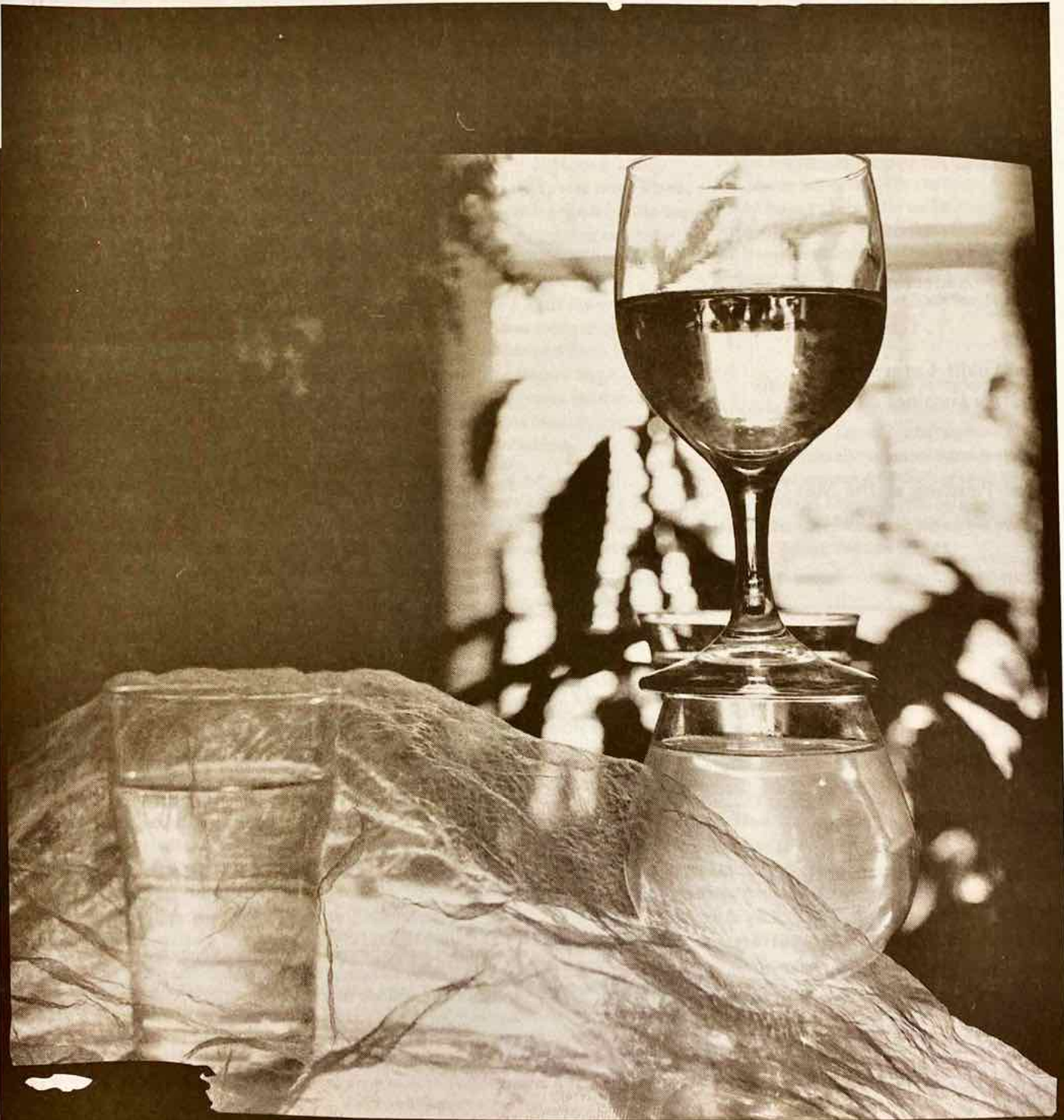


Poetry Project

NEWSLETTER



Summer 2002 Issue number 190



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News and Announcements

Ange Mlinko is stepping down as editor of *The Poetry Project Newsletter*. Thanks to the Poetry Project staff of the last two years; *Newsletter* interns Elizabeth Young and Natasha Dwyer; and the numerous writers who contributed articles, reviews, and interviews out of love of poetry and poetics.

The staff of the Poetry Project would like to thank all the dedicated volunteers who helped make the *Vermont Notebook* Celebration a wonderful success: Shannon Bowman-Sarkisian, Brenda Coultas, Deshana Hamid, David Kirschenbaum, Andrew Naymark, Roxanne Palmer, Kara Rondina, Douglas Rothschild, Fatin Sabur, Brook Schneider, Michael Shatz, David Ward and Jo Ann Wasserman. Special thanks to Teachers and Writers, Granary Books, Z Press, Ron Padgett, David Kermani and Dianne Benson.

On Sunday, March 3rd, a Memorial Tribute was held at The Poetry Project for the writer, teacher, and poet, Fielding Dawson, who passed away on January 5th, 2002. This moving and won-

derful afternoon was organized by Susan Maldovan and hosted by Hettie Jones, with over 20 participants reading and speaking about Fielding. It was especially remarkable to hear the gratitude and admiration of writers Fielding had worked with in the prison writing workshop program.

On Sunday, March 10th, the Poetry Project hosted A Tribute Reading: Eight Poets for Zoë Anglesey. Funds raised will be used to cover medical expenses incurred by Zoë who is fighting lung cancer. The afternoon was a stirring and memorable success. Many of the readers traveled long distances to be here.

The Poetry Project would like to give a special thanks for both these events to Lee Briccetti of Poets House, Bob Holman, Barbara Sibley and La Palapa Restaurant, Catherine Best, Erica Kaufman, Jessica Tanis, Andrew Naymark, Michael Shatz, David Vogen, Fatin Sabur, Andrea Byrne, and Shannon Bowman-Sarkisian.

At the end of June, we'll be saying "good-bye" to Program Assistant and Web-host Veronica Corpus. Ronnie, you've been amazing to work

with and we wish you well. Come back to New York as soon as possible.

As we get ready to leave for the summer, we wanted to give you a preview of our fall programming. We'll be starting a little earlier than usual with an 80th Birthday Celebration for Jackson Mac Low on September 18th. The Poetry Project will be hosting a tribute for the Late John Wieners on Wednesday, October 9th. Also in the fall lineup are readings by Merrill Gilfillen, Anne Waldman, Will Alexander, Ron Padgett, Serge Fauchereau, Nina Zivancevic, Josie Foo, Sesshu Foster, and Thurston Moore.

Arriving in mid-June will be the long-awaited (and delayed) issue 58 of *The World*. It begins with Denizé Lature's "Zaps of Zombifying Powder" and includes work, by among others, Victor Hernandez Cruz, Carla Harryman, John Godfrey, Lewis Warsh, Maureen Owen, Kimberly Lyons, Betsy Fagin, Anselm Berrigan, Fred Moten, Jo Ann Wasserman, Lorenzo Thomas, and Gary Lenhart.

Fielding Dawson (1930 - 2002)

Fielding Dawson was born in New York City in 1930. After his family moved around a bit, he grew up in Kirkwood, Missouri. He attended Black Mountain College from 1949 to 1953, where his teachers and fellow students included Charles Olson, Franz Kline, Robert Creeley, Cy Twombly, John Chamberlain, John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Basil King, Joel Oppenheimer and Ed Dorn. Soon thereafter he was drafted into the military, and served as an army cook in Germany. In 1956, he returned to New York City, where he made his home for the rest of his life.

Fielding is best known as the author of some of the best fiction of the 20th Century. His sentences are so well constructed, indicating the contours of natural speech. Fielding adds a dash of Hammett and Raymond Chandler, rendering texts of such clarity and speed that they make, as Creeley said, "of words a literal texture of place and person." Fielding's stories shift from past to present and back again, zeroing in on the crucial psychological nuances so true to the story at hand that his story becomes our story, instantly recognizable. He was remarkably sensitive to emotional truths that hide behind the objective facts of one's life. With his keen eye, Fielding could see into people, including himself. This ability sharpened his prose, and contributed to his success as a teacher. He taught writing at various colleges and universities, including Naropa Institute. He had a knack for encouraging young writers. His enthusiasm is legendary, often bright eyed and funny, he could say "wow" like nobody else, and mean it.

In 1984, Fielding was asked to teach a workshop at Attica Maximum Security Prison. Charged and awakened by the experience, he dedicated

an enormous amount of time and energy to teaching in prisons, shelters and alternative high schools. Working with students who needed to write affected him deeply. He became an activist, hosting a weekly radio program on WBAI, "Breaking Down the Walls" and chairing the PEN Prison Writing Committee.

"Inside prison classrooms we see how prison forces prisoners to express themselves, drives them to write—in that violent recklessness and dull routine—to create. I am saying these are students to listen to! These are students to learn from! These are the students who cause us to rethink education, because they want it, they need it, and cooperate beyond our expectations to get it."

The range and intimacy of his prose fills over 20 volumes, including his famous *An Emotional Memoir of Franz Kline* (1967), *The Black Mountain Book* (1970), *Tiger Lilies* (1984), *The Mandalay Dream* (1971), *The Trilogy of Penny Lane* (1977-1981), *Krazy Kat and 76 More* (1982), *Virginia Dare* (1985), *The Trick* (1990), and his last collection, *The Land of Milk and Honey* (2001).

As a visual artist, Fielding contributed drawings and collages to a great many small press publications, including his own books. He enjoyed witty juxtapositions and angular abstractions, often using advertising cut-outs and slipping text in here and there. He was represented by the Jack Tilton Gallery in New York, where his last show exhibited last September.

