

poetry project

NEWSLETTER

DECEMBER/JANUARY 1998/9

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POETRY

Barbara Guest



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announcements

Web Announcements

We have some new features on our web site at www.poetryproject.com, including a fresh Poets & Poems selection, with work by Will Alexander, Laynie Browne, Brian Lucas and Kristin Prevallet. Other additions are an expanded World Archives, with poems by Wanda Coleman, Alice Notley, Jackson Mac Low, Edward Sanders, Paul Beatty, Eric Bogosian and more, originally published in the Poetry Project's literary magazine, *The World*. There is a new Announcements page, which features late-breaking news about readings at the Project, links to special events pages, and general gossip. Our Links page is constantly expanding; if you have an addition or a suggestion, please e-mail us at poproj@artomatic.com. We are also developing an e-mail mailing list, so if you'd like to join, let us know.

DIA Deal

Those taking Poetry Project workshops this fall can attend readings at DIA Center for the Arts at half price. Just show your membership card at the door. Upcoming readings include Kimiko Hahn & Arthur Sze on Thursday, November 12th, and Jackson Mac Low & Joan Retallack on Friday, December 11th. Readings begin at 7 p.m. and regular admission is \$5.

Jaywalking Blues: d.a. levy Lives

A two-day festival celebrating the life and work of 1960's poet d.a. levy, 30 years after his death, will begin with a reading on Friday, December 2 at the Poetry Project. For information call (212) 330-7840 or email levy@booglit.com.

Readers Needed

Steal This Radio, 88.7 FM, a micro-powered Lower East Side community unlicensed radio all volunteer anti-profit station is seeking poets to read on Word Waves, an hour-long radio show. Call Mr. Bradley: 1-888-924-3217.

Thank You

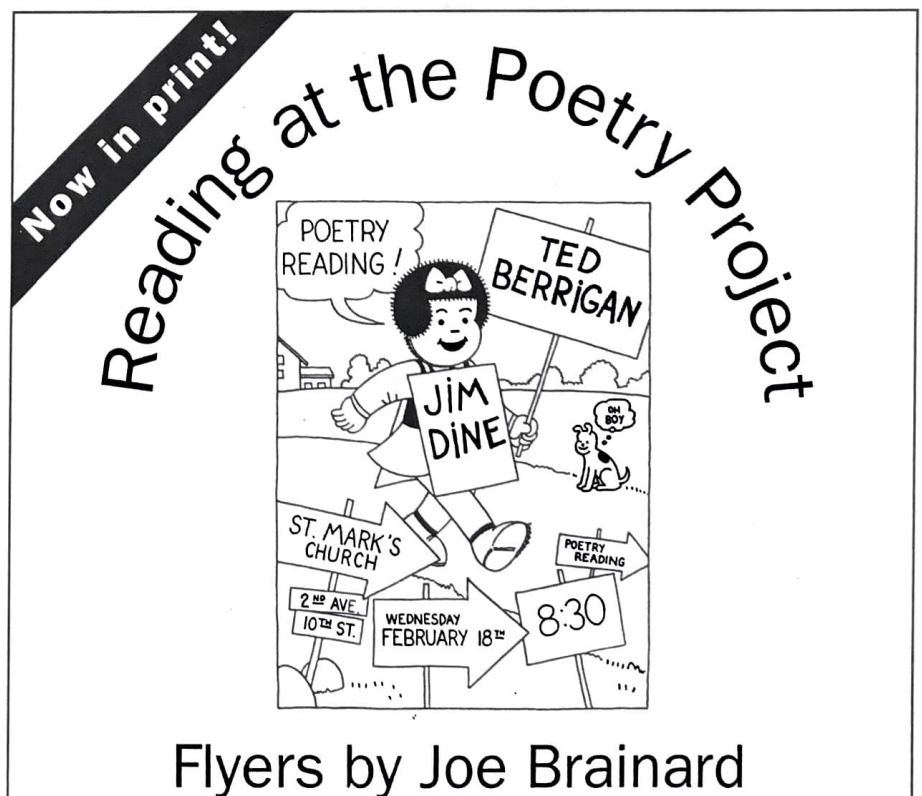
The Poetry Project would like to thank all the volunteers who made our October events not only possible, but successful: Bridget Brehen, Donna Cartelli, Jeff Conant, John de-Vries, Gregory Fuchs, Brendan Lorber, Josie McKee, Elinor Nauen, Linda Neiberg, Rich O'Russa, Jennifer Pan, Wanda Phipps, Douglas Rothschild, Prageeta Sharma,

Michael Smoler, and Magdalena Zurawski. And our wonderful interns: Travis Kripor, Keith Edwards, Katrina Vogel, Brenda Bordofsky and Siri Herzog.

