” continues. Any passing event, whether it's a new idea, a family of quail, or the laundry, works as a vehicle for observing the mind in the phenomenal world. “The world of transformation / is real and not real but trusting.” (“September,” *All This Everyday*, p.61).

I remember spending a night in Joanne's house all those years ago. She had a cold and was feeling rotten, but she made me “at home” and went back to bed. I sat in her kitchen, drinking tea, taking in all the little things, pictures, stones, poems, scarves, souvenirs—I was fascinated by the evidence of that life. Later that night, too happy to sleep, I listened to a radio left on somewhere in the dark, softly broadcasting friendly static, which every now and then coalesced into distant opera. And all through the night I could hear Joanne

laughing in her sleep.

It was a taste of a life in which everything was included. The details of daily survival, in their "thingness," bothersome and funny, were elements of a necessary, home-made beauty. This is the world apparent in her work—writing which does not "represent" her life but gets in there with it, making and being made by each moment: participating. What makes this sort of involved observation unique here is its constant understanding of the tricks one is always playing on oneself. Belief (in anything) can be shift-y. As she puts it in her *Japan and India Journals*, "Keep remembering: Confusion arises when we assume the symbol stands for something." Can something be a symbol *without* standing for something? The confusion she refers to comes up when one gets stuck on the boundary between things and ideas. Some poets remind us of things, some of ideas, and both are necessary. But Kyger reminds us that the assumed difference between the two is suspect.

Kyger's method is sometimes described as "personal", but it's rather an interpretation of the conceptual habits which we think of as personal: something *through which* the perceived world shifts, falls apart and reforms itself, whether "you" like it or not. The personal, here in these poems, is something like a kaleidoscope. Just when you recognize a pattern and get used to it, one little shake and the whole thing's different. You have to start from scratch.

If you grow your hair you save on heating bills...
Thus the globe rolls over

Poverty is something
Money can't buy.

("Empty Shrine Buddha," *Just Space*, p.116)

Kyger's long practice as a Zen Buddhist is evident in every turn of phrase. But it's not an exclusive belief system; her particular and anti-earnest style of presentation is all-pervasive. This is no "listen to the truth" breed of persona on the page—rather, the "me too kids!" energy of her early motto (John Wieners nicknamed her "Miss Kids" because she was always calling everybody "kids" and wanting to join in anything that was going on, to watch, to learn, to have fun.) "Buddhism" as overarching concept is not as important

here as what really matters and shows: her way of evaporating the boundary between the so-called self and the so-called world. And *that*, of course, never stays done. Just as with any task of daily living, it has to be done over and over, sometimes on an hourly basis. Dharma (trans: "what is") shows up in the natural world, which is crucial to Kyger, but it also barges in at the breakfast table, where she gets angry and throws the pancake pan on the floor. But this doesn't mean that the language here is domesticated (familiarized). Kyger approaches any regular human entanglement, including her own frustrations, from the viewpoint of *emptiness*.

The Buddhist concept of emptiness is different from the western understanding of the word (i.e. lacking in meaning or purpose). The western formulation is one of despair, whereas the emptiness glimpsed throughout Kyger's work provides a way out of any humorless mental grip or fixation...the gluey paralysis which any kind of writing is prey to once you decide to pre-determine where it's going. This kind of emptiness merely turns the tables on the "I" which not only perceives but always wants its own way. "The 'psyche' is not a personal / but a world existence" (*Desecheo Notebook*, p.16). But again, this letting go, the opposite of "getting a grip on yourself," is never accomplished, always a work in progress. And Kyger makes that continuing fluctuation, the ups and downs, the always starting over, fully available in her language, as well as in its geography on the page, in which the pause is sometimes as important as the word.²

Fifty years ago, Charles Olson wrote, in "Projective Verse" (which Kyger claims as a formative influence), "It is true, what the master says he picked up from Confusion: all the thots men are capable of can be entered on the back of a postage stamp. So, is it not the PLAY of a mind we are after, is it not that that shows whether a mind is there at all?" Yes, play, in all senses of the word. And in *Some Life* (Post Apollo Press, 2000), we have the distilled, rigorous play of a particular and recognizable mind, an old friend, quite *there*. Or "there and not there" as Heidegger (another early influence) might put it. She is both teacher and student of her own mind and the world—a longtime interpolation through which these words, left like footprints on the page, both trace and produce moments of contemplation. The one thing her method does not do is "describe."

(Cont. page 18)

DECEMBER 1, FRIDAY

A Night of Taboos, Part III: The "O" Reading

The Taboo series continues with The "O" Reading, where poets will interpret the vowel "o" in an erotic manner, followed by a quickie "o"-pen mike. Featured readers include: Cynthia Andrews, Jaclyn Puidik, Richard Lorange, Hal Sirowitz, Rachel Levitsky, Thaddeus Rutkowski, and more. A gift certificate to Toys in Babeland will be given away for the best "o"-pen mike reading. [10:30 pm]

DECEMBER 4, MONDAY

Open Reading

Sign-up at 7:30 pm [8:00 pm]

DECEMBER 6, WEDNESDAY

Jaime Manrique and Eileen Myles

Jaime Manrique is the author of the novels *Eminent Maricones: Arenas, Lorca, Puig, and Mr. Twilight at the Equator*, *Latin Moon in Manhattan*, and *Colombian Gold*, as well as a wide range of poetry and short story collections. He's currently teaching a workshop at the Poetry Project. Eileen Myles, the author of the forthcoming *Cool for You* (Soft Skull Press) as well as *Not Meand Chelsea Girls*, brought poetry and politics together in 1992 when she ran for President of the United States as an "openly female" write-in candidate in 28 states. She curates a series of readings and performances called "Scout" at Threadwaxing Space in New York City.

DECEMBER 8, FRIDAY

From Real Time to Poetic Measure: Shaping Poems from Researched Fact

A Writing Workshop taught by Ed Sanders

Poet and journalist Ed Sanders is the founding member of the musical group The Fugs and the author of *The Family*, the best-selling account of the Manson family murders. The recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in poetry and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in poetry, he is the editor of the *Woodstock Journal* and author of many books of poetry; most recently *1968: A History in Verse* and volume one of *America: A History in Verse*. This workshop has been made possible by a generous grant from the Jerome Foundation. Admission to the workshop is \$7, \$4 for students and seniors, and \$3 for Poetry Project members. [7-9 pm]

E-book Night

A night to celebrate the online publication of Edwin Torres' and Richard Pearce's books. Edwin Torres' new collection of poetry, *Onamalingua: Noise, Songs & Poetry*, will be released as an e-book with MP3 files and Real Video. In performance with him will be Sean G. Meehan (percussion) and Gen Ken Montgomery (electronics). Richard Pearce has had several books of poems published as well as a chapbook, *Landscape of Skin* (Audit Press). Some two dozen magazines have published his poems and stories, including *The Paris Review* and *Prairie Schooner*. His e-book is called *Private Drives*. [10:30 pm]

DECEMBER 11, MONDAY

Joi Brozek and Steve Fried

Joi Brozek has been published in *The Brooklyn Review*, *Flicker*, and other journals. She is the author of two chapbooks, *The Porcelain God* (Dirty Girls) and *Blood and a Windshield Make Lovely Stained Glass* (Lunar Offensive). Her first novel, *Sleeveless*, was published by Dirty Girls Press. Steve Fried lives in Brooklyn and teaches writing skills to union members. His books include *Going Through Doors* (Lunar Offensive), *The Rough Sex Defense for Matricide* (Suicide Graphics), *Red Eva Rediviva* (Morbio Editions), *Plackets* (Juxta), and *Women and Men of Air* (Vedem Press). He is the editor of Lunar Offensive Press.

