

THE POETRY PROJECT NEWSLETTER

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TIES THAT BIND

by Jessica Hagedorn

It was with a certain sense of anxiety and trepidation that I responded to my brother's phone call in the middle of the night. "We're in Hawaii," he announced, his voice sharp and loud. "Why don't you come out for a family reunion? I don't know how long we're staying," he added, "so try to come out as possible..." For months I had been bugging my agent to try and get me a magazine assignment to cover the elections in the Philippines. With little journalistic experience, I was nevertheless confident that I could write a deeply felt, personal account as a writer returning to the country of her birth at a momentous, turbulent and extraordinary time in history.

My heart sank. I would be overjoyed to see my brother again after so many years, but I wasn't particularly interested in visiting Hawaii; it would be close enough to the Philippines but not the real thing---we would be getting our news secondhand. My ace in the hole as far as trying to get a magazine assignment was the fact that most of my family still lived in Manila...Without them there, where were my immediate sources of information? Where could I stay? My genuinely selfish motive for wanting to go back was the novel I'd been working on all year, which was set in contemporary Manila and had been an obsession with me for more than ten years.

My agent called back with bad news. Rolling Stone had already assigned somebody...

I was even willing to sell-out and do a pictorial essay on Imelda's extensive perfume and shoe collection, but Vanity Fair acted coy and disinterested: "We don't see how it could work for our magazine!"

Esquire was peeved that I didn't have enough journalistic experience, nor was I macho enough, while Playboy had just assigned someone two weeks before. Penthouse was the only magazine willing to look at something on "spec", but they couldn't promise

a thing...the list went on and on. All I needed were travel expenses. I felt angry and trapped by having to stay in New York and relying on Ted Koppel's interpretation of events.

And now, the prospect of Hawaii loomed. Long conversations with my cynical older brother, the man who knew everyone and everything. It was certainly better than nothing.

My novel sat in its black folder, heavy and forbidding. I was never particularly interested in being historically accurate. Or presenting a factual account of current events. I wasn't attempting to solve political or moral or social problems. That is for another writer to do, and I am clear about that. My task is to capture some of the intricacies and complexities of a rich and potent culture, one steeped in irony, influenced by everything from Mecca to Mickey Mouse. With this in mind, I desperately wanted to be back home when the showdown occurred, to add more blood and flesh to a book largely dictated by memory

and my overripe imagination. Home is now New York, but home in my heart is also Manila...

Ponce Enrile used to live a block away from my father's house. I remember the constant, intimidating presence of men in khaki uniforms, patrolling his beautifully landscaped front lawn. Two to three army jeeps were always parked in his drive way. The sun shone bright and still on the well-tended plumeria trees and bird-of-paradise adorning the Defense Minister's lush, green garden.

I remember Senator Aquino, in his day, as a prominent man -even in prison. His wife Corazon as another anonymous matron. Did anyone know her name?

Back then, it was New Year's Eve, and Marcos's son the sullen Bongbong cruised crowded, glittering nightclubs with his entourage of goons. Men

in dark glasses, cliches in tropical hoodlum attire, guns bulging from holsters strapped to ankles and chests. One of Bongbong's well-known favorite pasttimes in those days was fagbashing, and on this particular New Year's Eve, he lived down to his sordid reputation...two young hairdressers were badly beaten, for no apparent reason. The music never stopped, and dancing went on into the early hours of the morning, long after the president's son and his henchmen had gone.

ADIÓS



ALOHA

Drawing
Tom McGlynn

I remember how my mother left my father when I was thirteen years old, a heroic gesture back then. She took her children to America. She and I were the only ones to stick it out. I would refuse to come back to Manila for another twelve years, but once I stepped off the plane in the hot and steamy airport, I would keep coming back for more, asking myself why it had taken me so long to come home.

I had not come back to Manila in five years, and the country had suddenly become a major media magnet. Thankfully, fewer people were asking me questions like, "Where, exactly, is it?" or "How come you speak English so well?" The New York Times took care of that, with its daily coverage, population counts, guerilla estimates, and detailed maps...I felt a mixture of pride and unea-

siness. My oldest brother tells me he has left Manila with his family, an unexpected "vacation" imposed by the very real threat of violence. "Why don't you try to get to Hawaii right before the elections? We can watch the whole thing on television," he teases.