On January 5, Fielding Dawson died of heart failure in his New York City home. —Mitch Highfill

from **A Locked Room** by **Beth Anderson**

*"It must be assumed that somebody is telling
the truth—else there is no legitimate mystery,
and, in fact, no story at all."*

—John Dickson Carr, The Three Coffins

1.

Traps are underfoot on every path. He who set them is bound
to property, waits to see if jaws glinting in moonlight will leave traces
when they close. He passes three doors on his way to find songs of grief

with interchangeable words and will go back over his steps past them
until negligence finds another place to keep its keys. I listen—no sound—
see three chairs, one outside each door. Even so, the hall does not invite delay.
Another gas lamp flutters against the gravel path, reflected in steel teeth

so that pieces of light are cut out. Evidently he has left and not given
us the means to suspect him, but there is no ladder; how did he descend?
We need not risk crossing open sky if imagination alone will suffice.

4.

The registrar's narrative finds him across from her while voices crash
and drop onto the quilt, undamaged. He lives like a wolf, with the hunter's eye
upon him, in an apartment surrounded by cement that keeps knowledge interned.

Held fast, in secret, it squints and grows by sifting through mattress guts.
A steward offered vast sums of money that were refused and his eyeglasses
fell from the bridge of his nose before imagination could recover them. I
gently imply that madness will pass from belief through theory to the silent cavern

containing all that is not held true. He expresses no surprise at the scratched but
whole chicken bones littering the ground where dogs guard the entryway
for we both know they will choke if they break through to marrow.

5.

On the window ledge a vine is crushed as if by the weight of a person preparing to jump. But just three feet separate the mulch-covered ground from the sill, and any leap would involve, then, a desire to live.

The absence of trust is a turning point in our sense of what should happen to the words *I saw a man*. The strange dissociation of matter has become a balloon inflated with helium, floating over footsteps sinking profoundly as they progress toward betrayal. Ankles and cobblestones don't mix

so all claims ably resist corroboration. I prepare again to enter the garden under the pretense of looking for traces he might have left. But once inside I will in fact rely on dreams to unveil both guilt and happiness.

9.

We ate breakfast together in the sunlit room. Her soft voice denied any involvement, but I knew I'd never comfortably sign any statement sporting her word. Like the steps of blistering blocked shoes on dedicated toes,

her syntax returned to the point in every sentence, wore down one section of sound-damped floorboards at a pace intended to clash with scenery. Our words foliate these walls but eventually erode their own means of support. Behind them, my goals hide even from me although we share

an office, nap nodding together in the afternoons. But danger beckons and though I confess with some shame that I fear the blinking lights atop each skyline tower, in order to save birds of prey I will overcome myself.

10.

Now who remains in the room with me? With that question I lost control of all I'd thought secure. Clad in remnants of an echoing gallery, the lady in black left her voice behind to protect those who would walk under leaning ladders.

We took chances but never were able to find ourselves at home, instead kept crossing borders and becoming visible. He escaped the fall in a most unusual way. He sprang atop a wire fence just after the attack and used grudges to keep his balance across the roof, break the pattern,

skip lightly atop the trap without triggering its jaws. I must loop a thread around my wrist and carry my identity tucked in my sleeve instead of on it, move past witnesses to take my place, wanting to whisper in every ear but silent.

Poem

The Giant Caterpillars by Drew Gardner

the giant caterpillars changing into moths
the glass filled with water
time moves, a survivor
by being sound
tires against the street
spider on the wall
children playing in the leaves
I tried to hang it on a door
but it won't stay
not the last
the radiator bang
of course you love monsters
he replaced the burners on the stove
rampant serpentine gas nozzles
the main signal disconnect switch
the body steering the mind out of the way
the trick is to actually make it darker
passes over from the passivity of the experience
to the activity of the game
the war substitute
becoming crystal from the heat and pressure
drugs...insurance...oil...
there is no second skull that protects the brain from itself
the germ of life
is obliged in the course of its development
to repeat the structures

of all the forms from which it sprung
the history of the earth
its relation to the sun
destroyed television, mnemonic carpet bagger
look at your hands...
I don't even do anything, I just write numbers down...
was robbed of cash by an officer
and pepper sprayed by another (who held
the cylinder to his mouth)
the heart can live for six hours outside the body
yelling at the inner boundary
Christmas lights reflected in coffee
relieves the pressure, but the problem remains
eating travesties
the house cat in the coffee shop
the shadows of birds moving over Amsterdam Ave.
coughed up after a long illness
the switch-board operator
the building on the sea of this
the transparently corrupt delegation of these resources
please don't let me become one of these lame
white people, writing shit in my ledger about money
dendrite action is open to many things...
a pagan torture against the wagonistic issues of bleed
that's how the world ends, some squirrel calls you
into her office and closes the door behind you
cute when yawning
eternity in a person
my heart felt like a black hole sucking in all light
the wheat fields slowly filling with ocean waves

That Painting at the Met by Patricia Spears Jones

She looks like Carol DeForest, but according to signage
She's Mrs. Isaac Newton Phelps Stoke
dressed for motion—a boating party?

Her mate—Mr. Stoke, Mr. Phelps Stoke?—at her side,
bowler hat in hand
his stern posture on the verge of a slouch perhaps?

They are wealthy and perfectly turned out
for the ghostly geometry of Sargent's lucrative formula.

A century later Carol shares the bride's charisma
and her dark, generous eyes and healthy skin

Carol is happy to be moving in light, air, dust, mortal
but once was Mrs. Isaac Newton Phelps Stoke
alive in this double portrait, circa 1897, fearless,
comfortable, ready to watch

another sunset with her handsome husband
as America vaunts its first prerogative.

John Wieners January 6, 1934 - March 1, 2002

by William Corbett

John Wieners died Friday March 1 in Boston's Massachusetts General Hospital. Unbeknownst to friends and family John had been in the hospital's Intensive Care Unit since midnight of the preceding Sunday, February 24th.

That night John attended a party on Blossom Street near MGH with his friend the poet Charley Shively. They drove to the party and parked in a parking lot. Around 10 p.m. John left to return home presumably planning to walk the three or so blocks to his Joy Street apartment. For reasons unknown he returned to the parking lot where he was felled by a stroke. By midnight he had been discovered and taken to the hospital. John never regained consciousness. It was quickly learned that he had his house keys on him but no identification. The sole piece of paper on his person was a receipt from a CVS drugstore. Using this receipt which indicated that John had made his purchase with a medical credit card in his name, hospital authorities determined John's identity and alerted his family. This took five days until the afternoon of March 1 by which time John was near death. Since he often stayed incommunicado in his apartment friends had not missed him. John's family called Shively and John's close friend the poet Jim Dunn who raced to the hospital. They arrived to find that John had been declared brain dead at 5:11 p.m. Since he was still hooked up to life-saving machines Shively, Dunn and John's family were able to, in the words of a nurse, "say goodbye to him." Shively and Dunn summoned a priest who came and gave John

last rites. He was declared dead at 8:16 p.m.

Born January 6, 1934 in Milton, Massachusetts, John graduated from Boston College in 1934 and attended Black Mountain College in the spring of 1955 and summer of 1956. He lived in Boston before residing for various lengths of time in San Francisco, Buffalo and New York City. In 1970 John returned to Boston and moved into 44 Joy Street on Beacon Hill, his home for the rest of his life. In 1986 Black Sparrow Press published John's *Selected Poems 1956-1984* edited by Raymond Foye. Black Sparrow published *Cultural Affairs in Boston: Selected Poetry and Prose 1956-1985* also edited by Foye in 1988. Several generations of Boston and Cambridge poets held John in high regard and his rare appearances on the poetry scene quickly became the stuff of legend. The most recent of which was his twelve-minute reading for Harvard's Woodbery Poetry Room. In April, 2000 Pressed Wafer, the Boston press named after John's pamphlet of that name gave John its first, and only, Lifetime Achievement Award. One hundred and forty-six people attended the ceremony at my home 9 Columbus Square, where over a dozen poets read. John accepted the tribute quietly but obviously enjoyed himself. In association with Granary Books Pressed Wafer published *The Blind See Only This World*, a gathering of seventy-two writers who celebrated John's work and example. John's family placed a copy of this book in his coffin. Over thirty poets and musicians read and sang at a memorial reading for John on May 2 at M.I.T.

For the record: John was buried on March 8th out of St. Gregory's Church in his Dorchester Lower Mills parish. Walter Phinney, Jr., John's nephew who handled his financial affairs, Jim Dunn, Jim Behrle, Jon Landry, Charley Shively and I were his pall bearers. At the Wieners family plot in Milton Cemetery Dunn, Shively and I read from his work

"The poem/does not lie to us. We lie under/its law,
alive in the glamour of this hour"

("A Poem for Vipers")

Snapshots of John Wieners

It must have been in the spring of 1971 just after John had returned to Boston and moved into his Joy Street apartment that he first came to 9 Columbus Square. I see him at a party standing in our kitchen quiet and alone: small moustache, sleeveless sweater, bow tie. The poet Paul Hannigan grabbed my arm. "That's John Wieners," he hissed. "Why he looks like a high school biology teacher!"

On that first visit or soon after when he came for dinner John met my eighty-year old grandmother then living with us. They hit it off, and he called on her several times for afternoon tete-a-tetes. Passing Nanny's room Beverly overheard the word "Renuzit." When I asked John what he and my grandmother talked about he said, "Household cleaning products." But their friendship went further than that. John gave her a copy of William Carlos Williams's book of stories *The Farmer's Daughter*. She, who rarely ventured beyond *Good Housekeeping* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, allowed as how Williams wrote a good story.