Pierre Martory

Pierre Martory died suddenly in Paris on October 5 at the age of 77. Though his poetry is unknown in France he gained a small following over here through two collections, *Every Question But One* and *The Landscape Is Behind the Door*, which I translated, and through a number of readings he gave on his trips to the States. His poetry appeared in *Arshile*, *The New Yorker*, *American Poetry Review* and *Poetry*, among other magazines. He was my close companion for forty-two years and I miss him very much.

—John Ashbery



Reading at the Poetry Project: Flyers by Joe Brainard
 A folio of 11 classic Brainard flyers and one full-length comic strip, with a special introduction by Bill Berkson. Printed in an limited edition of 250. 8 1/2 x 11 inches. Available from the Poetry Project. \$14.95.

regional updates

CARACAS, VENEZUELA

La Casa de la Poesia thrives in Caracas, birthplace of Simon Bolivar, with its yearly (now 7th) lively *Semana Internacional*. Set in a sprawling metropolis—modern, vibrant, cosmopolitan with troubling barrios proliferating on the hills and a huge new Mosque facing Mecca built by the Saudis—this festival invites 20 or so poets to a round of panels, lectures, readings, performances. Held in an attractive air-conditioned theatre at the base of the Torre Corp Banca, “entrada libre,” up to six hundred inter-generational folk attend the various events. The Casa is run by poets, one Santos Lopez, who is also a priest in the Yoruba religion and a terrific salsa dancer, and Carmen Arocha, an energetic woman of African descent whose most recent pamphlet is “Cuira,” published by the Grupo International Eclepsidra. This year’s festival honored the 80-year-old Venezuelan Ana Enriqueta Teran, an extremely elegant grande dame who reads with passion and defiance and dons her self-designed exotic jewelry (and red suede stiletto heels). Angela Garcia of Medellin and Elsa

Cross of Mexico City were other strong Latin female “presences.” Scots poet Douglas Dunn charmed the audience with his long Browningsque meditations. This reporter performed with sax player Victor Cuica and national stage and film star Elba reading Spanish translations. There’s a lively poetry subculture, particularly the group CERO (median age 17). They have a magazine, readings, discussions, and they surf the Net for other like-minded young folk passionate about poetry. Cero E-mail: ccs@etheron.net

— Anne Waldman

VIENNA, AUSTRIA

The Schule fur Dichtung now in its 8th year was founded by Austrian poets Ide Hintze, Christina Huber and Chris Loidl after they visited The Jack Kerouac’s Summer Program in Boulder some years ago. Their September Akademie is modeled on the Naropa summer program though with a definite fin de siecle turn with lectures, workshops (taught in German, Spanish and English), pan-

els, readings, performances and this year hosted Australian Bad Seed songwriter Nick Cave and jazz performer Ruth Weiss formerly of Vienna (she and her family escaped Nazis over 60 years ago), among others. It’s impressive the attention given to the students’ collaborative and solo work the last days. Classes were held in the imperial Akademie der Bildenden Kunste which houses the famous and terrifying Bosch triptych “The Last Judgement” upstairs in its hallowed galerie. Teachers such as the great Austrian Surrealist H.C. Artmann have edited publications of students’ work. The Schule is also producing CDs—a recent one features the amazing Tuva vocalist Sainkho Namtchylak, Wolfgang Bauer, Edward Sanders and the redoubtable Allen Ginsberg. The Salon, Shambhala Center, Alte Schmiede and the Labyrinth (poets writing in English) also participated in the array of activities. Schule poets read on a float for the annual Hallamasch parade, and also performed at a health spa where the audience soaked in mineral pools and could listen to readings underwater. “Eerie,” a student remarked. And “voices from the Bardo?” My first truly subterranean reading.