Should I bring my manuscript with me, take notes, or tape interviews? Everything was happening fast and furious, simultaneous with Baby Doc's downfall in Haiti. Could I possibly keep up with all this, even in Hawaii?

Intrigue was ripe, plots and counterplots developing like the juiciest Hollywood movie. "You have to shed blood to cleanse out an old wound," my brother intoned. "Maybe a good war is what we need..." Envoy Habib became the butt of a few jokes. "He's probably offering that son-of-a-bitch Marcos a one-way ticket on the next space shuttle...He can be the first Ilocano in outer space."

"Revolution! Revolution!" My sister-in-law cried out in alarm, one morning. "Is it here, yet?" It was as if revolution were something tangible, dropped from heaven. She is the unpatriarchized granddaughter of a patriarch who has opposed Marcos for years; that is why she is here, in Hawaii, waiting it out with my brother. Reprisals by Marcos and his cronies are a definite possibility, but it is not real to her—even she wants to be back home with the nuns and the tanks. "You'd never survive," my brother tells her. They have a new baby, they are vulnerable.

Days pass quickly. We cannot wait to see a newspaper, we sit up for t.v. news. Long-distance phone calls from family and friends add fuel to the fire.

The greedy old dog and his greedy, absurd wife are finally gone, carrying their box of Pampers filled with money and jewels. I just missed them in Hawaii, having left a few days before Marcos' arrival. My timing is so on it's off.

A woman named Corazon Aquino is now president of the Philippines. It's her husband's ghost, someone says, "living through her...telling her what to do..." For now, she has the support of most people, most generals, and the Church. She is an icon, a metaphor, a heroine, a triumphant story.

Something in me still hesitates feels exhausted and ambiguous about the fantastic turn of events. It can be dangerous, this cynicism that runs in the blood. I can almost hear my brother's short, derisive

laugh, see the pain in his eyes he so cleverly disguises. He and his family will go back to Manila in a few days. For them it is all over. Things seem safe, and life resumes.

I cannot help remembering names. Names from my own childhood, names that always meant money and power, the freedom to move about at will, indulging a life filled with privilege. Those names are now still the same names...The difference was Marcos got too greedy and went too far. The cards have been reshuffled, and roles exchanged. But the players are the same. Indeed, some of the players with those names suffered long years in prison, and some even died by the bullet. Aquino, Lopez, Cojuangco, Zobel, Laurel, Enrile, blood against blood. The ruling class in the Phil-

ippines is convoluted and incestuous, the ties that bind serpentine and confusing.

Before I left town, I asked a Filipino writer why he hadn't bothered to cover the elections with all his journalistic credentials. He sounded mildly annoyed. "It's a set-up," he said. "The candidates don't truly represent the people..."

"Give her a few years, she may surprise you," another friend says.

"If the generals let her last that long," someone else remarks, rolling their eyes.

"Corruption has a way of reaching everyone," my brother warns then sighs. "But at least, the old dog is gone..."

MY MY EMILY DICKINSON

by Edie Jarolim

MY EMILY DICKINSON
by Susan Howe
North Atlantic Books
\$9.95.

Since the early decades of this century, Emily Dickinson has been one of the few women universally admitted into the ranks of academic sainthood, the canon of American Literature. Common lore has it that during her lifetime Dickinson's literary mentor, Atlantic editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson, was too conservative to see the true value and originality of her poetry; not until after her death was her creative genius fully recognized and appreciated. But this recognition and appreciation has taken some rather strange forms. Before the publication in 1955 of Thomas H. Johnson's monumental variorum edition of her work, Dickinson's poems often appeared in slim, sometimes bowdlerized editions, frequently with the verse divided into such categories as "Nature," "Fame," and "God." And, it was not only the American popular imagination—the collective mind that, later in the century, brought us that lovable spinster of Off-Broadway and Television, the Belle of Amherst—that sentimentalized and oversimplified the poetry; the corpus was ravished too in the groves of academe.