DECEMBER 13, WEDNESDAY

Michael Lally and Maggie Dubris

Michael Lally is the author of over 20 volumes of poetry, including *Can't Be Wrong*, which received the 1997 Oakland PEN Josephine Miles Award for Excellence in Literature. Additionally, he's acted in movies and on TV in shows like *NYPD Blue*. Maggie Dubris is a poet and guitarist/songwriter for the New York City-based rock band Homer Erotic. She is the author of *WillieWorld*, a book-length prose poem drawn from her experiences as a 911 paramedic. She has published stories in *CyberCorpse* and *Big Bridge*, and recently finished a new series of 113 linked poems called *Toilers of the Sea*.

DECEMBER 15, FRIDAY

Decorated Veteran Poets Pick Potential Stars of the XXI Century: The Long Shot Reading

Contributors from the latest issue of *Long Shot* magazine will read, including Daisy Fried, Keith Roach, Felice Bell, Bob Holman, John Rodriguez, Laurel Barclay, Kathie Izzo, Steve Cannon, Patrick Kosiewicz, Pedro Pietri, and Rodrigo Ortiz III. In this special issue of *Long Shot*, established poets introduce newer poets who are poetry's next rising stars. At the reading, as in the magazine, the veterans will introduce the up-and-coming. [10:30 pm]

DECEMBER 19, TUESDAY

The Poet in the World

A Writing Workshop taught by Ray Gonzalez

(See bio for December 20th reading.) Through discussion and writing assignments, this workshop will explore ways in which poets make a difference in the world. Ideas for literary events, publications, and common projects will be discussed. This workshop has been made possible by a generous grant from the Jerome Foundation. Admission to the workshop is \$7, \$4 for students and seniors, and \$3 for Poetry Project members. [7-9 pm]

DECEMBER 20, WEDNESDAY

Ray Gonzalez and Mark Nowak

Poet, essayist, and editor Ray Gonzalez is the author of the recently published *Turtle Pictures* (The University of Arizona Press), as well as the memoir *Memory Fever* (The University of Arizona Press) and five books of poetry, including *The Heat of Arrivals*, which received a 1997 PEN/Oakland Josephine Miles Book Award. Mark Nowak's first collection of poetry, *Revenants* (Coffee House Press, 2000) explores the Polish American neighborhoods in and around Buffalo, New York. Mr. Nowak is the co-editor, with Diane Glancy, of the anthology *Visit Teepee Town: Native Writings After the Detours*.

JANUARY 1, MONDAY

New Year's Day Marathon Reading

Spend your first day of the new year with the best of downtown poetry, performances, dance, music, multimedia and more with over 120 readers, including Patti Smith, John Cale, Jim Carroll, Penny Arcade, Peter Straub, Taylor Mead, Edwin Torres, Lewis Warsh, Bill Kushner, Maggie Estep, Gillian McCain, Lee Ann Brown, Ange Mlinko, Church of Betty, Maureen Owen, Ed Friedman, Tracy Blackmer, Jenny Smith, and many more!

JANUARY 8, MONDAY

Open Reading

Sign-up at 7:30 pm [8:00 pm]

JANUARY 10, WEDNESDAY

Dick Lourie and Dana Bryant

Dick Lourie is the author of seven collections of poetry, including his most recent, *Ghost Radio* (Hanging Loose Press). His work has appeared in such publications as *Verso*, *Esquire*, *Corpe*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Ms.* magazine, and others. A musician as well as a poet, he plays tenor sax with three bands. Dana Bryant has won international acclaim for her energetic, sensual poetry. She has performed her poetry on many compilation CDs and is the author of the collection *Song of the Siren: Tales of Rhythm and Revolution* (Boulevard Books).

JANUARY 12, FRIDAY

Alix Olson CD Release Party & Drag King Night

Poet Alix Olson "is a red-hot, fire-bellied, feminism-spewin' volcano," says Alison Bechdel, creator of the comic strip "Dykes to Watch Out For." Ms. Olson's poetry has been published in *The Lesbian Review of Books*, *Gathering of the Tribes* and two anthologies: *Revolutionary Voices* (Alyson Publications) and *Will Work For Peace: New Political Poems* (Zero Panik Press). Tonight's performers also include Pat Riach, Buster Hymen, Dred, Teena Turn-her, and others. [10:30 pm]

JANUARY 16, TUESDAY

Degrees of Nothing: Ron Padgett and the Drawer Principle

A Writing Workshop taught by Bill Luoma

(See bio for January 17th reading.) Using a Ron Padgett sonnet as a starting point, this workshop will discuss ways to explore the range of Louis Zukofsky's famous dictum, "lower limit speech, upper limit song." This workshop has been made possible by a generous grant from the Jerome Foundation. Admission to the workshop is \$7, \$4 for students and seniors, and \$3 for Poetry Project members. [7-9 pm]

JANUARY 17, WEDNESDAY

Bill Luoma and Vernon Frazer

Bill Luoma is the author of *Works & Days*, *Swoon Rocket*, and *Western Love*. His writing has been published in *The Imparicent*, *Poetics Journal*, and *The World*. His visual poems can be found on the World Wide Web. Vernon Frazer's six books of poetry include *A Slick Set of Wheels*, *Demon Dance*, *Sing Me One Song of Evolution*, and *Free Fall*. Mr. Frazer has released five recordings that fuse poetry with jazz. Mr. Frazer has also published an e-novel, *Relic's Reunions*, and a collection of short stories entitled *Stay Tuned to This Channel*.