— Anne Waldman

WRITING WORKSHOPS AT THE POETRY PROJECT

Poetry Workshop taught by Stephen Rodefer
(Tuesday evenings, 7-9 pm: 10 sessions, began October 20)

Poetry Workshop taught by Frank Lima
(Friday evenings 7-9 pm: 10 sessions, began October 23)

Continuing To Be Inspired by Inspiration taught by Maureen Owen
(Saturday afternoons 12-2 pm: 10 sessions, began October 24)

The workshop fee is \$150, which includes tuition for unlimited classes and membership with The Poetry Project for one year. Reservations are required due to limited class space and payment must be received in advance. Membership includes free admission to all regularly scheduled Project events, discount admission to special events, and subscription to the Poetry Project Newsletter. Please send payment and reservations to: The Poetry Project, St. Mark’s Church, 131 E. 10th St., New York, NY 10003. For more information, please call (212) 674-0910, or e-mail us at poproj@artomatic.com.

SEATTLE

"There must be...about twenty minutes in the morning and again in the afternoon when it's really nice out on Mercury." So I'm told by Gregory Hischak in a visual poetry piece in the form of a sheet of colorful stamps. In another he writes "Generation after generation each copy a rendering of the previous deconstruction into dots like a flock of birds." Unfortunately, since I can't replicate the work here, my description of an exhibition of visual and concrete poetry is merely that. The show, curated by poet Nico Vassilakis, at the Richard Hugo House featured work from eighteen poets/artists. Material ranged from cut-up and collage, to science diagrams smeared with inkblots, interesting use of scanning and Xerox, to three-dimensional pieces. My personal favorites included Helen Lessic's "shared symbols on flock of sheep" and Nancy Brush-Burr's cursive lines. Another recent event was the Bumbershoot festival, where highlights included a mesmerizing performance by Robin Blaser, and a very witty performance by your own Ed Friedman. There was also a drop-dead recitation from memory by Belle Randall from her devastating letterpress chapbook *Drop Dead Beautiful* (Woodworks Press). Recent highlights in the Subtext series were Lisa Jarrot with Roberta Olson in August, and Robert Mitterthal and Meredith Quartermain in September. I highly recommend Meredith Quartermain's chapbook *Abstract Relations* (1998, Keefer Street Press, Vancouver). Upcoming in the Subtext series are Will Alexander, Norma Cole, Juliana Spahr, Rebecca Brown and Lee Ann Brown, among others. Check out our web site for details at: <http://www.speakeasy.org/subtext/>. Also upcoming, a three-day arts and humanities festival exploring the life and work of Richard Hugo and the role of poetry and prose in the life of the city. This festival, titled "The Power of Place" will take place at the Richard Hugo House from October 2-4. You can still attend a reading every day of the week, or a few a day if you like. I counted 31 ongoing reading series in the Seattle area in the current issue of *Wordscape*. One last note—on recent publications—Joseph Donahue's chapbook

Terra Lucida from Heaven Bone Press, including photographs by Michael Burns, should not be missed.

—Laynie Browne

THE CATSKILLS

Russian, the Woodstock street poet, was piloting his shopping cart of empty soda cans while wearing a Grand Union deli cap (imprinted with the words: "Ask me. I'm here to help you.") over his cowboy hat. Russian exulted: "I've gotten five smiles already!" Meanwhile, Tad Richards, artistic director of Opus 40, the regal, eccentric, maze-like stone sculpture, has released the 14th section of *Situations*, his epic poem based entirely on plot summaries of situation comedies in *The New York Times*. And the indispensable Phlebus Book Shop in Phoenicia continues its soul-enshrining reading series (which has encompassed Hettie Jones and Chuck Wachtel) with...Luc Santé!

—Sparrow

SANTA FE

Amidst the teal coyotes (howling through their polka-dot bandannas) and coffee-table rattlesnakes, behind the platter-sized concho belts and million-dollar mudhut ashrams, nestled between a zillionth piñon-studded hillscape and another epic sunset, Santa Fe—city of 290 restaurants, as many galleries and even more therapists, where "reading" may have a distinctly different connotation—is, believe it or not, making room for poetry. The Writers Reading Series, run by Bill Higginson out of Recursos de Santa Fe's Southwest Literary Center (and with a grant from the Witter Bynner Foundation for Poetry) has long been a forum for local talent every other Wednesday. Local hipster Joe Ray Sandoval has been managing the spoken word scene with Poetry Allowed, which alternates between the Plan B arts center (formerly CCA) and the Drama Club (a bar). In addition to running a weekly slam/hip-hop forum, Sandoval brings as much out-of-town talent as he