Although literary hagiography is by nature prone to biographical excess, in the case of Dickinson criticism its absurdities were more patent and pervasive than usual. Dickinson scholarship was rife with speculation about who, if anyone, was the great love of her life for whom she renounced all other love, and with attempts to trace her "morbid" preoccupation with death.

In recent decades, feminist criticism has attempted to correct some of the biases and imbalances of the predominantly male academic establishment by: trying to open up the ranks of literary sainthood; questioning—along with other postmodernists—the processes and premises of canonization itself; attempting to define and valorize the characteristics of women's writing. But as the category "feminist artist" includes the domestic and biological productions of Judy Chicago as well as the linguistic and semiotic interrogations of Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, so "feminist literary criticism"

describes the work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination*, as well as that of Susan Howe.

My Emily Dickinson is a feminist study written in part as a response to another type of feminist study. With her vision of Dickinson as a fiercely intellectual and revolutionary poet, Howe avowedly sets out to counter Gilbert and Gubar's image in *Madwoman of Dickinson* as a domestic stitcher and spinner of verse. Howe's writing is formalist in bent, emphasizing the linguistic rather than the social and historical circumstances of women's writing (while recognizing the interconnection of all three). Her type of critique—itsself formally innovative and exciting—is more characteristic of French than American feminists, akin to the essays found, for example, in Elaine Marks' and Isabelle Courtivan's *New French Feminisms*, an anthology Howe cites in her book. In the genre of poetic reimaginings of literary/historical figures, My Emily Dickinson has been aptly compared with Williams' *In the American Grain* and Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare*; it is also the first full-length author study in its vital feminist mode. If this ground-breaking book will probably not be—as Zukofsky's has not been—readily integrated into most standard American Literature syllabi, one can hope it will find its way into women's studies courses.

It's too bad this book is not likely to get the widespread academic attention it deserves because, among other things, it is an important work of scholarship. Howe revises the critical picture of Dickinson by pulling together some very interesting literary contexts for her work. While Dickinson's poetry has been widely discussed in terms of its Calvinist and Transcendentalist influences, the confluence of Charles Dickens, Shakespeare's history plays (in parallel with the American Civil War), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, and James

Fenimore Cooper—among others—is an unexpected and evocative one. Howe's analysis of the philosophical link between Dickinson and Jonathan Edwards also sheds new light on the precise nature of the Calvinist connection. Higginson himself is made more complex—if not completely exonerated—in this study; he turns out to be a far more revolutionary figure than one would expect on the basis of his treatment of Dickinson's poems.

Don't agree with everything Howe writes (I'm intrigued, but not entirely convinced, for example, by her suggestion that the strangeness of Dickinson's "Master" letters is largely attributable to their being exercises in literary pastiche), but there's certainly room for such differences in this open-ended, self-deconstructive text. Negative capability and paradox reign: we read that Dickinson "audaciously invented a new grammar grounded in humility and humiliation" and that "absence is the admired presence of each poem."

And if the book contains a good deal of excellent scholarship, not its soul, resides. My Emily Dickinson is cerebral in the sense used by Dickinson as a test for poetry; she knew a poem was true, she wrote, if it made her "feel...as if the top of my head were taken off." Howe's response to Dickinson is above all a physical, emotional, spiritual one, one poet, glossolalic, taking voice from and giving it back to another. The book's title embodies the terms of the exchange. On the one hand, the use of the possessive pronoun "my" is a self-effacing Dickinsonian strategy, Howe thereby making it clear she is presenting only one subjective version out of many possible versions of the poet. ("We will never capture Dickinson in one interpretation," she writes. "Her soul's deepest necessity was to flee such forced sterility.") At the same time, Howe confidently takes full possession of Dickinson in this book—as she has been possessed by the poet. Her act of literary appropriation—a present enactment of such past acts as she shows Dickinson taking—is as gnostic, metaphysical and exciting as the poetry it takes us to anew.

SONG FROM THE INTENSIVE CARE UNIT

The dawn takes twenty thousand years
To creep up to my window sill.
I had two pills to calm my fears,
And for my pain the usual.