JANUARY 19, FRIDAY

A New Moon with the Old Moon in Her Arms:

A Tribute to Ursule Molinaro

A Tribute to the late Ursule Molinaro, with readings and talks from

Bruce Benderson, Bruce McPherson, Gerard Malanga, Janice Eidus, Joseph McElroy, Dana Ratajczak, and more. "Molinaro has a ... talent for providing laughter in the midst of tears," says *The New York Times Book Review*. Ms. Molinaro, who died in July, 2000, wrote fifteen novels, more than a dozen plays, three volumes of non-fiction, and over one hundred short stories. Working from four languages, she also translated significant literary works by Herman Hesse, Christa Wolf, Dino Buzzati, and others. [10:30 pm]

JANUARY 22, MONDAY

Jeff Conant and Brenda Iijima

Jeff Conant was born in New York and currently resides in Oakland, California. He is the author of *Breathing Problems* (whut/e.g. Press) and *The Evacuated Forest Papers* (Buck Downs Books). His translation from Spanish of the book *Wind in the Blood: Mayan Healing and Chinese Medicine* was published by North Atlantic Books in 1999. Brenda Iijima, a poet and visual artist, is the author of *Epitome and Person(a)* (Portable Press). Her drawings were exhibited at the Hayato Gallery in Manhattan in July, 2000. Her photographs accompany Eliza McGrand's poems in *Shadow Dragging Like a Photographer's Cloth* (forthcoming).

JANUARY 24, WEDNESDAY

Denizé Lauture and Paul Laraque

Denizé Lauture, who migrated from Haiti to the United States in 1968, writes poetry in Creole, English, and French. His poems have appeared in many literary magazines, such as *Callaloo*, *Black American Literature Forum*, and others. He has authored two volumes of poetry and two children's books, one of which was among the five books nominated to the NAACP's 1993 Image Awards. Paul Laraque was born in Jeremie, Haiti. He fled Haiti during the reign of Papa-Doc and has only recently been allowed to return. He is the author of several books of poetry, including *Les armes quotidiennes/Poésie quotidienne* (*Everyday Weapons, Everyday Poetry*), which was the first work to receive the Casa de las Americas Prize in French.

JANUARY 26, FRIDAY

Mrs. Crabtree & the Little Rascals: The Fall 2000 Workshop Reading

Participants from the *Poetry Project's* fall workshops, led by poets and writers Jaime Manrique, Brenda Coultas, and Larry Fagin, will read their work. [10:30 pm]

JANUARY 29, MONDAY

Camille Martin and Dan Machlin

Camille Martin is a poet and translator who lives in New Orleans. Her collections of poetry include *sesame kiosk* (forthcoming from Potes & Potes Press), *rogue embryo*, and others. Martin is founder and co-creator of the *Li City Poetry Reading Series* in New Orleans. Dan Machlin is the author of two chapbooks, *This Side Facing You* (Heart Hammer) and *In Rem* (© Press, a collaboration with San Francisco poet Jen Hofer and visual artist James Yamada). His work has appeared in *Talisman*, *Tool*, a magazine, *Murmur*, *Torque*, online at the Poetry Project Web site; and elsewhere.

JANUARY 31, WEDNESDAY

Heather Ramsdell and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge

James Tate calls Heather Ramsdell's book *Lost Wax* "a symphony of poems that is original and profoundly full of wonder." A native of northeastern Massachusetts, Ms. Ramsdell's poetry has appeared in *Arras*, *Big Allis*, *Mandorla*, *Murmur*, *Sulfur*, *Talisman*, *Torque* and *Whatever*. Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's books include *The Heat Bird* (Burning Deck), *Empathy* (Station Hill), *Sphericity* and *Four Year Old Girl* (Kelsey St.). She has received two NEA Fellowships, two American Book Awards, and book awards this year from the Asian-American Writers Workshop and the Western States Art Foundation. She has been a contributing editor of *Conjunctions* magazine since 1978.

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The dew sweet law
is not flowing
literature
but is still

Open morning
after morning
and totally excellent

As the bachelor quail looks up
in the quiet air

all the food is his

("July 23, 1998
Reading Nagarjuna," *Some Life*)

North Atlantic Books will soon reissue the marvelous *Japan and India Journals* (1960-1964), now titled *Strange Big Moon*. This book, too long out of print, is a tour-de-force in the genre of journal writing. It's the young Joanne at her best: coping with the boys, learning how to meditate, and continually washing her one little black dress. This elegant record of her years in Japan with Gary Snyder is, like her poetry, inclusive of every possible kind of daily being in the world. She notes, on Monday, 12 December 1960, "Read my poems at Bernstein's last night. Jackie said whereas she could smell the pine cones in Gary's poems, she kept expecting to wake from a dream in mine." It's an interesting observation. Although one is able to find plenty of "pine cones" (souvenirs of the material world) in Kyger, she has always included dreams as well. They are just as real as anything else (or anything else is just as unreal as dreams—both), part of the daily discipline of tracking what passes by. Memories, dreams, philosophical arguments, self-analysis, pine cones, meddling neighbors—all are noted with an egalitarian sense of fun and frustration (often occurring simultaneously).

How very difficult to cut past and future time away from what is happening. Reminiscence and anticipation are so important—define the moment ahead and behind. Memory defines us now. Cut off time from what we are doing now and it renders the act meaningless. However, also fresh. How does one cut time away. I don't know as I would want an act to be presented new, I cling to memory.

There's a lifetime between that book and *Some Life*, but they come from the same window, through memory, onto the present moment. Kyger's poems have often been dated rather than titled; the poems are always in "real time" (or they remind us of it) as pauses or interventions. This is time of both the continuous and interrupted variety. But when she does use a title (many of them in this book) she knows how to wield it. There's a poem called "Some Choice" (*Some Life*, p. 17), which consists entirely of a comment surgically removed from a discussion (between "X and Y," in *Gare du Nord*, Vol. I #3, 1998).

"With Joanne it's the fact that she has
chosen to live in this little town
and not be famous

and to perform her life in this highly
spiritual but not draggy way
this really interesting and colloquial way
in the woods."

Kyger's contribution to this poem is merely the art of exposure and a rueful, bemused containment field in the form of a title. "Some choice," you hear her say, sitting at her kitchen table, laughing and shaking her head. We get it—how this process of facing reality, as it happens to you, not as you planned it, is not a "choice"—the demands and frustrations of "career" (as opposed to actual work) deaths of loved ones, endless tasks, and never enough money. And yet, this reader wants to reply, it is a choice, though a more subtle and rigorous one than "X and Y" seem to mean. This life's work reveals an on-going choice simply to remain awake, to return to the present, apparent, visible and invisible universe, day after day: to breathe. Reading Joanne Kyger reminds me to make the same choice.

¹ A favorite saying of Suzuki Roshi's, the zen teacher with whom Joanne studied in the sixties in San Francisco. The conflation of the singular and the plural is of course deliberate.

² Kyger has described her placement of words on the page as "scoring." See interviews in the on-line magazine *Jacket* #11 (www.jacket.zip.com.au).

Susan Noel is the author of *Autobiography in Words* (CUZ Editions, 1998).

(Ramsdell cont.)

HR: Yeah. It started as an attempt to just...OK, if I put in a ton of things then it relieves the pressure. The opposite is chickens and a wheelbarrow.

MD: I was going to say, the chicken pecks for food. That's a very interesting moment [in *Vague Swimmers*].

HR: That's actually—You know the Chinatown chicken that died?

MD: Oh did it die? I thought the ASPCA cracked down.

HR: Oh maybe.