can muster, and hopes are that more younger writers—of the "new (American) poets" set—will be inclined to drop in, on their way from one coast to the other. Albuquerque's La Alameda press has been bringing out beautiful editions that do justice, finally, to some of the area's best poets—such as Judith Hill, Mary McGinnis, Joan Logghe or Carol Moldaw—poets one can always look forward to hearing at the sporadic bookstore or cafe signing. The Lannan Foundation's move to Santa Fe has significantly upped the stakes—starting with last fall's series curated by Arthur Sze and Bill Fox and held at the SITE Santa Fe gallery. The series was such a success that SITE Santa Fe decided to continue its own "writers in the galleries" series—a Mei-mei Berssenbrugge-Richard Tuttle duet—while Lannan moved its series (now curated by Saskia Hamilton) to the Armory for the Arts theater, to accommodate 'blockbuster' mainstream events. In addition, Lannan and SITE Santa Fe are collaborating with "Neighboring Voices/Voces Proximas"—a weekend of readings in October featuring Mexican poets Francisco Hernández, Tedi López Mills, Pedro Serrano, Alfonso D'Aquino, Pura López Colomé, and José Luis Rivas, with their (North) American translators Alberto Ríos, Judith Hall, Harryette Mullen, Naomi Shihab Nye, Forrest Gander and Edward Hirsch. This percolation of resources from the art world to poetry will hopefully be taking ever greater advantage of Santa Fe's location, as a gateway for poetries North and South (again, an infusion of the younger generation would be welcome here). The New Mexico Center for the Book sponsored an appearance by poet-laureate Robert Pinsky—"I'm in love with meaning," he declaimed; who knows what else they've got up their sleeves?

—Jonathan Skinner

Tom Dent

1932—1998



photo by Walter Dent

Tom Dent founded the legendary Umbra Workshop. It was an extraordinary group—members included Calvin Hernton, David Henderson, Steve Cannon, Ishmael Reed, Brenda Walcott, Joe Johnson, Askia Muhammad Touré, Jane Logan, Art Berger, Norman H. Pritchard, Lennox Raphael, James W. Thompson, Herbert Woodward Martin, Al Haynes, and others. In addition to publishing a magazine that was an early expression of the Black Arts Movement, the Umbra Workshop was part of the cultural renaissance of the Lower East Side and sponsored numerous high-powered poetry readings—many of them at St. Mark's Church.

Long after its members relocated to various cities and pursued disparate careers, Umbra still maintained—through Tom's efforts—a presence as a kind of friendly intellectual network. Working with the Free Southern Theatre—with Gilbert Moses, Denise Nicholas, Richard Schechner, and John O'Neal—Tom himself participated in the Civil Rights Movement's grassroots campaigns. He recently revisited places such as Anniston, Birmingham, and Selma to assess what that struggle has actually accomplished. *Southern Journey*, published by

Morrow in 1997, is his beautiful and sensitive report on the human cost of what we call History. Tom's books of poetry—guides to the rediscovery of our culture and ourselves—are *Magnolia Street* (1987) and *Blue Lights and River Songs* (1982); his intense play *Ritual Murder* is included in the anthology *Black Southern Voices* (Mentor), edited by John Oliver Killens and Jerry W. Ward, Jr.

Settling in his hometown of New Orleans, Tom collaborated with Kalamu ya Salaam, Chakula Cha Jua, and others, to organize a number of projects including *Nkomo* magazine and the Congo Square Writers Workshop. He was also a founding editor of *Callaloo*, now ably and energetically headed by Charles H. Rowell at the University of Virginia. Tom, holding a BA from Morehouse College and an MFA from Goddard College, taught briefly at the University of New Orleans and served as executive director of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. Tom's associations were many and we all benefited from his intensely perceptive analytical thinking. He was, above all, an indefatigable and effective cultural worker. He made sure, for example, that the corporate and tourist dollars generated by the world-class Jazz Festival were shared with local arts agencies and artists—Tom Dent understood, in the most practical way, that a heritage is something that continues.

Tom's death in June 1998 followed a sudden heart attack suffered several days earlier while playing tennis. It was a saddening shock to friends around the country and abroad. Tom's loyalty was famously unwavering; his criticism—literary or personal—always soft-spoken but unblenchingly accurate. He was both gregarious and, when working on a long writing project, reclusive; but he seemed to have a potent aura and the ability to charge the space around him, affecting anyone who shared it. As his lifelong friend Andrew Young said at the funeral services in New Orleans, Tom Dent's ability "to walk dangerous streets with love for God's children, with generosity and warmth, made those streets safe."