In the early 1970s I taught a class on Black Mountain at Emerson College. Special events—lectures, readings—convened at my house and I invited the interested public. John agreed to deliver a lecture on his years at the college. He arrived for dinner beforehand wearing a gray suit and tie. I remember that he advised me on the etiquette of appearing at the stage door to congratulate actresses on their performance. When forty or so people gathered in our living room I introduced John who, I noticed, had pulled out a hand mirror and comb to adjust his moustache and hair. I remember only two things about his talk. He began by saying that he went

to Black Mountain because the college gave him money. He claimed he would have gone wherever Richard Wilbur taught had he been awarded a scholarship to do so. After this he spoke mainly about S. Foster Damon's play *The Moulton Tragedy* which he had read that afternoon in the Boston Public Library. The tape recording of that evening has long since disappeared.

The morning Book Affair, a two-day convention of little magazines and small presses, opened—this is 1975 or '76—John showed up at my door. I was surprised to see him because he was not scheduled to read at the event until that night. John had shaved his skull and tied a red scarf around his head. When I opened the door I saw that he wore red leather hot pants and high heels. A circa 1930's women's jacket with large, round Bakelite buttons completed his outfit. John explained that he had come to accompany me to the event. I had a cartoon of *Fire Exit* magazines to carry so that out on Columbus Avenue I hailed a cab. John stood next to me oblivious to the wolf whistles and catcalls of the construction workers filling potholes with tar. He didn't ignore them; they simply did not exist. In the cab I asked him what he planned to do at the event so far in advance of his reading. "I want to give the place," he answered, "a little elan." Which is exactly what he did. He charmed the assembled writers and editors and throughout the afternoon John visited all the booths perusing the magazines and books with great care and happily posing for photographs. He attended all the readings that night before giving his own calm and clear reading. I don't know when he changed his clothes but now appeared in pants and a shirt. Afterwards we had a party at the house to which a number of people we did not know or barely knew came. Some days later I noticed that my copies of John's books, a first edition of *The Hotel Wentley Poems* and first of *Ace of Pentacles* had been stolen. In thirty-three years of giving parties in this house only copies of Bill Knott's books have similarly disappeared.

John showed up to read at the Blacksmith House wearing a flimsy summer dress over pants and a shirt. He read a few poems then began to talk between poems until the talking became paranoid rants about nearby Harvard and whores in the Cambridge streets. His face seemed crushed in torment. As the hour wore on he began to pause, long pauses, as if searching for the thread. He lasted it out but barely. Afterwards he handed me a torn blue plastic briefcase holding the

manuscript of a book I was to edit for a series to be published by the O'Neill brothers who owned Cambridge's Temple Bar Bookshop. Offstage John had calmed down and we planned to meet in a few days. At home I put the briefcase on the floor in our bedroom. Hours later Beverly and I were awakened by a thick sweet smell. Perfume! Where? A bottle of it had spilled in John's briefcase dousing the manuscript. That book never got published because the Temple Bar boys pulled the plug ending their brief-two books-careers as publishers. Later John wrote a poem indicting me for being a fake publisher and no friend to poets.

On a spring afternoon John phoned from the Taunton, Massachusetts State asylum. If I ever knew the circumstances of his admittance there I have forgotten them. John told me he had met a former student of mine who had been sent to Taunton after picking up a package at Logan airport. The package was full of LSD tablets. John, who had begun to call me "Professor Billy," said that he and my student were spending their days walking the grounds and reading aloud "Mr. Creeley's verses."

Lewis Warsh and I went to visit John in his Joy Street apartment in hopes of getting work from him for our magazine *The Boston Eagle*. (This was after Lewis, myself, Lee Harwood and John wearing a black and gold lame windbreaker, had been photographed together on the shores of Walden Pond, a photograph that is on the back cover of the first issue of *The Eagle*.) John asked if he might serve us refreshments. He returned from his kitchen with a plate of sliced carrot spears and three glasses, gold rimmed cocktail glasses, of creme de menthe. I remember from this or subsequent visits a collage hanging on John's living room wall. A photograph of the actress Alida Valli who had starred in *The Third Man* was at the collage's center. Either John told me or I later learned that Valli had been addicted to heroin. I remember that John's furniture was bamboo, porch furniture. I think Lewis carried away with him from this visit the large ledger holding the journal John kept while living on Scott Street in San Francisco that later became the book *707 Scott Street*, my copy of which seems to have gone missing.

John read at Emerson College—1976 is my guess—and it was a powerful reading especially the passages about the Kennedy brothers from a novel-in-progress. I can hear John read the line, "My father beat me with crisp

chains." I taped this reading but the playback revealed that John could barely be heard over the sound of Emerson's radio station, which had come over the electrical outlet. I have no idea what became of John's novel.

In the early 1980s I frequently saw John walking in Boston and Cambridge. When we stopped to chat it became clear that he was walking aimlessly for the pleasure of being free from his apartment. He did walk across town from his Beacon Hill neighborhood to shop for groceries at the Star Market at the Prudential Center not far from my South End home. In these years John often wore the sweaters of professional hockey teams. I see him now in a Chicago Blackhawks' sweater, its large Indian head with yellow feathers prominent on John's increasing paunch. He bought these sweaters at a store near the Boston Garden where he shopped after visiting his brother's law office to pick up a weekly or monthly check. This was money left by John's recently deceased parents.

Some months after John's *Selected Poems* edited by Raymond Foye appeared in 1986 Stratis Haviaras of Harvard's Woodbery Poetry room called to see if I thought John was up to a reading. I said I thought so and Stratis had John read in Lamont Library's Forum Room. Stratis asked me to bring a copy of John's book and to call out requests for poems if John became distracted. My participation was unnecessary. John had prepared a three-part program. First, he read from his book. When a member of the audience asked him to read from *The Hotel Wentley Poems* John refused. Next he picked up a copy of Bill Berkson's Z Press book *Lush Life*. He held up the book praising the handsome Bill's photograph on the cover. I saw that John had cut through the book twice stopping short of the spine to create three books. Somehow he negotiated through these by combining a start of one poem with the middle of another and the ending of a third. John finished his reading with the scene in the psychiatrist's office from T.S. Eliot's play *The Cocktail Party*. This gave the evening a sort of coherence. At least the audience members I spoke to found the reading as satisfying as I did.

John began to look increasingly like a street person: toothless, his clothes dirty and disheveled, his face bearded and covered with crusted sores. But his appearance did not reflect his state of mind. He may

(Continued on page 26)

Letter from a Young Poet by Magdalena Zurawski

For Alice Notley

A writer almost ghostily feels a certain language without knowing her own head full of colors. She is travel-dented by the heavy strokes of typographical youth first launched through goosed rhymes, the earlier grace notes that stave off adolescent sea legs. And indeed, having such customs roused within her cures her figuratively. With such health, then, she is able to write her letters from where she has made her home: in a resonating ink blot.

Whilst journeying through Greece, however, she suffers a little. But there a word reverberates occasionally with some generosity. She is dropping off to sleep with pleasure in the sound. She sleeps hoarse with pleasure. "Build," it says, "cover my ribs."

She is suddenly ajar with near poetry, a sea of hacked pieces: "Their flaming bellies, ardent eyes, nimble tongues, hissing jaws." She courts the noise. Her roaring mouth, purely athletic, gets the vowels out. Lemons. Artificial lemons.

Though it's not matter, it neither sings entirely, nor falls apart. She chides her tongue for its palsy. Yet, she is unable to wake and stand and leave it in this formal place.

But slowly, in the room, after she can flirt no more, after she must become her only feared guest, she begins to hear her own noise dwelling: "I felt yesterday again the tortures of my youth, felt yesterday again the fiction that I know, almost a passion, a queer sort of freedom, idealized singular rebel, fragrance of a rose, fragrance of a dissected rose, and finally, a more human feeling than has ever preceded it."

Questionnaire

What do you find to be the uses and/or limits of "community" at this moment?

Anne Waldman (Boulder, CO):

The Sanskrit word for community, used in spiritual contexts, is *sangha*. By that, a deliberate vow intended that you don't diss, destroy, slander, obliterate the imagination, creativity, or interfere with the practice of your friend. Your poet friend? Generosity is the transcendent friend. You support the lifestream and the work. Are we just existing in poet time? The world's in flames: intense hatred fanning out in all 10 directions; a war on terror that's already killed 3,500 people in the name of "crusade," "retribution"; citizens of New York fresh on the funeral pyre. Every life is sacred and suffering and grief are endless.

Poetry alleviate suffering? Possibly so. So work on that joy and delight. The accoutrements of our scene, both critical and poetic, the schools, academic zones, publications, reading and performance series, internet exposure, through dialog and discussion, only exist through the committed seriousness and visionary "I" of self and other, and they're always worth the struggle.

Buy some turf for the safe poetry zones, I'm telling students. How precious those spaces are to hear, think, write within! You wanna go it alone? Guard your community well for the next generations. Preserve the precious tape archives of St. Mark's and Naropa, the shouted and whispered secret poetry transmissions. It's all interconnected.

Hindrances: greed, envy, slander, bad poetry.

Fanny Howe (Boston, MA):

When I was young in the seventies, there was a fertile poetry community that came out of New York through a variety of mimeographed publications that were mailed to 100 poets free of charge. United Artists and Telephone Books were only two

of these. But it was clear that the two essential ingredients for this sense of community was this rapid publication of work by each other; and then, too, common life circumstances. What is general to being young is poverty, error, uncertainty, uprootedness and wild romance. These ingredients generated thought and poetry that we wanted to share with each other. The Language poets, a few years later, created a similar energetic community, with lots of poetry and ideas being printed and exchanged among a smallish group. Much of it in the Bay Area.