Terror, shame, who seeks you out
At the front corners of my room?
The razor teeth of what small mouth
Begin to nibble at my name?

by Howard Moss

This Month's Events



Illustration by Denise Barbart

April 2: JANA HARRIS & PATRICIA JONES Poet & novelist JANA HARRIS hails from the Pacific Northwest. She is the author of *Manhattan As A Second Language* (Harper & Row, 1982) *The Clackamas* (The Smith, 1980) & *Ataska* (Harper & Row, 1980). She currently co-directs the *Writers -In-Performance* at the Manhattan Theater Club. PATRICIA JONES is a poet, arts writer and performance artist. She is the author of *Mythologizing Always* (Telephone, 1980) and has just completed a first full volume of poetry, *Tense Geography*. She is the Program Coordinator of the Poetry Project.

April 7: OPEN READING

April 9: BOB ROSENTHAL & HARRIS SCHIFF Prose writing poet BOB ROSENTHAL has written four books of poetry including *Lies About The Flesh* (Frontward Books, 1977) and *Rude Awakenings* (Yellow Press, 1982). He has also co-authored five plays, the most recent being "Our Version Of Heaven" with Johnny Stanton. ROSENTHAL co-coordinates the Committee for International Poetry as well. HARRISSCHIFF is a prize winning poet & author of five books, the most recent, *Yo-Yos With Money* which he co-authored with Ted Berrigan (*United Artists*, 1980). Just back from a poet's tour of Nicaragua, continues to capture his special brand of poem within a sharp lyric clarity. He is the former CO-coordinator of the Poetry Project & former editor of *The World*.

April 13: RON SILLIMAN: "The I In The Machine", this special St. Mark's Talk will feature a consideration of "postmodernism" & its relation to contemporary poetry. SILLIMAN will discuss the competing critical theories of postmodernism--including those of Habermas, Lyotard, & Jameson--& relate them to works by Koch, Mac Low, Watten & others. SILLIMAN is author of *Paradise* (Burning Deck), *Tjanting* (The Figures), *Ketjack* (This), *ABC* (Tumba), among other books. This fall, Roof Books will publish a collection of his essays.

April 14: KENWARD ELSLIE & STEVE TAYLOR

April 16: JESSICA HAGEDORN & RICHARD TILLINGHAST Writer & performer JESSICA HAGEDORN is the author of *Dangerous Music* and *Petfood & Tropical Apparitions* both put out by Momo's Press. She is currently working on a novel about the modern Philippines where she was born & raised. RICHARD TILLINGHAST is the prize winning author of *Our Flag Was Still There* (Wesleyan University Press, 1984) & other books. His work can be found in many literary journals; *Antaeus*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Paris Review* & *Shenandoah*. He heads the MFA Program in Creative Writing at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

April 21: JENNIFER BARTLETT & NAN GOLDIN

April 23: JIM BRODEY & JIM CARROLL BRODEY gave his first St. Mark's reading in 1963, some three years before the official Poetry Project began. Since then he has published 13 books of verbal jewelry, especially *Judyism* (United Artists), *Blues Of The Egyptian Kings* (Big Sky), & *Last Licks* (Telephone). An original staffer at *Rolling Stone* & publicist for THE BAND, these prestigious facts are never-the-less dwarfed by his beautiful poetry. JIM CARROLL will read from his first new collection in eight years, *The Book Of Nods* (Penguin, 1986). CARROLL is best known for *The BasketBall Diaries & Living At The Movies*. His record "Catholic Boy" is a classic Rock & Roll album.

April 28: KEVIN DUFFY & KENTISTA/BILL JACOBSON

April 30: JOAN LARKIN & HOWARD MOSS JOAN LARKIN is a poet, teacher & editorial publisher. Her books include the feminist classic *Housework* (Out & Out Books, 1975) & a new volume *A Long Sound* (Granite Press, 1986). She co-edited with Eilly Bulkin *Amazon Poetry* in 1975 & *Lesbian Poetry* in 1981. *Lesbian Poetry* by Gay Press later in the year HOWARD MOSS is one of America's best known poets. He's published over 10 volumes of poetry, most recently *New Selected Poems* (Atheneum, 1985) & *Rules Of Sleep* (Atheneum, 1982). He has been the poetry editor of *The New Yorker* since 1950.