MD: Well, the chicken probably died one way or another. I thought the ASPCA made them take it out of the cage.

HR: I think it was trained to peck, it was starved to death or it was electrocuted.

MD: That was a myth. Actually I made that chicken dance. It just had to scramble. It was on this record player type thing that tipped so it was just scrambling around—that was supposedly dancing. So that chicken's in your poem?

HR: I don't know what to say about that. I hate that part. That word was one of the worst words. For some reason, it's painful to say it.

MD: But in a way it's in keep with the power of the rest of the manuscript, especially the part about sobbing...

HR: That is one of the oldest parts. It was written while *Lost Wax* was still being produced. I couldn't write after I finished the book, so I just did this exercise where I typed everyday. Straight plain typing. Anything could be included but I wasn't allowed to stop typing. I did that for a long time. Out of that material I edited—the rule that I gave myself was that I couldn't break up text, I couldn't edit into text. I just had to take whole pieces of stuff out and I was going to assemble those. I didn't remember that until just now.

Since then I've edited the pieces a little bit.

It's like the goldfish parable, where the emperor hires someone to draw a goldfish and he comes back in a year and it's not done, and the next year it's still not done, so he decides that he's going to cut off the artist's head. The emperor says "you didn't produce my goldfish drawing so I'm going to kill you." And the guy just does a perfect goldfish. It had to just flow out.

MD: I think you have to work to clear the pathways to the divine.

HR: I do too. Somewhere in the story we discover there is a whole pile of attempts. I think the only way this worked at all was that I had hundreds of pages of shit, just unbelievable crap that I found five pieces of text

that actually worked. I think that first thought, best thought is complete bullshit. It may have been interesting at a certain point historically as a rebellion against some other thing.

I don't have a theory that nouns are evil. But committing to one is very difficult for me.

MD: Well, I asked Allen Ginsberg—I studied with him—I asked him about that. He said it was very misinterpreted. That you had to work to get to that first thought past all the cliches. He didn't mean the first thought that popped up in your brain. I also wondered if he was backpedaling once he saw the results...

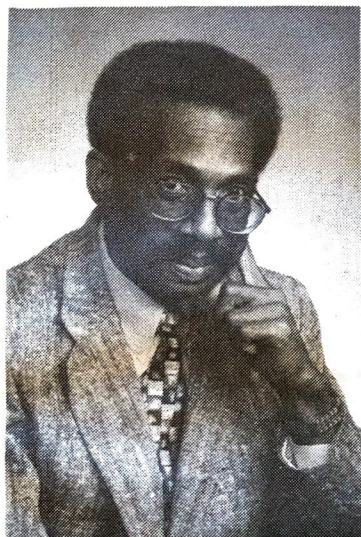
HR: Yeah, I was going to say...I wish he corrected that for the public record. I don't believe in that. I believe in editing.

MD: Last thought, best thought.

HR: Right.

MD: Best thought after years of angst and editing.

Heather Ramsdell will be reading at the Poetry Project on January 31, 2001. See Marcella Durand's poem on page 6 of the Newsletter.



**Lorenzo Thomas:
Extraordinary
Measures:
Afrocentric
Modernism and
Twentieth-
Century
American
Poetry**

The University of
Alabama Press,
2000. 288 pages.

In the poem "The
House Was Quiet and

the World Was Calm," Wallace Stevens describes an idealized relationship between reader and text in which "The reader became the book; and summer night / Was like the conscious being of the book." For Stevens, language itself is always metaphorical, poetic language even more so. Thus, the world becomes a book, and the book becomes a world. The reader's job is to unravel this metaphorical aspect—an ultimately unending task in Stevens' mind, because a metaphor is language already partially unraveled. At the same time, in its depiction of a reader hunched over a book, quietly working through a difficult text, or a reader for whom a book becomes a world, "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" is a familiar depiction of a reader's traditionally solitary, and even lonely, place.

One of the things that struck me the most while reading through Lorenzo Thomas' collection of essays, *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, is how much this reader is taken out of her or his solitude and placed within a bustling world of community centers, street corners, neighborhood theaters, political rallies, union halls, schools, and churches. The idea that poetry can never be separated from its social, political, and economic contexts informs nearly every page of Thomas' book. This is tied into the larger historical experiences of African Americans for whom a racially inimical and

economically exploitative society is rarely metaphysically tranquil in the same manner as "the truth in a calm world" evoked in Stevens' poem.

And whose "truth" is it anyway? This is one of the many questions Thomas' book raises while outlining an alternative tradition of African American poetry. Inserting itself within the struggle over who is and is not allowed to shape the debate regarding what constitutes truth and knowledge, *Extraordinary Measures* astutely moves between aesthetic issues and political concerns, literary genealogies and underground cultural traditions, close readings of individual poems and the history of race relations in the United States. Each of the chapters on individual authors offer careful explications of their work along with an outline of the historical circumstances in which it was written—specifically, the historical situation of African Americans. Thomas' chapter on Amiri Baraka is one of the best in *Extraordinary Measures*, partly because Thomas knew Baraka during the period he writes about, and partly because it provides concrete examples of a couple important ideas in his book. Here, he describes a visit he made with Ishmael Reed to Newark, New Jersey on Christmas Eve, not long after Baraka moved there in the mid-Sixties. After barhopping for a while, Thomas and Reed ended up at

a union hall or community center sort of place where Amiri Baraka was reading feverish political poems to a few cheerful working-class black folks. Same kind of folks we had left in the Blue Note, but these were their mommas, sisters, little brothers, and wives. Cousins nieces nephews of the big talkers in the red-lit private bar.

Baraka was dressed in a flowing big-sleeved dashiki and a Moroccan knit cap. He was shouting and singing his poems. One of them was a severe but lyrical j'accuse aimed at the horde of colored political hacks sucking up behind Hugh Addonizio, the Newark mayor who later went to jail for extortion. The poem was cold.... The audience, just like

(cont. on p. 28)

Moon People

Two blue figures
synchronized to move
toward a blurred point
across the barest space imaginable—
will they make it?

At the risk of pandering to Berkson's alternate life as an art critic/curator/teacher, I need to start by saying his poems often seem as if they should be hung on a wall rather than on a page. The visual quality of Berkson's work, meaning how the words look (are shaped) in one another's company rather than how they are placed on the page or what images they might induce, is that strong. Perhaps *Serenade* should be scissored and spread out across one's walls in the right light (although the act of reading poems may, by itself, do just that) in order to best be seen. Probably not, but someone should do it.

Nevertheless, Berkson's writing, despite his impeccable use of "speech" (talk would actually be sharper, and he's on record talking about talk in *Hills* 6/7) as "a mode that can be made material to writing" (see interview, *Combo* 5) is quite often starkly visual down to the word. That is, the word choices appear oriented as much to the eye as to the ear, mind, heart, liver (and this review-person recognizes Berkson as a poet who has written the line "There are no non-verbal experiences"). The shapes of the words in Berkson's poems articulate the shapes of the poems themselves, to the extent that one might dare say the sight work of Berkson's writing is taken care of by his prosody, that inescapable articulation of time:

Selected Dreams

At the airport with dark glasses.