For me—from our first meeting in his East 2nd Street flat for an Umbra meeting, to our last dinner together in Houston a few months before his passing—Tom Dent was like the big brother who treats you like an equal; a friend and teacher. He could be both irascible and joyous—a man of impatient patience. Most importantly, through his tireless encouragement of other writers and artists, he made us believe that the nation's culture and civility is *our* business and responsibility; that it is, in fact "our turn."

— Lorenzo Thomas

DISCOVERING AMERICA AGAIN

in memory of Tom Dent

The world we found was not something
To fall in love with
But there were people in it
Who watched us at our games

Who warned us early
African veneers and European valences
Could both be false and
Polished surfaces distracting

Armed us with corny maxims;
Pride is not assumed but earned
By effort properly applied

Common sense:
Garvey, Washington, DuBois were men
Like those you meet in the street

And sent us on the way, expecting us
To be explorers
Space travelers in song,
Screaming or mellow
In caravans of ageless aspiration
To memorize exuberant manifests
Of semi-precious words

Discovering America again,
We found
The simplest of all mysteries
Called speech
Retains the register
Of fear

Encountering
What we do not know we know
Disguised as other people.

They are still there, those watchers
Watching you
Discovering America again

Don't be afraid—

Someone has walked this way before
All the world's music in her hands
Under the starlight
That she wished
Could lead away to freedom
Or at least a space to be
As newborn as tomorrow,
Forgiven as today
Someone has walked this way before
Who learned the secret

Someone has walked this way before:
A man who knew
That speech
Is breath made lovely
Shaped and shaping
Volume expanding both
Inside and out
In the quick transfer
Of sight and feeling
Into sound
and sense (sometimes)

Someone has walked this way before,
My friend
Who was my friend

A man who spoke with people
Who asked you questions
So that you could breathe

— Lorenzo Thomas

A Talk on "Startling Maneuvers"

by
Barbara Guest

I'M SO PLEASED to be here and of course one of my difficulties in life is not just writing poetry; it's collecting my particles and wondering what

I'm supposed to do where, so I thought today was going to be a discussion, of what the poem is about, so I brought a poem on Anne-Marie Albiach. About two weeks ago, at home, I was looking through some old diaries that of course weren't completed but still had white pages and I saw at the top of one page—oh this was ten, fifteen, years ago—"Wrote a letter to Prynne," "Received book from Anne-Marie Albiach," and, in little brackets, "She inspires me," and now that I know her and know her work more, she inspires me more. So there was a birthday celebration for Anne-Marie in San Francisco and I wrote a poem to her in celebration of this, of her, of her poetry and after I'd finished it, I realized that what I'd written about, because she is very much on my horizon, that I'd written about the process of writing a poem. So I'm going to read this [poem, "Startling Maneuvers"] and we're going to discuss it—Mei-mei's going to tell you what it means. [laughter]

Arrived at the terrain of her sensibility/—a stasis and//pull in the composition physical—//remember, a contradictory tug phantom-like—//upon the environs of the poem.

My interpretation of this is that when you come to the point in a sensibility when you're approaching a poem, that is the preparation, and there is always a stasis, which contains balance and then non-movement. You are prepared to move but you're still balancing yourself. And the pull in the composition, which is physical because it has to announce itself and it announces its frailty, its physical presence, and that's why its tug is phantom-like. And it's beginning to have its phantom-shadow on the poem. And this pull is so extraordinarily

important because if you don't feel the pull between the poem and you, then you somehow or other don't manage to produce anything that has much energy.

Darkening of the page and then withdrawal of darkening.

This could be your shadow—

Gradually the page lightens,/the invisible heaviness lifted//Perhaps—cinematic—//this elevation.

Perhaps it's on a screen. I think that I probably, in the screen of distance, projected this figure coming from distance onto the screen, and there is a feeling of a screen, not only to be projected on but between yourself and the poem.

With no warning (from inside the text, //mind attached to the text.) and attacked by dizziness of atmosphere, in the attack of suspense a master-

ful/development of plot and erasure.