Now that I am not young my poetry community is dispersed around the country, and beyond. Only a few of us stay in touch with any regularity and even fewer exchange our work. We write emails. We are not involved in publishing by and large but we go to readings by old friends and follow the work of a few people we knew from the beginning. I read some new work that floats into my house by chance. Boston has no community of poets to speak of, really. But just recently Bill Corbett held a reading for Tom Raworth in his house in the South End. It was a superb occasion, and great friends came around to hang out and listen to poems. In the late afternoon Ben Watkins drove Tom and me to the freshly dug grave of John Wieners in Milton, near Massachusetts Bay. Our feeling of closeness traveled through time, earth and space for that hour, because really community is based in sharing a moment in history.

Dale Smith & Hoa Nguyen (Austin, TX):

*but public life has fallen asleep
like a secret name the wrong-reader
will say he has pity for others
where the thought is born in hatred
of pity, which is only feeling the action*

*we are only images of hates pity
and its reduction of horror to sentiment*

wordlessness no thing is so simply

—Robin Blaser, "Image-Nation 9 (half and half)"

There are poetry communities—plural. Their uses are familiar: to encourage, inspire, critique, teach, share and determine, individually, the defining actions that renew and restore the affections of poetry for individuals within them. I'm not talking about the fashionable and obscene analysis of literary markets. That's a reduction removed far from the dream of *communitas* many poets share in their work. There is a war for the imagination of poetry—between communities and markets—just as the war on terror battles the ancient sovereignty of the individual. The uses of these communities could be to bolster and extend the complex narrative of our shared moments in time. A community is a gathering of voices that put us in contact with diverse physical, temporal and textual environments. The community is a *modus* of perception (recall Pound's "all eras are contemporaneous"), a perceived force, completing an urgency of connection.

Communities sustain the bodies of feeling and intelligence of individuals. Nothing takes the place of the pleasure of our friendships. Likewise, "opposition is true friendship." The struggle to extend poetry's vital energies—across social and imaginative geographies—remains the essential effort of people bold in their engagement of instinctive forms but humble enough to listen to the convergent environments of our art and world.

Community is our trade for a shattered common ground. It's the public manifest of the heart's wild void.

Joshua Clover (Berkeley, CA):

The main uses and limits seem pretty constant: on the one hand, spells against loneliness and the pleasures of continuing conversations, instead of having to define terms and establish axioms every time you go to a bar. And, on the other, the astounding percentage of aesthetic output devoted to signaling one's membership in a com-

munity, and policing its borders. How do these functions of community relate to this historical moment? Well, they probably go toward producing the sense of there being a historical moment at all, rather than abstract duration in which atomized individuals drift along. I wonder if this isn't particularly appealing just now, when the rhetoric of the end of history is at a kind of zenith. And I wonder if the hypothesis of continuous, self-identifying historical moments (just a "ve" away from "movements") isn't quietly charged in the environs of the Poetry Project, where the value of repressing the idea that a certain history might be really really over is at a premium.

Edwin Torres (NYC):

any community builds support while creating a vacuum...to step outside what would be considered community enables growth....or at least another viewpoint...which then evolves your work...which allows you to enrich your community...so it's a double-edged sword... maybe community is too inhibiting...for me anyway...in poetry I sense many groups of people in the grand community called poetry...and each group contributes while remaining in their vacuum...which is unavoidable...to remain if you're in a group... but then, I have problems with organization...of words let alone people...

Rachel Levitsky (Brooklyn, NY):

The poetry community is rather strong right now. Collaborative projects seem to pop up like mushrooms. Solitude became eerie after September 11th and the wars that have followed. Translation projects and cross cultural work in particular seems to be flourishing vis a vis Double Change, Duration and the new translation series at the New York Public Library. There is that wonderful series at White Box, Lytle's Shaw's at Drawing Center, and Joanna Fuhrman's wild projects of video, and theater on Monday nights at the Project—all which yearn to place the poet in her world. The world seems willing. I think that, though we lament how poorly we're paid as poets,

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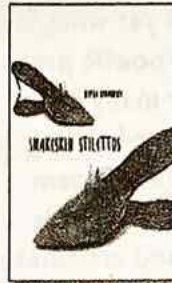
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If I don't hear from you again, I shall wonder whether or not you got so wrapped up in your "canning and freezing" that you are either somewhere on a shelf full of preserves with a metal lid on your head or boiling up with the frozen peas in your freezer compartment, from life to something else swiftly translated. Be of good cheer

Beverly

John Ashbery and Joe Brainard: *The Vermont Notebook* Commemorative Broadside • 16" x 19" • Signed, limited edition • \$100

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there is an element to our lack that frees us to make connections to grassroots communities. Also the possibility of/and acceptance into the mainstream has forced those of us in the avant-garde with radical politics—who have, as one example, negative feelings toward unrestricted capitalist growth and consolidation—into action. Perhaps.

When I started *Belladonna*, in part that was a response to, as Mei-mei Berssenbrugge called it, the “paranoia” of the New York innovative scene, a fight for perceived scarce space—and yet what would we fight over? Some notion of poetic prestige and position? Forgive any vagary in my memory here: Jacques Debrot had a project of calling people and asking them if he could read a poem and then asking them to evaluate it. Many of his random subjects were as perceptive and articulate as our most esteemed critics. In addition he called The Poetry Society or the Academy of American Poets (I don’t remember which) and asked if he could speak to, again my memory is poor, John Ashbery and Robert Haas in order to read them a poem, and asked how does one become a poet and how are they paid. The administrative assistant who answered his call replied: it’s not for money, it’s more for prestige that one tries to be a successful poet. There it was in bold—the holographic universe that is the poetic hierarchy. We’re poets doing our work and the point is, as Anne Waldman notes, to alleviate suffering, to make something beautiful, interesting, something that wakes one out of the generation’s somnambulism, something that works more efficiently and humanely/that is more alive/organic/unmediated than pharmacology. At the White Box is an exhibit of the faces and comments of anti-globalist activists and it’s completely compelling. Here is a post utopian community that is trying to reinvent the notion of caring for the world beyond the self. I think we in the poetry world are being reminded all the time. I have the feeling that the struggle is beginning again and in terms of our participation I have hope for us. Though I’m really lost right at the moment about Sharon’s war against Palestine (not to mention Department of Justice’s suppression of legal rights—arresting radical lawyers!).

Jim Behrle (Brookline, MA):

Poetry’s audience is so slight, anyone writing and showing it to anybody (pets included) has entered into a circle. The pluses can be camaraderie, challenge, influence, exchange, friendship, publication, adoration and, with luck, fantastic sexual encounters. The limits of any community spring from the limits of its members. There are so many poets out there. We can be ambitious and petty creatures: cliquish, snobby, hateful, indifferent, obnoxious and lousy in bed. At our best our clans give us an audience—no small feat. Whether they heckle or clap, bless them.

Patricia Spears Jones (Brooklyn):

I think the uses and the limits are the ones that have always been in the “poetry” or any other “community.” The uses are fellowship, critical attention, shared knowledge and concern, publication opportunities, the chance to pass on experience, knowledge and deeply held ideas to a new generation. The limits are political—which “poetry community” one is aligned with may determine what kind of fellowship, critical attention, opportunities, etc. that a poet will receive. The “credentialized” community decides who the prize winners will be, who gets the teaching jobs, major publication opportunities, and how much or little critical attention will be made of the poet’s work. The “populist/performance” community decides who gets gigs at what kind of readings; publication or recording opportunities, production credit and whether the poet has to adhere to identity issues. At a few junctions, these particular communities meet, but for the most part, they are exclusive of each other. And frankly, that is a shame.

Anselm Berrigan (NYC):

The uses of a community, or communities, are similar to what they are for me at any moment—sources of information, atypical perspectives, certain kinds of artistic and demi-political support. It’s useful to find out how, and in what ways, other

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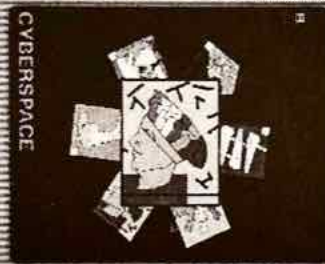
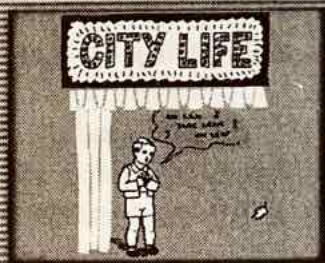
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people are responding or not responding to the current state of war and planetary breakdown.

The limits feel harder to quantify, but insularity between "communities" has always been a limit, though it is perhaps less of an issue right now as opposed to five years ago. I like to think of everyone who has ever written a poem as a part of my community, which makes it very large and mysterious. A limit to that type of thinking might be that it's somewhat delusional, but I like big, open doors that any person, ghost, or alien could walk through at any moment.

Elizabeth Robinson (Berkeley, CA):

Once when I was waxing a little too enthusiastic over poetry, my uncle responded flatly that some people like poetry and some people like waterskiing. While I'm willing to acknowledge his point, I respectfully disagree that all passions are equal. Poetry does not require specialized equipment, a body of water (unless you want to be published in *The New Yorker*) or physical prowess. There are in-group problems with the writing community, but overall it is remarkably open and lively.

Everywhere I've lived, there were people writing poetry. They often did this semi-secretly, but were only too glad to engage with another writer. And I've always been happy for their company and insistence on the efficacy of words, even if I didn't feel much excitement over particular poems. But when the excitement over poetry *is* there, it's one of the best things in life.