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James Ruggia, Editor

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A P R I L ' S

Monday Evening

POETRY /
PERFORMANCE
Host: Richard Elovich 8pm \$4

- 7 Open Reading
- 14 Kenward Elmslie & Steven Taylor
- 21 Jennifer Bartlett & Nan Golden
- 28 Kevin Duffy, Bill Jacobsen & Ken Tisa

Wednesday Evening

READINGS
Hosts: Eileen Myles & Patricia Jones
8 pm \$4

- 2 Jana Harris & Patricia Jones
- 9 Bob Rosenthal & Harris Schiff
- 16 Jessica Hagedorn & Richard Tillinghast
- 23 Jim Brodey & Jim Carroll
- 30 Joan Larkin & Howard Moss

Saturday Evening

ST. MARK'S PLAYS
Host: Elinor Nauen 8pm
Suggested Contribution \$4

- 12 "Short Circuits"
by Dennis Moritz

Sunday Evening

ST. MARK'S TALKS
Host: Charles Bernstein 8pm
Suggested contribution \$4

- 13 Ron Silliman on
"The 'I' in the machine"

Workshops

NARRATIVES
Tuesdays 7pm the Parish Hall

- 1 Kimiko Hahn
- 8, 15, 22, 29 Zoe Anglesey

POETRY
Fridays 7pm the Parish Hall

- 4, 11, 18, 25 Susie Timmons

**THE POETRY
PROJECT**
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POETRY

STRUGGLING TOWARDS THE REAL

TRANSDUCING

by George-Therese Dickenson

Segue Books, \$7.50

171 pp.

In his biography of Malcolm Lowry, Douglas Day called Lowry's masterpiece, *Under The Volcano*, "not so much a novel as a monument to prodigality of vision." Although *Transducing* is not a novel, and only obliquely shares some of Volcano's thematic concerns, this phrase is as surely accurate as if Day had been referring to Dickenson's work. For in this, her second book, Dickenson has moved as far from the traditional boundaries of lyric poetry (a tradition I feel she is solidly connected to) as Lowry and Joyce, in their day, moved from the constraints of the linear fictional narrative. And like those writers, she has done so in such a way that her lyricism and her meaning—her content—both remain intact. This seems to be a feat beyond many of the other poets currently pushing against comparable poetic boundaries.

Transducing is demanding, difficult work. But it isn't obscurantist work, full of odd and pointless juxtapositions, difficult for its own sake. It is tough for a number of reasons, all of which are direct outgrowths of its ultimate intent. And this intent is nothing less than reproducing—transducing—the sensual impact of "the world" as experienced by the poet, while at the same time imbuing these sensory fragments with that most illusive and subjective thing, meaning.

But isn't that what all poetry does (or should do)? Of course. But the unique quality of *Transducing* is the scale on which Dickenson works. The prose-poems in this book (and they are no less lyrical for their prose structure) take on the world not as an isolated collection of incidents, but as a cacophonous flood of sensory input that is harnessed by the poet like a wild horse, and brought into the service of her vision:

"A perfect manufactured world. Not affected by viewing nor present in speaking. At remove. A distant awe. A child's toy. A playground.

From here, the hillocks and vineyards look small enough to fit into the palm of a hand. The pages of a book fill with our ideas of houses, hills, and vines."

Prodigality, lavishness of vision. This is all-inclusive writing, to a well-honed purpose. Thematically, *Transducing* has two major concerns: Alienation in work, in human relationships, and above all from the natural world in which we live; and the ways our mechanistic Western world view promulgates this alienation.

"In direct off, they wouldn't put the house. Wanted a smaller view. Clipped enclosure. In the bushes, an aperture approaching." In this context, a view, an aperture, is positively menacing. And our social forms do nothing but reinforce the terror:

"Billboards order one by one on the road. Prep for adult. Induced proclivity. Cards in directions. Give um a job and they do it. No heeding helps. Self-aggrandize till unexpected result: another evening in the pesticide. Cephalic utters. Neutered basalt. False front. Sky comes right down to earth. Smacks right into you. No matter what you want to believe, thought in action topples the given conclusion."