Writing a master's thesis on the city of Nice.

A duel with electric irons as weapons.

Meeting Stuart Perkoff.

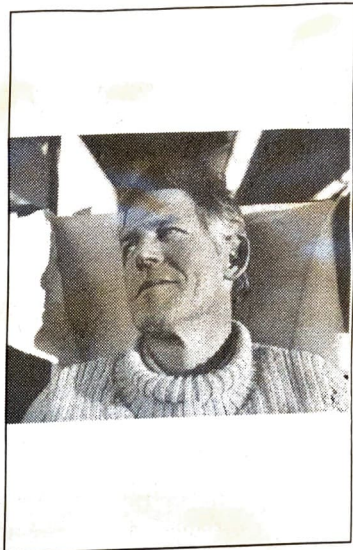
The Celeste Holm Sisters.

But enough with this visual stuff. So much of the

impulse and beauty of Berkson's work stems from an attentiveness to the whole alphabet—which may seem like a very silly thing to say, but how many poets make use of their full palette of material in the year 2000? A writer's choices within the act of writing make up the gateway to what any work might be "about":

"Mobilize versus drift." He takes it the cosmos is each one's full extent. In *Serenade* words are not language, but can be. And they are often being dreams, anti-poems, accumulation of aphoristic demi-truths ("Anyone can anything at anytime"), poems, and prose structures in which abstraction and talk collaborate to create an elegant fluidity (yearning to be awkward!) that seems foreign to Now. I'm thinking in particular of the long prose poem "Start Over", which is as momentous (thinking of momentum as the base there, correctly or not) and sparkling a work as O'Hara's "Second Avenue" or Silliman's "Ketjak". That "Start Over" is, in many ways, a domestic work—Berkson's son Moses is the star early on—as well as a piece of Northern California (Bolinas) living, feeds into the feeling that for Berkson talk is a mode of perception:

Assume, taking the plunge, the first deep person.
Dreamy Mallarme seized beforehand, on ice. All
there, nothing there, there there, all I can do to
restaple it. Sing the songs I know: Here a chick,
there diamonds the branch hatched and then the
bristles of other trees on top of them and above
there comes sky. Knee-high stove metal sheet
cylinder, hole in it burned out. You have to break
the bolts. When's nap-time? "Ee-Ay-Eee-Ay-O" he
crooned, he croons, he keeps on crooning. We have
come like birds to a stable strategy of crooning.
Pauses arranged by soup.



(cont. on p. 29)

Lisa Jarnot, Bill Luoma, Rod Smith:
New Mannerist Tricycle
Beautiful Swimmer Press (158 Franklin St, Brooklyn
NY 11222—BeautSwim@aol.com), 2000. 39 pp.

A new stapled thing is out; write to the publishers and get a copy. A happy cross between a magazine, an anthology, and a chapbook, *New Mannerist Tricycle* includes work by Rod Smith, Bill Luoma, and former PPN editor Lisa Jarnot.

Although all three of these writers have published perfect-bound books, Bill Luoma has yet to publish a full-length collection of poems; 1998's heartbreaking *Works & Days* is prose. Somewhere between the seven- and eight-syllable lines of *Swoon Rocket* and the short-lined verse paragraphs of *Western Love* comes "Ode," a series of twenty-seven short poems addressed to different fruits and vegetables, their crates, and their product code stickers. Luoma, who has resided in Hawaii for a few years now, gets some diffident pathos into these poems of exile from fresh produce. "Big calif potatoes / you are eaten here / but are nonetheless / suspicious," he writes, the issues of sovereignty and tourism crowding that last line. There are fruits native to Hawaii, of course: "The mango roper / of Yee's Orchard / uses a reaching / tool to obtain / the fruit." Here Luoma uses the flat affect of brochure captions, elsewhere he borders on pidgin ("You make / Vicky •1 go flop flop"), and everywhere he relishes in the slightly off word or phrase: "spuge," "haz mat," "bolometer," "humena," "carbo funs." I'm reminded of Lee Ann Brown's found (or found-ish) poem "Cafeteria", which concludes its list of everyday exotic southern foods with the delicious-to-read "plus one meat."

"They," Lisa Jarnot's contribution to this collection, is a series of eight variations on the phrase "they loved." She has varied the repertoire of her 1996 chapbook *Sea Lyrics*—absent here are the unexpected superlative ("the spanishest of music"), the nonstandard prefix ("undangerous") and the dated cultural references ("I am standing on the corner where Huey Newton got shot but you thought that he was Huey Lewis"). She mixes periods and run-ons in with the commas, but the shift from *Sea Lyrics*' "I am" to "they loved" has the effect of making these poems a little cooler—it's a stretch to identify with "they." Not to belabor the comparison, but Jarnot's daffy parallelism (in *Sea Lyrics* she yoked crazy phrases such as "I am for the hillsides bowling, I am unlike all the other countries

in this wood" etc) is scaled down to the level of the noun, limiting the poem to odd but not especially revealing choices—"They loved competence and they loved the dark metallic stapler." In the sestina "Story," though, she writes only beautifully, stretching the poem's last sentence over the last three stanzas, ending with a string of prepositional phrases it's a pleasure to follow (and get lost among): "inside the rain near little ships with sheep in shadows of the sun."

Nearly a continuous pleasure is Rod Smith's "The Spider Poems." Somewhere between *Sea Lyrics* and the discursive lines of Jack Spicer are sixteen pages of weird repetitions, deflections, vulnerabilities, and the finest cares for quasi-angular syntax. Smith has always been capable of breathtaking nonsense on the order of "Fuzzylogical diamond mini-tours' explicit sibling truthed on a plectrum," but lately he's discovered a way or some ways to gelcap this irrationalism. In the opening lines of "The Spider Poems," Smith takes Wallace Stevens's play on the positive value of nothing—

Nothing believes Korea.

Nothing turns into it, & leaves your salt there.

and having taken it hostage, administers some bizarre compounds and suffixes:

Nothing believes Korea.

& believing it believes also
that to be afraid is accursed, caseladen, peri-
[patetic, inchworthy &
glown. That's what it believes.

There is a theme here, or something like it, and there are some things like characters that we find out about as Smith goes along. I won't spoil the ending (I understand Smith is writing more poems about spiders) but I will say that the interplay of sense and nonsense in Smith's work goes well with the alternation of happiness and anguish, of excitement and boredom, of lunging exposition and one-liners, of full-stops and cadenced rhythms.