That brings me to what I see as the value of community among poets. Poetry provides a kind of intimacy between readers and writers that isn't always available elsewhere. I am grateful for the labor, art, and risk that the process entails. This has, for me, opened out into other forms of intimacy and community. Explicitly and implicitly literary relationships have sustained me over time, geography and changing life circumstances.

Ron Padgett (NYC):

A good poetry community—that is, people who get together in person, by phone, by letters, or by

email, and talk about poetry and read or hear or publish each other's work—can be very helpful for a poet whose writing is uncertain or stagnant because of isolation. Such a group can not only provide mutual encouragement and information, they can also serve as sounding boards for each other's work. They can even generate energy by arousing one's competitive instinct. All of this can be particularly useful for a young writer.

It can also be less than useless if one begins to think that the group's collective taste forms the boundaries of the universe of poetry, or if the group begins to exert pressure—tacit or explicit—on its members to write only in an approved style. Both of these dangers impose an insularity that the poet might have been trying to escape by joining the group in the first place.

In a larger sense, what is perhaps healthiest is to be involved in a variety of changing poetry communities—real and imagined—made up of writers living and dead, local, national, and international, and to stay open to the best in each.

Vincent Katz (Rome, Italy):

Although I've had many friends who are poets, I've rarely felt myself part of a community. Poetry, like any other human endeavor, seems to work on power, which is fine. Lord knows I like competition, but I wish it were friendly competition. The real problem is we don't pursue community in general, or only with great difficulty. I do think it's worth striving for, however. Community can be setting up readings for other poets, something I've tried to do whenever I'm outside of New York, like now.

Eleni Sikelianos (NYC):

Not having ever entirely accepted (the old news of) the death of the author, I was still confused by the idea of individual genius. The notion that genius and its creations come out of a community and a community's activities suits me just fine. We make this work and thought together. As a living community of poets and writers (one that includes individuals all over the globe), we are also making some alternative, some other way to oper-

ate within the world besides the most visible social structures.

The community, of course, is more than just the living—there are the dead, as well as books, paintings, etc., and there are all kinds of elaborated connective tissue between overlapping (sometimes contentious) groups, and individuals in farflung lands.

Limitations: 1) in more tightly defined communities, writing to a narrow band of “audience” and thus losing sight of some of the larger world picture; 2) in New York, having to go to all of your friends’ and acquaintances’ readings so that that is all you ever do; 3) the temptation to put a little emphatic thumb on all your friends and acquaintances to come to your readings so that that is all they ever do.

Andrew Maxwell (Los Angeles, CA):

Poetic communities are communities against consensus. As Melville nearly said, “Strike through the masque!”

Though tetchy and tending to worry over countless species of visibility and emergency and dustbunny conceptualism, poets are rescuers, or they must be, as they often rescue me from the sort of ecumenicalism that daily stands in for common knowledge. Ecumenicalism confuses territorial acquisition with “settlements,” as if such a consensual vocabulary could earn a composite peace. Well, most poets can’t settle down, thank you! I imagine them Bradbury’s talking books, stumbling away from the city and its ovens toward a preservative uncertainty.

Despite a certain diffuse grumpiness we may all admit to, I keep inviting poets to my town, because a life without them is insufferable. Or perhaps because a life with them is insufferable, which gives you some sense of life’s value, no? Young poets, before they’ve begun selling signature plate sets and wind-chimes to Hallmark, try at least to remain suspicious and alert and available to an argument. Never trust a poet who doesn’t argue with you at some point! We can’t afford them in their modesty, with their humming love of books by the dozen, ready with endless concessions to the scope notes of the New Republic. Remember

that William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass had largely irreconcilable differences, and that progressive “community” in their time marched to the refrain of “Dare To Stand Alone,” definitively a “strangely popular” sentiment.

Poets, inasmuch as they are aspirants to principled individuation, are just so “strangely popular,” which must also mean difficult and off-putting. *Bande à part*, yessir. When intellectual debate is made euphemism for sedition, as the landlords would have it, the poets are pitched off the green. Damn right! Thoreau wasn’t a golfer! But he did say that a person’s wealth is measured by what they can afford to leave alone, so poetry must be something akin to tramp art. Poets can’t leave well-enough alone, and so consult their penury in groups—why complain about the noise? Shelley set the stakes: “Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh hear!”

Such spontaneous communities are themselves reignitions, arguments, enthusiasms, romanticisms; and poetic community is the antidote to the ecumenical. Remember it for that. It is definitively troublesome. What they call “difficult music”—alive and unreasonable. The friends and lovers of poetry pull a Branca on instrumental reason. I can barely hear you in this din, bravo, but keep it up!

Daniel Bouchard (Cambridge, MA):

Community is larger than what I can visualize. So it’s kind of an abstraction that you sometimes encounter at a reading or in a bar. I wouldn’t want all of my poetry community in my apartment. Not enough glasses. Community is essentially a clique whose survival depends upon the infiltration of outsiders. If this were not so, community would merely be a society of professionals. But a proper assimilation of newcomers isn’t predetermined. Change is a two-way street. Once community ceases to attract vitality, conformity is its zombie-knell. You can recognize fellow communitarians like you would someone from your neighborhood or school. That is, you may not have a speaking relationship with them but there’s an awareness of presence. You may not even like them. Still, you may read their work; hear rumors and anecdotes of their ups and downs. On the other hand, if in an

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Poetry and the Fate of the Senses

by Susan Stewart

University of Chicago, 2002

The title refers to Marx's aphorism, "The forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present": nonetheless, after 447 glorious pages demonstrating that poetry has been a vehicle for (as well as a record of) the ontology of consciousness through the senses, Stewart erupts in despair: "Perhaps I am writing at the end of a world." If one traverses the history of poetry from the warm waters of Lesbos, where the singing head of Orpheus washed up on Sappho's shore, to the twin pillars of Spectacle Theory and Mechanical Reproduction, one might well wonder if one has swum to the ends of the earth (or simply westward with the course of Empire). For Stewart is concerned with the human and what makes us more humane to one another; poetry forces a face-to-face encounter between individuals, writer and reader, and in the process reveals our interrelatedness. This is the transcendent project of poetry. If you bleep at the words "human" or "transcendent" I hasten to add that Stewart is a historical thinker, rejecting formalism and artifactualism and anything that would erase labor with magic.

For Stewart, it is the spectacle that masks death; poetry confronts it. Mark-making is the synecdoche for all *poiesis*; it re-enacts our consciousness emerging from inchoate darkness (to which it will also return) meanwhile defying the forces of time to obliterate *this*. Thus darkness is a figure Stewart returns to as the embodiment of that which we rallied our senses, and our metrics, against throughout history. And even as I give you this nutshell explanation I am doing an injustice to a book bursting at the seams of every paragraph with knowledge, ideas, images and even that most rare thing, sublime sentences. You will learn that Donne was the first English poet to designate a poem as a "Nocturnal"; you will encounter frissons, such as I did at "We may say in fact that visual perception becomes a mode of touching when comparisons are made and the eye is 'placed upon' or 'falls upon' relations between phenomena." Such a line is the shortest distance between Gaston Bachelard and anyone alive writing now.

Shifts between Stewart the critic and Stewart the poet (three volumes, most recently 1995's *The Forest*)

make her phantom subject and object of her own study. Which Stewart wrote the despairing ending which conjures a (postindustrial) world bereft of sensual delight? "Marx had hoped over time new human senses would develop; he never seemed to have imagined that entire spheres of sense experience might be lost for many first-world people: a tacit knowledge of tools and forms of dancing or carrying infants...." It is a long backward look she throws over her shoulder, only to see these things wrenched back into history. But her elegy closes the book on a note of intense poetic melancholy, invoking first darkness, then curses in the dark, then silence: the apparent end of history. This visionary ending may signify a radical undecideability between the Romantic poet and the Marxian critic. If balance or vertigo as a "new" sense experience was developed in the baroque era, isn't it possible that other new "senses" have been illuminated by the poetics of the twentieth century? I think of Wallace Stevens's "Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar" or Ashbery's "Perhaps we ought to feel with more imagination" as portents of the new world horizon—one that eventually will appear continuous with the old.—ANGE MLINKO

North Point North: New and Selected Poems

by John Koethe

HarperCollins, 2002

John Koethe is often likened to Wallace Stevens, in no small part because of an affinity for blank verse metaphysics; a Euro-aestheticism set to an American landscape; and because other critics say so. But he doesn't always seem that modern, or Modern. With his unitary I, twilit melancholia, and romantic obsession with age, it's surprising he rhymes with Slim Shady rather than Goethe. Whatever century one affiliates him with, he seems pointedly out of time; like Al Green perfecting soul spirituals after the category dropped from relevance, Koethe seems bent on the purified operations of an inoperant genre.

He's followed a discontinuous course: two early volumes preceded an eleven-year hiatus ending with 1984's meditative, lovely *Late Wisconsin Spring* (Milwaukee is his Hartford). A longer lacuna followed, until 1997's *Falling Water*. The water's been falling ever

since: *The Constructor* (apparently done in parallel) came two years later, and this *Selected* includes 58 pages of new poems.

Here's an example of the Koethesque, from *Spring's* title poem:

Although the incidents vary and principle figures change,
Once established, the essential tone and character of a

Stays inwardly the same, day after day, like a person's. [season
The clouds are frantic. Shadows sweep across the lawn...