With her linguistic jumpcuts and twisted syntax, Dickenson mirrors the strategy of our society, interlocking strategies that divide and conquer us: In work: "All points whereof. Jobs seem all pretty much the same. But in the subsensuous realm they keep you from. Basic chunks excised. Messy, the edges compound in a drift sort of way into everything you try to go to bed with." In our sexuality: "He to her a little seed case. The job becomes her.

"As opposed to a person who 'happens also to.' Meanwhile continues as the paint is slapped onto the peach rooms. Sexual engross. So exhausted from looking he couldn't get it up. Everything goes on as a diorama. Even in the "simple" process of human speech: ("I am going to talk. I am going to so and so. I am going to talk to so and so about something. I am going to straighten it out. I am going straight to the hand grenade lying on the window sill.)"

This is the inter-related, biotic daily grind, the "personal effects" of a culture obsessed with linguistic sleight-of-hand as a surrogate for true communication, and freighted with the burdens of reductionism, categorization and the reification that must result.

"Less effective in the long run, but in the short it gets the point across." We shelter ourselves from the wonder and mystery of life as it occurs around us with our obsession with the corraling effects of our language: "Packaged as the 'physical' renders to the mind. Refracted back, filtered, the great and glorious world (physical). Afraid of being impotent, we conjure and use. We don't know what we have at the tip of our tongues. ...But to avoid taking chances, try words, not names." Throughout *Transducing* the Platonic ideal of essential naming is squared off against the limitations of our everyday vocabulary.

But is this process of "true naming" any better? Invoking the great alchemist-philosophers of the late Middle Ages (Galen, Avicenna, etc.), Dickenson seems to hold an unjustified nostalgia for the simplified, mystically-based process of elemental naming. But who were these people, after all, but the ancestors of modern science that has given us nuclear and biological weapons and the genetically engineered future-world Dickenson so ably indicts and rationally fears? Our alienation grows out of our responses to our social structures, and as strong as these structures are, they are not invincible. If *Transducing* has a major flaw, it is a romantic nostalgia for simpler times, when the human response to the natural world was not "it was degenerating. I wouldn't recognize it if I saw it. Almost as though from another planet," but a sense of balanced wholeness with it. The vastness of vision "martialled in *Transducing* is proof that we don't have to look back. Dickenson has proved that we can, even against the enormity of socialized consciousness, struggle towards the real. As she concludes, "with fiery devotion, I commence my fast and eat it all."

by Will Bennett

from MY NEIGHBOR, MARN
VOLUNTEER FIREMAN

...Marn takes Muffin to work with him over on the Res where he builds houses which the government gives the Indians

to make sure they'll never stand on their own two feet, "ol' Rough Raven was doin' a Power Dance," says Marn pouring you

a drink in a Coke Is It glass, "Rave said he was standin' up, but he was down on his kitchen floor, I don't know what a Power Dance is, but it turned Raven's roof to flame..

by Jana Harris

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Busard

with last year's wound
throbbing in new year's winter night
to the milk store bound

as sweethearts glide on cadillac springs
softly sexy in furs
& silky things

past a cold wake
as the old lights glow
on the suddenly diminished trees
crismus so suddenly over

by Harris Schiff

"Devas, levels of light,"

Devas, levels of light, sore gums
Unwitty at graveside'll be us soon enough
Marooned glories sublime omens of heavy bliss
Birds of flame ascending myriad isles,
Singing engines burst silver light ain't so
Glamorous as I'd wanna have it for belch-adorned;
The only sin is to slow down and fast break for
Alien priests out to smoke our hesitation. You know,
Singing engines burst silver light ain't so bad.

by Jim Brodey

from GENEALOGY

I come from alcohol.
I was set down in it like a spark in gas.
I lay down dumb with it, I let it erase what it liked.
I played house with it, let it dress me, undress me.
I exulted, I excused.
I married it. And where it went, I went.
I gave birth to it.
I nursed, I plotted murder with it.
I laid its table, paid its promises.
I lived with it wherever it liked to live.

by Joan Larkin

FOR JOHN DONNE*

Stars, in their unchecked lust,
ejaculate still onto the barren moons
their pulsating milk. The solar winds
like Aurora seeds, enter
At the poles of this planet, above and below.