The layout of this chapbook is mainly attractive (the frontispiece is a half-successful typographical experiment) and the disassembled tricycle parts of Kimura Hiroshi's front cover fit together neatly on the back. Mysterious to me are the reasons these authors call their style of submodernism "new manner-

ism" (and everybody I've mentioned this book to thinks I'm referring to the American Buddhism magazine, *Tricycle*). Those quibbles aside, it's nice to see the old Penguin collections of three poets' work echoed. More such friendships, please.—JORDAN DAVIS

Jordan Davis is a former editor of the Newsletter. He works at Teachers & Writers Collaborative, where he hosts the Poetry City reading series. Forthcoming chapbooks include Yeah, No (Detour) and A Winter Magazine (Situations).

Anne Waldman: *Marriage: A Sentence*
Penguin Poets (New York), 2000. 116 pp.

Throughout *Marriage: A Sentence*, Anne Waldman explores the meaning, history and implication of a rite so much a part of the social fabric that in many cases we take it for granted. In 49 prose-and-poem couples—just one short of the 50th Golden Anniversary Year!—Waldman bonds with her theme. The result is that we get marriages, as many as one poet in full possession of her literary power can wed.

In the book, Waldman takes the traditional Japanese form of the haibun and makes it her own, replacing the haiku half of the equation with tight, almost hermetic, lyrics and pushing the prose half over the grammatical threshold. The range of style summoned within these prose-and-poem pairs is dizzying. The famous incantatory Waldman is still there, but also tones that are far less familiar—moody and detached at one extreme, frolicking at the other. They say that marriage brings out parts of the personality that were dormant or potential—perhaps a sustained writing project on Marriage has the same effect.

From the "sexual motion" prose dedication, with its appeal to the "ayami" muse, to the concluding "coda a code" poem with its vow to poetry, Waldman's survey of historic, multicultural marriage customs reminds us that marriage has as many forms as there are relationships. Why do people pair off anyway? What's the point? Part of the answer lies in the social and economic conditions and conditioning which result in reproduction rights and accumulated property. But even in arranged marriages or marriages of convenience, some form of emotional "commitment" is involved.

Marriage is, in a way, "committed," just like a crime—hence the "sentence" of the book's title. Waldman's sentencings is (of course) two-fold—there's the grammatical utterance in all its transformational

glory at the syntactic level of the paragraph or poem, but there's also a kind of metaphoric sentence delivered in the titles. Instead of "ten years to life," the sentence is "wine cup of night play" or "abate the clause." The marriage title, in this case, occurs at the end, rather than the beginning, of each poem and paragraph. This displacement has a curious effect on reading—the titles are like quirky judgments about a marriage made by a third party.

But despite the compendium of facts and observations about traditional and nontraditional marriages, *Marriage: A Sentence* is also an intensely personal, almost intimate book. Waldman leaves little doubts as to her position—every marriage mirrors in some way the "hieros gamos" or sacred marriage of earth and sky, of myth, of the divine. "—ancient vestiges, saintly, sparse? /—more connected to nature, like that /—a simultaneous response /—yes /—gregarious movements as in a duet /—will it cure? That's the mighty thing /—yes."—DAWN MICHELLE BAUDE

Dawn Michelle Baude's new book, egypt, is forthcoming from the Post-Apollo Press. She currently teaches writing for the Bard College / Lacoste School of the Arts program in Lacoste, France.

Eléna Rivera: *Unknown Land*
Kelsey St. Press, 2000. 55 pp.

It's appropriate that Eléna Rivera's long-awaited first book is the inaugural edition of Kelsey St.'s annual Frances Jaffer prize. As its title suggests, *Unknown Land* is cartographic in spirit, though it points decidedly off the map—at the haunted edges of other texts that come into the collection, at the "real" experience of textual life, the landscape and limits of voice, and the poetics of quotation those limits make necessary. In many ways, this is a poem of and about extremity, and it reiterates poetry's ongoing role as an extreme discourse of beginnings and apocalypses, strophes and catastrophes. Language explodes or implodes between the double pressures of tradition and innovation. The eruptions and earthquakes and tremblings in *Unknown Land* are only the most literal manifestation of this tension.

The opening poem, wedged between the half-title page and the first section of the book, works as a gloss or legend to Rivera's "Land" as a whole:

the sound of the land—erupts—recite after me—a route—a river road—

saturated—leads to the next, and the next—shatters
 and uncovers—
 recite after me—a memory, a reflection, a word, a
 meadow—where are
 the lost—charred—I drift amidst—and the earth
 was filled with

Like Theresa Cha's groundbreaking work *Dictée* (one of the many texts echoed here), Rivera's *Unknowne Land* begins by drawing attention to the scripted and auditory life of words, to utterance as a primary experience as well as a transmitter of experience, and to the role of repetition in building and containing meaning, even if it ultimately "shatters" or drifts.

Other anchoring reference points include the works of Wallace Stevens, Virginia Woolf, Susan Howe, and the Bible—all quoted in passages that engage the juncture of order and chaos. Formally and thematically, the text points in two directions at once: at fragmentation and wholeness, at groundedness and drift. True to its elemental structure (the book's five sections are entitled "Fire," "Earth," "Water," "Air," and "The Sphere"), each section conducts itself differently, according to strict formal constraints. "Earth" is solid (14-line justified prose margins with occasional fissures in the middle), "Water" is composed of fluid, staggered 3-line stanzas, "The Sphere" is set in couplets, etc., but each section also contains one non-con-

forming poem, a form of undoing that subtly unifies the collection.

In presenting language as a totality—a world or "sphere"—which we can only view topographically, no matter what our intimations of its depth, these poems suggest that we don't so much arrive at its limits as discover our own ("This is not what I had in mind"). Here the limit is voiced as anything from sexual programming to linear thinking ("I realized that my project had always been horizontal") or the frustrated desire for political or aesthetic

transformation: "What have we managed to change but the surface."

Like the voice of H.D.'s *Trilogy* or *Notes on Thought and Vision*, the "I" in this *Unknowne Land* looks to biological models of composition to create a sense of historical depth, the presence of the unseen within the seen, the unknown within the known. Reading a cephalopod's "rage to order the words of the sea," the poem records the motive of making as a biological imperative: "I dug deep into the voices of the past / until I reached a calcified internal shell, all the pushing in the world couldn't get me past that grip."
 —ELIZABETH WILLIS

Elizabeth Willis is the author of *Second Law (Avenue B)* and *The Human Abstract (Penguin)*. She lives on the other coast and teaches at Mills College.

Ronald Johnson: To Do As Adam Did: Selected Poems
 Edited by Peter O'Leary
 Talisman House, (Jersey City, NJ), 2000, 151 pp.

When I first came to Ronald Johnson's *ARK* a few years ago, what immediately struck me was the careful attention paid to the sounds embedded deep in a word's core and the way his syntax sifts through the rubble of sterile contemporary speech to reveal what's hidden beneath the surface. Most of the work that I was reading at the time was a sort of jaded linguistic acrobatics; Johnson's wordplay, in contrast, impressed me not as an ironic undermining of the language but rather an acknowledgment of the potential clarity to be found within it if one were just to look hard enough.