This may not showcase his preferred gestures. But then Koethe is not a poet of gesture, and such a passage gives a good sense of his mind-motion across a rigorously consistent body of work. The gracious, pensive surface is rippled by occasional movie citations and passing predilections like Frank Lloyd Wright; it's held in its banks by steady meter while recurrently floating bits of analytic philosophy. At moments he's the finest high-lyric traditionalist going; at sometimes-contiguous moments he's a guy sitting on the dusk-charged porch who, realizing he's quite sad, determines to tell you about it. Or rather, he seems determined to tell the evening air about it, measuredly, without much of a sense that it will make a difference, yet with the entitled assurance that someone will be listening.

But who, exactly? One isn't surprised to see the Hadas and Hirsch blurbs, the dedication to Mark Strand. So how comes Koethe to be debated at Naropa, his essays reviewed by the *Poetry Project Newsletter* editor, his poetry raved over by John Ashbery? Whence the alternative cred?

The answer must be, in part, in the comfortingly eccentric arc (itself faintly Stevensian) wherein talent and success appear rather late; this cheers everyone but the very young. Moreover, such a parabola has spared Koethe both the resentment leveled against mainstream poster-kids, and suspicions of careerism. Indeed, he has an actual career otherwise; his version of insurance is to be a philosophy professor. This marks him—rightly—as alien to the overt and covert anti-intellectualism of American Verse Culture. It also undergirds the rigor and charming charmlessness of his poetry, while quietly making apparent (surely to the reassurance of more than one young poet) that the Seventies vanguards didn't corner the market on brainpower.

But it must also matter that Koethe's poems call up the prospect of JA as much as WS. In 1968, when exciting politics and dull political poetry dominated the landscape, his debut was rifted with Ashberiana: "But the dream changes when you go away // And information arises to take its place." Three decades later he hasn't lost his nerve: "The people come and go

/ As in an elevator rising through the lobby of a new hotel / Into a frame of mind."

What's crucial to Koethe's poetics and his appeal in equal parts is the part of Ashbery's tradition from which he flows. Most acolytes and retreads capitalize on Ashbery the laissez-faire-haired boy, the snarky whiz of anything goes. There's something not just pleasing but akin to relief in being returned to Ashbery the romantic philosopher, that part which has been much-effaced as his institutional influence has risen to flood-levels. This, perhaps, is the secret of Koethe's signification: patiently his own river, he is nonetheless fed by another, near-forgotten river of which it reminds us, while turning itself, suddenly, late in its course, into a cataract.—GENEVIEVE BERNSTEIN

Sleeping with the Dictionary

by Harryette Mullen

University of California, 2002

Harryette Mullen's *Muse and Drudge* blew my mind on page and aloud in the mid-nineties, cutting away a huge swath of potential misconceptions about where the seams are or could be in a long poem, not to mention unleashing an expansive, wildly humored piece of poly-vocal momentum onto the world. *Sleeping with the Dictionary* takes another kind of constructive track, mixing N+7 techniques into a bag of literary and neighborhood/schoolyard wordplay games run through the *American Heritage Dictionary* and *Roger's Thesaurus*—bed partners, so to speak. The result is 85 pages of surprise-laden poems immersed unselfconsciously in the pleasures of reading and writing, and the primary pleasures of fucking with reading and writing.

The changeup level from work to work is one of *Sleeping with the Dictionary's* most amiable and ornery features. Mullen has stated on several occasions that *Muse and Drudge*, was, in a way, a poem in which she looked to bring the different audiences generated by her earlier books into the same room. *Sleeping with the Dictionary* is less singular a work on the surface—it is mostly short poems, many of which are made of prose—but in key with Mullen's desire to include as many different kinds, or instances, of personal and public language, talk, nonsense, wisdom, bullshit, music and speechwaves as possible from one line to the next. So anyone there reading or listening might find a doorway into the consciousness of the work.

Many of the poems herein have been published in dozens of little and not-so-little magazines over the past several years, from *Callaloo* to *Combo* and *Colored Greens* to the *Columbia Poetry Review*, so Mullen fans

will find multiple points of recognition. As a book, however, the poems mysteriously cohere; the feeling of selection that magazines often cast upon poems is swept aside when they cohabit between covers. Highlights include the demi-erotic derangement of Shakespeare in "Dim Lady" ("My honeybunch's peepers are nothing like neon... I have seen tablecloths in Shakey's Pizza Parlors, red and white, but no such picnic colors do I see in her mug."), "Denigration," a piece made of questions with "nig" and "neg" syllables carrying the sound all the way down the lines ("Does my niggling concern with trivial matters negate my ability to negotiate in good faith?"), and "Jinglejangle" an alphabetized arrangement of every singsong rhyme and parody Mullen's imagination can conjure: "Shake 'n Bake Shedd's Spread shilly-shally shipshape shirk work shit fit / shit, grit, motherwit shock jock Shy Di sin bin Sin Den singles mingle singsong / skag hag skimble scamble skinflint skinny mini skunk funk sky high slammer jammer."

I have a connection in mind between Mullen's poems in this book and George Schneeman's recent paintings of collages. The two artists' sensibilities are extremely different, but when Schneeman paints his collages all the seams end up at the same point of depth—they lose their material boundaries, making the images appear to be growing out of one another, rather than being layered. I sometimes can read *Sleeping with the Dictionary* the same way I see these paintings—the layering is gone, the seams are invisible, the parts might have been assembled at one point, but the movement within each poem is rich, and jarringly undivided most of the time. There's much more to say about it than a short review will allow, but that's only further incentive to pick the book up and let it take you on its ride.—ANSELM BERRIGAN

The All-Union Day of the Shock Worker

by Edwin Torres
Roof Books, 2001

A few years ago, I enrolled in a writing workshop that was taught by Edwin Torres. Each workshop would begin with an exercise that created some sort of chaos. I remember, for instance, one that began with us all writing something down. Then we all got up and began walking around the room screaming out what we had written down. As we did this we wrote down what we heard. Then we went and edited this into a new poem. In another workshop, we laid out 3 x 5 cards all over the floor to make a big rectangle. Then we drew one big drawing on these cards. And then we separated the

cards so that we were just left with little bits of the main drawing we had done. Then we wrote out of this bit of the drawing we had. These workshops were process orientated. Writing was presented as something that was in flux and all the better for it. And writing wasn't just written, it was also something sonic and graphic. And it was a complicated improvisational act that was very much dependent upon and stimulated by contact with others in the room.

This is what I think it means to be a shock worker. *The All-Union Day of the Shock Worker* reads as if it was written out of this space. There is the odd moment of romanticism and the odd moment of straight up philosophy, but in general the poems in *Shock Worker* seem to be all about what it means to be moving through life with languages and their attendant chaos. *Shock Worker* has five sections to it. It begins with poems that look more or less like poems in the section titled "Unfinished Beginnings." Then the section "What What What Now" which is a score to a play by Steve Cannon (these poems might be more interesting if read in the context of the play; on their own, this is the weakest part of this book). Then "Canyon Suite: A Parallel Text in Five Acts" which was written in the same manner but is more successful as it reads as a very funny series of word play without the source text. Then "I. E. Zagmm," poems written mainly in an unreadable, at least for me, symbol system although there are brief moments of English and Spanish coherence. And then "A Nuyo-Futurist's Manifestiny," which is a wonderful poem/manifesto/essay and is I think the strongest piece of writing in the book. I plan to make students of the courses I get assigned that have dumb names like "Understanding Poetry" read it for years to come. For readers who might find themselves lost in this work, "A Nuyo-Futurist's Manifestiny" will most likely explain it all. It explains language this way: "you set up / different precedents / as a part of / your senses / the other senses will follow // establish possibility / to allow / exploration / to allow / unexpectation / to happen." And also, "as LANGUAGE is : what creates us / let's create something greater : than / you or I /let's create us." The us that gets created in these poems is multilingual in all sorts of ways. The manifestiny moves back and forth between English and Spanish, "And I see that I say I am soy muy flaco de HOY..." *Shock Worker* is grounded in the urban space of New York and, as is often noted about Torres's work, it suggests many influences: Language, Performance, Experimental, Latino, Nuyorican, Slam, Latin American avant garde. There is a certain urban sprawl about his writing that makes it distinctive. At the same time, I believe anyone can join the union of the shock worker.

Some copies of the book come with a free button that proclaims membership. I wear mine proudly. I urge everyone else to join up.—JULIANA SPAHR

Spinoza in Her Youth

by Norma Cole
Omnidawn, 2002

If the title seems at first to trouble gender, on second thought it pushes the disturbance toward subject/object status: have we a female Spinoza, or another "she" encountering the proper name and all it stands for? This particular unclarity structures the book's flux. Still, Cole refuses to partake of the bodiless free-for-all and linguistic delirium of much post-modern writing around the signifier. Even in the volume's opening stanza, slippage emerges in the company of threats of force: "at some point, or at gunpoint / human is to wander." That first line quickly sobers its eponymous abstraction while inciting a range of attitudes: to be human is to wander; or humans are slated, bound—in the most literal sense—to wander, err. Cole's minding of both fluctuation and coercion delineates the possibility and compromise of being numerous, vigilantly. She cobbles a convoluted kinship if not a strictly Spinozan oneness of things. Mercurial, this poet/translator sets you hurtling toward other writings, dedications, and objects as "reference and frailty"; no straightforward genealogy will account for their adjacencies. What binds us, Cole proposes, might be a "heterotopian itch," or "laws of instead of." Jamming discrete phrasings, authorities and vulgar tongues against one another, cutting and coordinating verbal paste-ups, the collection finds reference's volatile poise. "Q" manifests these tendencies as a contemporary *Paterson* (or "new world jersey") reframed by the Biblical sourcebook of sayings, as though there were some as-yet unaccumulated gospel immanent amid all this sampling.