Don't you see
the obscenity of glaciers, waiting like
aged dictators, blinding white,
impatient for their cycle to devour?

Born of this,
we watch night grow,
voyeurs of cloudless nights,
impatient and pathetic
to imitate its pleasures, to uncover
the code of its birth.

by Jim Carroll

(from "The Book of Nods")

*Reprinted with the permission
of Viking Penguin

from A MODEST COMPLAINT

Tonight, I drink in the
dazzle of Venus and cry
"I'm too young to know the way
to Saturn
and too old to care about
Paris."

by Patricia Jones

DO ALL WRITERS WALK

Do all writers walk
Slightly downcast
looking down--
I did--
Looking for objects--
Things
Got bad posture
Finding a place
For all those things

by Bob Rosenthal

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mix informally,
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THE HOYT WILHELM OF POETRY

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NEW SPACES: POEMS 1975-1983

by Joel Oppenheimer
Black Sparrow Press, 1985
151 pp.

Of all the places on earth to meet Joel Oppenheimer, I did it in Rochester, New York. And I did it exactly twenty years after he was chosen to head what was then the new Poetry Project at the Holy Church of St. Mark. He'd been finished with the *Voice* and his column which ran some fifteen years. Perhaps, to those in the City, his had become a voice that one measured one's time by. But to those of my city, his was the voice in the wilderness. A city of images, Kodak & Xerox & minor league baseball. A suburb of Buffalo, or so says the National Endowment of the Arts. An isolated city which breeds isolation. Too small a city to ever know someone in.

If it had been New Hampshire, or the Village, I probably would've known him better. Who wouldn't want to know the man who said, "If you are a poet at twenty, it's because you are twenty. If you are a poet at forty, it's because you are a poet." Not unlike Guillaume the IX, whom he taught to engineers & businessboys & his own loved printers, his is a bawdy poetry speaking the law of his sex.

The poems in *New Spaces* do not simply cop a feel, nor do they simply touch me. This book is the coming together of touch and feel, it's neither lost in dead abstraction nor off in itself. Not lost in the memory of space, but the progression of one's self as ever-renewed space:

not to know
what it stands for
since the knowing
just might stop us



to know only
that it stands
points down or out

--from "Legend"

And that's the grace, the moment, the turn. The turning of a phrase, a word. It's how we save our lives, I'm sure. It's how we learn who we are. Listen again to how he says it:

what i remember is i was
always forcing myself into
the cellar of my being
because instead i wanted
to ride always upward
. . . .



i had to learn to go down
in those dreams, into cell: s
of my being

instead of upward
into head and brain and
intellect which ordered action

--from "The Progression"

His line is so fast. His brain must be too. Or maybe because he doesn't ride that brain, he's slow enough to catch it. And that's why I think of him as the Hoyt Wilhelm of American poetry. His poems are like knuckleballs of pure phallos. In the grandstands of his past the women, the kangaroos, the painters, the Raymond Chandlers, the frog & little child all take on the history of his art. "Listen," Joel writes, "some want to work/ and will do so, even

franz kline sat in the cedar tavern new hat on head
bought at cavanaugh's
he always dressed beautifully

pollock walked in talked
drank got angry
grabbed that hat threw it on floor jumped on it threw it

ledge on top of the bar too far to reach
franz bought a round

a week later
pollock appeared again bought round sat talked stood up
pirouetted said

look at my new raincoat just got at brooks brothers
franz said it is
beautiful

jackson bought more drinks sat drank got mad
jumped up ran
outside ripped off coat stomped it in gutter threw into
road under a cab

and came in
franz bought another round

--from "A Village Poem"

Pretty funny if you ask me. But more and more these days, my word for a book like this is phenomenal. Phenomenal in the sense that if you're writing poems about phenomena, they have to be phenomenal. They have to appear as extraordinary as the specifics of one's life make them appear. To do it the way Joel does, apart from his legendary peers, gives what is fragile, a man's heart, the strength to speak.

by Jim Cohn

**THE POETRY
PROJECT**
AT
**ST MARK'S
CHURCH**
2 AVE & 10 ST
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212.674.0910

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