If I had any initial uncertainty upon approaching Johnson's work, it was that I thought of him as a "nature" poet, which meant that his work might not apply to my daily cityscape. I quickly learned that, while the natural world is obviously central to his poetry, it was a mistake to assume that these poems are only "about" nature; indeed, they translate fluently into a metropolitan architecture and serve as a welcome antidote to the primarily urban disease of cynical self awareness.

I expected *To Do As Adam Did* to be a hefty volume somehow physically reflective of Johnson's body of work; instead, editor Peter O'Leary takes on the unenviable task of expertly boiling down over thirty years' worth of poetry into just over 150 pages. While O'Leary chooses judiciously from eight texts, there is room to

THE
WORLD
 56-57

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only give the briefest sampling of *RADI OS*, Johnson's compelling revisioning of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. (To be fair, O'Leary acknowledges in his astute introduction that *RADI OS* is "nearly unexcerptable"; in addition, the complete poem will eventually be republished by Flood Editions as part of a book called *The Outworks*.) With *ARK* still in print and with a finite number of pages available for Adam, I was surprised to see that a full third of this collection was given over to the long poem. Still, when rereading the sections of the masterwork included here, I found that I came to them with a fresh eye as I read them in the context of other selections from this life's work. And for readers who do not yet know *ARK*, this volume provides a strong sampling of key sections that will hopefully lead them to tackle the poem in its entirety.

Increasingly, I find myself searching for poets who have made their way outside the rigid confines of academia without resorting to a knee-jerk sort of clichéd bohemia that is devoid of tradition or any sense of historical context. Throughout Johnson's body of work, it is clear that the poem (and poet) "must listen and sing simultaneously": in order to truly break new ground, the poet must first appreciate the traditions to which he or she is indebted just as the gardener must first understand the natural workings of the world in order to shape it into new patterns. Shortly before he died, Johnson had been slated to read here in Philadelphia but was unable to come due to mounting health concerns. After reading and rereading these selections from his work, I feel his loss more deeply and wish more strongly that I'd had the opportunity to acknowledge my debt to him in person. —CHRIS MCCREARY

Chris McCreary lives in Philadelphia, where he co-edits ixnay press.

Chris Tysh: *Continuity Girl* United Artists, 2000

The propelling thing about Chris Tysh's new book, and life in general, is that everything, every atom, every word, sentence, paragraph, action, image is poignantly present and almost graspable and then, it slips away. As I read these poems, I begin to make sense and then I instantly lose ground as the syntax trips me up or an image leaves me empty in the space of the margin. But I continue, swerving along this sexy, frightening path of meaning-making, and it is nothing like the way we learned to read in school. No, this is an experience of reading the Real as it rests hidden beneath a glimmering text with fractures and errors of syntax that allow me the unexpected freedom of looking through a crevice or over an edge.

Behind every poem, there is at least one particular photograph, painting, poem, philosophical treatise, translation, noir film, or news report. But they are not pinned down, named or conveniently included beside the text. As soon as I am certain of the reference, uncertainty arrives. Even though "Columbine" is the title of one poem, this is not reportage. The slippery nature of language and reference (and the inherent violence) is Tysh's subject and she takes the reader on a journey into the linguistic unexpected. Woven throughout are the structures and thoughts of the French and German postmodern philosophers and theorists, especially Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridian differance. If you have a smattering of knowledge in these areas, these structures and ideas will glimmer through the poems as if they are the translucent bones of language, and perhaps they are. If your reading is more lyrical or objectivist, the skin of the body will be enough. "And/in/one/orgasm/they/came/undone//below/the elastic/lexicon/of/baby/and/bath."
("catherinewheel") (cont. page 30)

Questionnaire

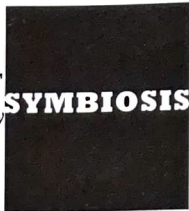
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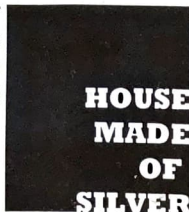
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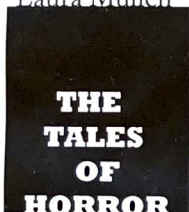
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(Thomas cont.)

a church congregation, said "Amen" when the poem was finished.

Ishmael Reed and I sat there with our eyes bugged out, wondering if the brother was mad. Talking like that. Talking that talk.

Baraka's particularly strident new poetry caught by surprise both Thomas, who around that time was a poet in the New York City-based Umbra Workshop (which was part of the Sixties' Black Arts Movement), and Reed, who was then working as a radical political journalist.

On a cold Christmas Eve in Newark, in an undecorated hall, to a somewhat sparse but engaged audience, Baraka hammered away at local conditions that threatened the self-determination of the community. It should be noted that Thomas' description of Baraka as "shouting and singing his poems" isn't a reference to the intellectual cliché that reduces all African-American literature to an oral tradition; instead, orality is only one of a number of elements in Baraka's performance. In fact, Thomas stresses performance over orality throughout his book in order to establish a more encompassing set of criteria with which to analyze the production and reception of poetry. Performance entails an emphasis on the institutional structures in which a performance takes place; it raises questions concerning the identity of the performer; and it refers to a complex set of interactions between performer and audience. In other words, performance locates in a way orality might not, or might not always.

Another major point of Thomas' book—and one which helps further elucidate the specific anecdote about Baraka—is that many African-American communities conceive of poetry as primarily functional. Thomas subtitles the chapter "Neon Griot"—in which he outlines the history of poetry readings within a twentieth-century Afrocentric tradition—with the phrase "The Functional Role of Poetry Readings"; and in his chapter on Margaret Walker, he quotes her as saying: "The slogan 'Art for the People' is not a new nor radically different tag from what it has always been among Black people. African art from its ancient beginnings has always been functional in its highest spiritual sense." This "highest spiritual sense" means its functionality is in service to the communities that give birth to poetry and sustain it.

At a basic level, Thomas' book is functional in its

uncovering of frequently neglected African-American cultures and histories—literary or not. Its first four chapters are scholarly treatments of significant—though, in the first two instances, less well-known—authors: Fenton Johnson, William Stanley Braithwaite, Margaret Walker, and Melvin Tolson. The remainder of the book is a little looser in structure. Chapters on the Black Arts Movement, Baraka, African-American poets in Louisiana, poetry readings, and recent African-American non-mainstream writers touch on a wide variety of topics. In each chapter, Thomas easily switches back and forth between aesthetic and political/cultural issues: for example, a Harlem Renaissance manifesto written by Langston Hughes is framed within segregationist legislation in the United States during the first two decades of the twentieth century, and the beginnings of the Afro hair style are discussed within the context of cultural black nationalist poetry.