Cole finds her way to philosophy via an "intellect in unison with the / senses." Composition feels like an eye passing over a photograph or a blinded hand scanning; form alters in accord. Her visual artist's attention to shape as "round, square and phoenix" and light as "the trace of gesture" reorients the lately spurned sense of sight, seeking suspension and deferral instead of freeze frames, leaving the image "unclaimed." What counts as "image" is itself reassessed as the beholder withdraws from apprehending and depicting familiar hierarchies of figure and background. As Cole stresses in her preface to *Crosscut Universe: Writing on Writing from France* (Burning Deck, 2000), "Circumstances and events..., from detail to detail,

date to date, are not backdrop but determining facts appearing at different focal lengths, from naming to silence, testing the orders of apprehension as well as of writing." Within this extension drifts the eye in Spinoza's wake as lens polisher and grinder, seeking those persistent patterns of traffic that constitute individual, palpable things.

A "continuous beginning / again," Cole's lyric is not teleological but curious. So readers need patience for misunderstanding her resistant quest for qualities "To be continued as conventions you can fall from." Their return takes the form of a thrill delivered when "Deliberate // a particular clarity lends itself."
—JENNIFER SCAPPETONE

With Strings

by Charles Bernstein
University of Chicago Press, 2001

With Strings is a departure for Bernstein: it shows signs of a mini-armistice with accepted notions of poetic structure. Many of these poems focus their intent in a manner that he isolates and ridicules in such books as *Dark City*, or even in *My Way: Speeches and Poems*, a companion volume to this book. Nostalgia, regret, love, frustration, and amusement surface here—and although such feelings are questioned, they are also allowed to flourish. When most successful, the poems display semi-linearity without losing any of their trademark inquisitiveness and wit. When Bernstein's simultaneously diplomatic and challenging stances cancel each other out, reading *With Strings* is mildly uncomfortable, as if the book were trying too hard to make itself liked.

Bernstein's deconstructions are more easily grasped than in such books as the recent *Dark City*, perhaps because their field of reference reaches more deeply, and pointedly, into the everyday. "The Age of Correggio and the Carracci" smartly shows the materiality in archetypal fragments from a thank-you letter ("Thanks for your", "was delighted to get", etc.) to suggest that literary artifacts no longer last, making gratitude more of a formality than ever; as "monumentality... rings/ only once, then pisses/ its excess into the subverbal/ omnipotence of a clogged/ throat (smote)," inarticulation overtakes clarity. "Poem" is actually an introduction to a poem, replete with explanations of references—to "dog," "glass," and "achtung"—which need no explanation, reminding us that explanation of texts is both hopeless and inevitable.

When not talking about themselves, the poems talk about talking itself—in more openly droll tones

and rhythms than usual, almost as clownish and direct as early Fellini. "Egg Under My Feet," a poem in slurred speech, reveals itself as a trip inside the mush- and mealy-mouthed syntax of authority figures. When we read (and hear) "Fogem/ frumptious besqualmatity./ voraxious flumpf," we consider in what sense our struggle to understand is guided by the notion that we could understand, in the first place. Bernstein's effort to make his purpose plain is here uncompromised, writ large rather than in invisible ink.

Other poems might trigger memories or conjure palpable moods while questioning our ways of experiencing them; Bernstein here uses techniques of accessibility—smoothness, amicability—which he has always assailed to get at the expected questions (about meaning, about readers' assumptions) in a manner which, pleasingly enough, neither manipulates nor promises comfort. His approach is surprising, challenging us to read the poems' relation to "official verse culture." In "The Smell of Cheap Cigars," a boring poet bandies the words "incunabulas" (not a word) and "brioche" as the critical speaker's attention drifts through "the mirror/ Into the damp New York night/ Lurking with imperfect confusion in the/ Meandering sing-song of the street." This might be a narrative of flight from the overwrought craftiness of the academy into the perpetually vital world of the "street," and yet the clash of "incunabulas," "brioche," and "lurking with imperfect confusion" reminds us that we are, after all reading a poem by Charles Bernstein. "Lily's Dream" offers a scrutiny of child's syntax, beginning "About Emma. We were playing in the/ playground. & we were swinging on/ the swings. & we were playing on the/ merry-go-round too..."—and yet it doesn't deny the inherent charm in such strangely human abandon.

When the poems' internal mediation is negotiated poorly, the work becomes more entertaining than engaging. "This Poem Intentionally Left Blank"—a blank page—might be a joking reference to the poem as creator of "grammatical space," so named in *My Way*. It might also satirize a perceived over-emphasis on "intention" in the poetic process by removing words altogether. And yet the conversation the poem provokes is too brief. "The Human Abstract" runs as follows: "the shortest distance//between two points//is love." Granted, these words are true, and they are also profound, but their depth stops sooner than one might like—even if irony is intended. That being said, though, poems like "This Page..." and "The Human Abstract" find their place within the architecture of the book, striking counter-balances to verbal plenitude elsewhere. And as we read, the broadening of Bernstein's curiosity broadens our pleasure in his words.—MAX WINTER

Swoon by Nada Gordon and Gary Sullivan Granary Books, 2001

We read Nada Gordon and Gary Sullivan's *Swoon* together, reveling in the voyeurism of experiencing this romance unfolding over email. It isn't that *Swoon* will "make you cream," as Nada claimed in a recent reading. But the intimate struggle of two egos laid bare is, well, fascinating and a little naughty.

Gary and Nada share the writer's instinct to open a life to the eyes of the world, and they become one another's voyeurs. We speak of the characters as the people we know, and the book purports to display the actual exchanges between Nada in Japan and Gary in New York City. But through these exchanges the writers create themselves, and each other, through a courting display of linguistic prowess.

Gary becomes a passionate, effusive lover, subtly asserting his power from within a submissive posture. He calls this the "aesthetics of failure." His writing seems spontaneous and raw, with "documentary" mis-sives that charm with their directness and blur the distinction between "art" and "life." Nada styles herself the exotic, unattainable beauty. She writes, "i'm beautiful, tho, kind of, didn't i tell you?" Where Gary masturbates while simultaneously writing the experience to Nada, she concocts an ornate fantasy involving a leopard on a stage.

The two also reveal themselves in poetry, first through older, finished work, and then in poems that continue or run parallel with the dialogue. Most compelling are those that seem to arise from the flow of conversation, an exchange of heightened intensity and music.

At moments of fear the invented selves falter; each questions what in the relationship is "authentic." Nada reminds Gary of his "no-doubt sincere desire for your fantasy of me..." Gary takes two steps back to see himself through his own cartoon: "What was I—crazy? I wrote a 10-page letter to Nada...."

It is the writing itself that becomes most real—an actual body growing between them. Gary, in fact, enjoys carrying around the fat sheaf. When photos and a phone call are inevitably exchanged, though, the intrusion of the physical body threatens to chill the fever. The shock of actually meeting renders both speechless, and they are able to resume only as their written selves, passing a notebook back and forth.

Nada cancels her own vulnerability in these meetings by asserting her power to deny Gary. Gary deflects her by seeming to prostrate himself to her will. Even so, he deftly questions Nada's rejection. He reminds her that he is an object of desire in the eyes of a beau-

rifful woman, "C." At these points the struggle seems doomed to failure.

Those of us who know Gary and Nada know the story ends happily. But the happy ending is far from certain. Neither could have been entirely in control of the strong alternating instincts between self preservation and passion driving them. What is most joyful about the book is their rejection of cynical disengagement from the world in favor, despite disappointments, of a voracious emotional and intellectual desire. *Swoon*, like love, is an achievement. —JEN COLEMAN & ALLISON COBB

Vacation of a Lifetime

by Andrea Brady
Salt, 2001

How can one imagine oneself past a particular brand of first-world lies and misrepresentations, while refusing to relinquish a particular perspective? And without producing bad-faith poems of w(h)it(e)ness?

Brady, a young American poet who has lived and worked in England for the last several years, has come up with some answers. She researches early 17th century elegy at Cambridge University, and co-edits Barque press, which last year brought out the appropriately mordant *100 Days* anthology (a reckoning of Bush 43's first three months in office) among other books. The anthology's attacks on the illegitimate ascendancy and the absurd economic boom that preceded it are consistent with the sustained critique baroquely elaborated in *Vacation's* four sections: "Liberties, The White Wish Part 1," "Liberties, the City Adorned like a Bride Part 2," "The Torpedo of Excess" and "Seasonals 9b-Oz." The critique moves from the flaming youth of the "Liberties" sections ("Raped by constant indeterminacy") through slow dissolves ("I see women drinking/ coffee with friends, in cities, mysteriously/ pregnant with moderation") into the latter two sections' stripping bare of the generalized and gendered polis by its malevolently capitalized bachelors:

I'm looking for a difference
between dissatisfaction that halts
the forming of the present
woman, and that which nullifies
an incorporated heaven.

Turn again to Assyria, offering no bounty
for the killers of Iraq's 1.2 million. Who would
break his fast, or burden the world
with the American Shari'a; as the president here

I wish for use of the sun
all plastered in gold,

for crumbling less in office than this cracker.
Having patience we await rule.

Having been given the codex for sexual expression
in positions that also hide those cellulite jingle bells,
we revamp nothing if not Christmas, giving out
the bottom of our over-
taxed gut.

The shape here is adapted from the earlier Prynne (recently copped by sock puppet Roger Pellett), and the diction stretches out and forces real-time data along tracks laid by Denise Riley, John Wilkinson and Jennifer Moxley ("I'm unimproved by want or its opposite, / by a charm offensive at my threshold"), blended with an blatant ledgering of human accounts. It's powerfully disconcerting to be in the thrall of a speaker who has fully internalized American idioms and ideology, and warps them back from outside—these poems accomplished the kind of ex-patriotism we attach to *The Tennis Court Oath*, here effecting an offsite sifting of virulently sexualized, lifestyle-proping policy that kills people.

The most overtly didactic poems, like "Ash Wednesday Seasonal Oi *Depleted Uranium, and tomorrow no Sunday*" are amazingly effective in carving out public space for normally censored subjects. The speaker's close-up inspection and contemplation of "one gramme of this stuff" violates the (now stronger than ever) prohibition on questioning the technology of war, and on contemplating what actual contact with it does to actual people. Yet Brady refuses to sentimentalize, to personalize death rather than focus on the murderously impersonal forces, forces indirectly supported by the subject's citizenship, behind it in the millions. DU's "penetrating power"—it is used to pierce tanks and other armored vehicles by producing a small nuclear reaction on impact—makes a "hole hot and clean as truth a fake dawn exploding" and is then "carted home for scrap/ pot metal, toxic/ war souvenirs slings and and ladders. / It induces cellular damage, tweaks short term memory." Brady, through a carefully calibrated sense of when to stay with a description and when to cut over to effect (and heightened affect) makes such horrifying scenarios, which are real, galvanizing, rather than mere sites of aesthetic appropriation or trans-national empathy. Yet the book's deep engagement with lyric as valid and viable cultural expression, despite its imperial history in English, evinces a belief in its role in imagining other truths. —MIKE SCHARF

(Continued from page 19)

unfamiliar place or under strange circumstances, you may suddenly seek their company and even if they've never heard of you they may recognize that you too are part of the community. There is a sense of interaction and communication. Beneficence is not required; participants in highly dysfunctional communities may stick around for a long time. Tension may be required. What is good for Poetry may be harmful to personal relations (tho this need not always be the case). In the best cases, a smaller circle of intimates is drawn from community.

Maureen Owen (NYC):

As though a "poetry community" were a small town without borders as in existing ubiquitously yet in no particular geography. A network of members loosely bound by their paying attention to what happens to each other. To belong to a group for a Poetics that by its very nature is politically charged, sharing similar or alike ideals offers a collective perspective, support against the shock and chagrin that now confronts us daily. By its nature a "poetry community" is dispersed in every direction, but when we can glance around a room where several members of our "poetry community" have congregated, there is a sense of "safety" of "family" of being "home" of being able to maintain our positive efforts.

Benefits for particular poets by organizations, individuals in the community organizing singularly and newly formed groups such as Poets in Need attest to the overall bond of the poetry community. Memorials for poets gone and determined efforts to keep their poems in print relies on the cohesiveness of this network.

Most importantly it is the support of this community in its workshops and reading series and publications that provides an avenue to put our work into the hands and ears of readers. This invisible but very real "net" of community is what makes it possible for us to keep writing and getting our work out there. The poetry community is a goading inspiration, vigorously poking us to keep experimenting and pushing the limits in our work. A place to come to for feedback and the energy go out there and try again.

(Continued from page 11)

not have been taking care of himself, but he retained his dignity. I remember the night he joined a group of poets—Clark Coolidge, John Godfrey, Kit Robinson, Johanna Drucker among them—who were reading in Cambridge to celebrate Geoffrey Young and his Figures Press. Someone summoned John on stage to pose for a group photograph to which he graciously consented. He appeared at the party afterwards and stayed into the night.

Over the last decade of his life John became reclusive. It is also true that my patterns shifted. I no longer saw him as frequently, but poets in New York and elsewhere asked after him as they had for thirty years. I remember that Peter Gizzi wanted to meet John and asked me how he might go about it. I suggested we invite John for tea. On the agreed upon day Peter arrived at my house bearing a big bouquet of flowers. We sat and waited. No John. And then he phoned. He said that he was on his way. I could hear screeching in the background. I asked him where he was. "The Park Street Subway station." After another half-hour, the time it would have taken John to reach my house had he been walking slowly, we realized that he was not coming.

When Joe Torra and I decided to start a small press Joe knew that he wanted its name to be Pressed Wafer after John's pamphlet of that title. So be it. A year into the venture, having added Dan Bouchard to the masthead, we decided to give John the First Annual Pressed Wafer Lifetime Achievement Award and publish, in league with Steve Clay's Granary Books, *The Blind See Only This World* gathering contributions by seventy-two writers to honor John. In April of 2000 one hundred and forty-six people—someone counted heads—crowded into our living room to give John the check and bottle of champagne that constituted the Award. Over a dozen poets read and sang his praises. John sat on the couch between his cousins and nephew saying little but obviously enjoying himself. In toasting John at the ceremony's end Joe Torra called him an "angel."

William Corbett's most recent books are All Prose: Selected Essays and Reviews and Boston Vermont: Poems, both with Zoland Books.

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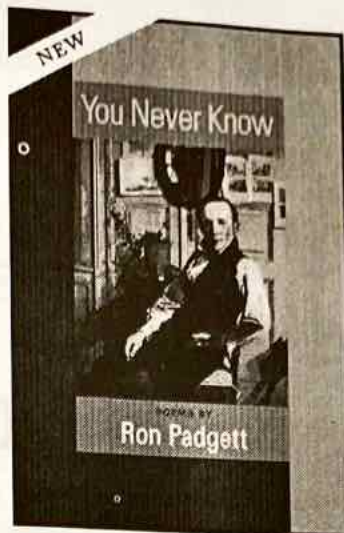
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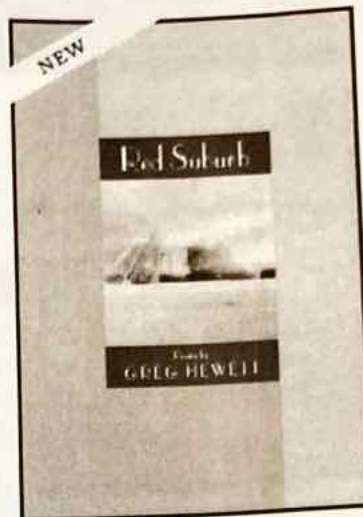
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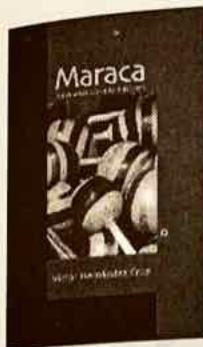
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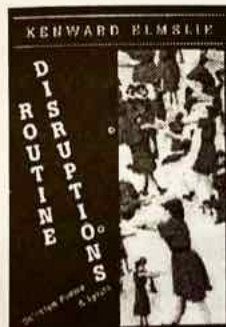
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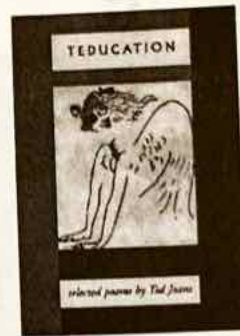
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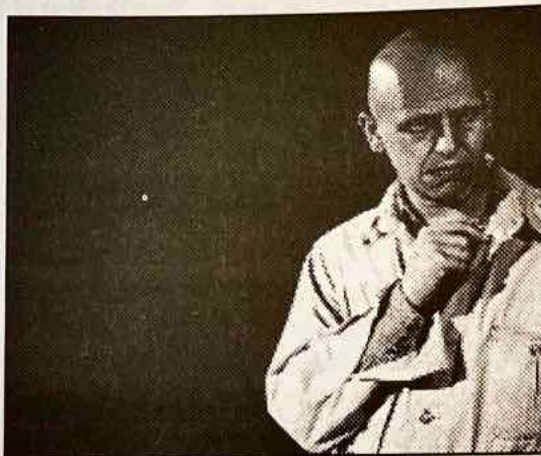
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Books Received

Books

- Beth Anderson, **Hazard**. Germ Folios, 2002.
- Rae Armantrout, **The Pretext**. Green Integer, 2001.
- Rachel Tzvia Back, **Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe**. University of Alabama, 2002.
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- George Evans, **The New World**. Curbstone Press, 2002.
- Michael Gottlieb, **Careering Obloquy**. Other Publications + Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs, 2002.
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- Photographer's Cloth**. Photographs by Brenda Ijima. Other Publications + Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs, 2002.
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- John Wieners, **Kidnap Notes Next**. Pressed Wafer, 2002.

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- Antennae 2**. Editor: Jesse Seldess (PO Box 2036, Madison, WI 53701-2036). Contributors: Michael Basinski, Jen Hofer, Andrew Levy, Chris McCreary, Kunsu Shim, others.
- Bird Dog: Issue One**. Editor: Sarah Mangold (1819 18th Ave, Seattle, Washington 98122). Contributors: Laynie Brown, Peter Ganick, Paul Long, Nico Vassilakis, others.
- PomPom Issue Two**. Editors: Allison Cobb, Jen Coleman, Ethan Fugate & Susan Landers (Susan Landers, POM2, 227 Prospect Ave. #2 Brooklyn, NY 11215). Contributors: Del Ray Cross, Duncan Dobbelmann, Jefferson Hansen, Sawako Nakayasu, Joan Retallack, Camille Roy, Anne Tardos, Rosmarie Waldrop, others.
- Skanky Possum #7**. Editors: Hoa Nguyen and Dale Smith (skankypossum.com). Contributors: Elizabeth Robinson, Allison Cobb, Tom Devaney, Lee Ann Brown, Robert Kelly, others.
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- Xcp 10: cross cultural poetics**. Editor: Mark Nowak. Contributors: Craig Dworkin, Bing He, May Mahala, Edwin Torres, Rosmarie Waldrop, others.

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