Yet as Harryette Mullen points out in an interview from which Thomas quotes, the demand for functionality can become restrictive when it's defined too narrowly: "One of the questions or problems for me is the kind of aesthetic turf that exists for black writers, and how black writers who do not fit into the notion of what black turf is can sometimes be overlooked or forgotten or go unread." While Thomas does explicitly state that, "The African American poet in the twentieth century has maintained a vision rooted in an Afrocentric knowledge of self and community," this Afrocentrism is never a dogmatically defined "turf." In accordance with Thomas' historicizing approach, it evolves as the concerns of African Americans have evolved. Questions of integration that figure more prominently in the first half of the book are called into question by the writers and thinkers of the Black Arts Movement, just as in the second half of the book cultural issues begin to take a certain degree of precedence once basic civil rights have been partially achieved.

The only time Thomas' arguments falter a bit is near the end of his book where he clings in a few places to a rigid and uncritical distinction between "serious" or "great" and "popular" literature. In the last chapter, this distinction allows him to give short shrift to spoken word poetry and hip-hop, both of which have made significant impacts on African-American writing during the past decade. I'm assuming this is as much a generational issue as an ideological one. But in relation to Thomas' book as a whole, it's a minor oversight; and I only point it out because it goes against

the grain of Thomas' own method, concerned as it is with the "communal traditions"—a recurrent phrase—that together constitute a vast reservoir of African-American cultural and political practices.

As his book thoroughly illustrates, these "communal traditions" are formed by an enormous array of "high," "low," "folk," "mass," and "popular" cultural and artistic activities. Thomas's method ultimately focuses on poetry and poetry criticism as complex forms of social history, and in this regard his work should help serve as an ongoing model for contemporary poetry. In *Extraordinary Measures*, Thomas reveals himself to be as much a storyteller as a historian, as much a poet as a critic, as much a sociologist as a close reader, and as much an activist as a scholar.—ALAN GILBERT

Alan Gilbert is a poet and essayist who lives in Brooklyn. His work has appeared in several magazines including Tripwire, First Intensity, and The Baffler.

(Berkson cont.)

Talk as a mode of perception is something other than a speech-based poetic sensibility, I think. The latter consigns speech to the surface of a poem, and allows a figure such as William Carlos Williams to be reduced by hemorrhage-producing workshop leaders into an abused model for lightweight intimations. Berkson's work is representative of the former, a full use of talk as an inseparable (for him, not for all writers, and he can make other things too) piece of consciousness rather than its broker. In that sense Berkson remains very connected to the poets who might be considered 2nd generation New York School, as well as to many of the other poets he was in touch with during the long period over which the work in *Serenade* was written, 1975-1989: Hunt, Thomas, Benson, Kyger, McNaughton, Perelman, Watten, Hejinian, McAdams, Scalapino, many others. This list of names is not arbitrary—the aesthetic cross-fertilization that took place in the 1970s and 1980s among these writers has yet to be truly reckoned with by most poets, scholars, critics or poetry institutions (alternative or not)—except for those who use this work.

But so what. I have used *Serenade*, for the better part of the year, to help me resist being overwhelmed by grief. An extremely uncritical remark, yes, but it's true, and it

has worked. Why? Perhaps because Berkson's poems quietly demand a clear eye without forcing a kind of clarity onto the reader: "Nothing is more perfectly obscure / than the trace of intention and no mess." And perhaps because I can't help but associate the eye behind these poems with the eye that curated the unbelievably gorgeous exhibition of late DeKoonings that reached MOMA a few years ago. His tone is sure, and he takes liberties. Berkson's work is not going to delight the reader who looks for either easy autobiography or evidence of the theories that line up in easy autobiography's opposition. That's alright. It may be that poetry, at this point, ought to provoke every sensibility, including its own, in order to help us avoid complacency. And of the many ways there are to avoid complacency, I'd say *Serenade* takes up its fair share:

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Moon comes up, tide goes out.
Your logic is held together

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You insist or stumble into interest.

Either way, another chance to look.
Not to mention what ordinarily happens.

—ANSELM BERRIGAN

Anselm Berrigan is packing his bags. He has poems in Combo 5, which also contains the aforementioned interview with Berkson (www.dept.English.upenn.edu/~wh/combo).

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(Berkson cont.)

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Untitled: A Magazine of Prose Poetry #1. Editors: Leonard Brink and Jono Schneider. (c/o Instress, P.O. Box 3124, Saratoga, CA 95070).

Chain #7: Memoir/Anti-Memoir
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Books

Richard Blevins. Fogbow Bridge: Selected Poems 1972-1999. Pavement Saw Press (Columbus, OH), 2000. 1-886350-92-2.

Crosscut Universe: Writing on Writing from France. Edited by Norma Cole. Burning Deck (Providence, RI) 2000. 1-886224-39-0.

Dana Curtis. The Body's Response to Famine. Pavement Saw Press (Columbus, OH) 2000. 1-886350-90-6.

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Thurston Moore. Alabama Wildman. Water Row Press (Sudbury, MA) 2000. 0-934953-70-8

Mark Salerno. For Revery. a+bend press (San Francisco, CA) 2000.

Kevin Young. Most Way Home. Zoland Books (Cambridge, MA) 2000. 1-58195-021-7.

Poetry & Poetics in a New Millennium: Interviews with Major Contemporary Poets. Edited by Edward Foster. Talisman House, Publishers (Jersey City, NJ) 1-58498-014-1

Barbara Henning. In Between. Spectacular Diseases (c/o Paul Green, 83(b) London Road, Peterborough, Cambs., PE2 9BS, UK) 2000.

K.B. Nemosky. Drift. Ten Pell Books, 2000. 1-930330-02-2

Paul Violi. Breakers: Selected Poems. Coffee House Press, 2000. 1-56689-099-3

Keith Waldrop. Haunt. Instance Press, 2000. 0-9679854-0-4

Hoa Nguyen. Parrot Drum. Leroy Chapbook Series (c/o Renee Gladman, 17A Chattanooga St., San Francisco, CA 94114) 2000.

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Jane Unrue. The House. Burning Deck Press (Providence, RI) 2000. 1-886224-35-8

Nicole Brossard. Installations. The Muses Company, 2000. 1-896239-65-x.

(Tysh cont. from page 25)

I'm especially moved by the twenty poems in the "Continuity Girl" section of the book which address the problems with identity and representation, especially related to gender, with the myriad of positions we take about and around the he and the she.

A very intelligent, political and word delicious book. Tysh articulates how we make/can't make meaning hold with sex or with sentences; words and bodies slip apart and away, on a continual swerving path to who knows where (slippery and unstable as is the rest of our knowledge), but perhaps it can be linguistically/poetically charted or trailed—and it is, beautifully, here, in *Continuity Girl*. —BARBARA HENNING

Barbara Henning's latest book is *In Between (Spectacular Diseases)*.

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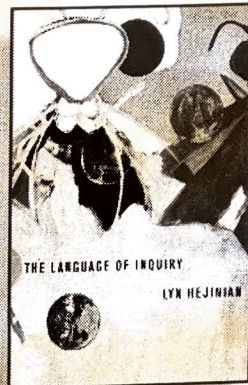
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