I'm hesitating because I don't know whether I'm going to say that I use Wite-out a lot. [laughter] I know Anne-Marie does. But that amount of erasure is very necessary to what she has written.

The echo that the words grant us on the page and off

Remember that it's off the page also—

sound of the last few words—,/they will be abolished and this new movement embracing an echo.

And at this point a destructiveness enters the poem. I know that...I've been reading the life of Shelley again—fabulous book, by Holmes—and the amount of destructiveness that Shelley was capable of was so incredible—everything he touched practically, but this also happens in the poem. It never is the pearl, but it's the pearl with the flaw.

The echo/ the words grant us on page and off,/sound of the last few words,/they will be abolished this new movement that embraces an echo/only discovered, here, where, the poem/sustains marginality. The/timing of this substitution, one idea for another/as we supplant ideas. Count down./Knuckle of the

continued on page 10

Flash Interview

Editors: Can you say more about "the poem sustains marginality"?

Barbara Guest: The poem has a brace so that when there is an overflow into the margin, where it goes further than it might go ordinarily (the idea that the margin is not a fixed point), the poem can be sustained. A person is a marginal person when they wander outside the bounds, and so with a poem. A flow of ideas that goes beyond the poem needs a content that can sustain this overflow of ideas; these ideas that wander in the margin have to be braced by a strong poem.

THE POETRY METER

Miner
of miniscapes, Selector,
bend your knee
to this Handwriting.

Bell rings.
A special timing
of Hand-Held Meter,
risky when used by buffoon.
Earth-flavored
experience says so.

Futurism

Phidias

Hand-Held Meter.

"Nothing but a fine nerve meter" (Artaud)

STORYTELLING

Words stumble.
(introduce pavement)
Old-fashioned people in clothes.

Passage to friendship
wave "bye, bye,"
(details, momentum, firefly)

idly unfolds.

(dark, light, etc.)

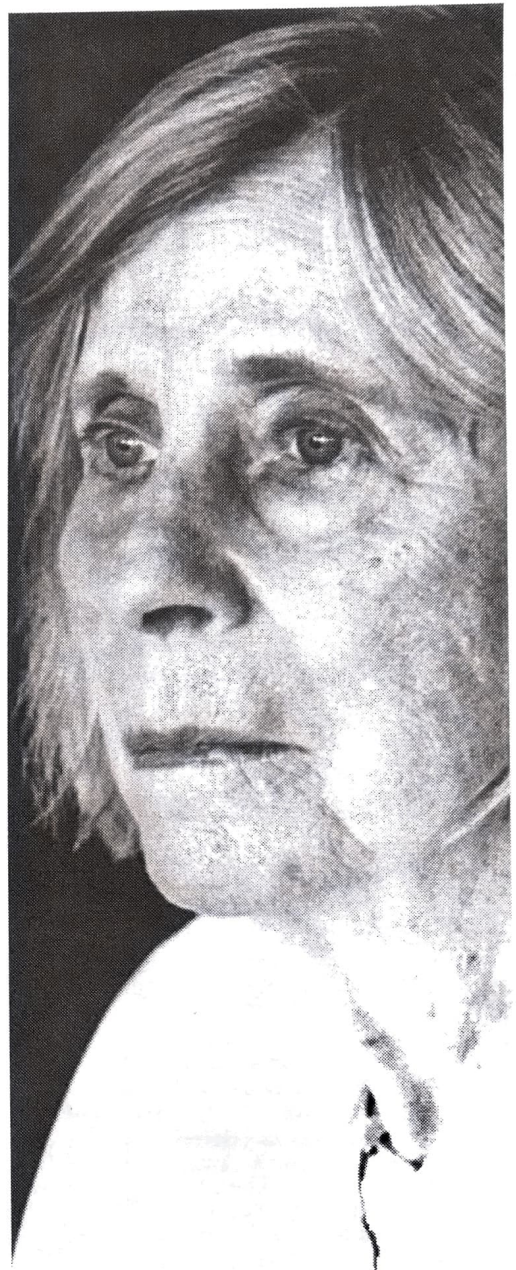
(separately, form,)

indifferent combinations. *(jest, tears.)*

(Rhythm upswing) collision with serpent,

*repeat and repeat
as suspense, moonlight.*

— two poems, *Barbara Guest*



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Art is shapely"*
— Allen Ginsberg

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*hand/illustrates itself, tames the sentence
covered with a/fist held loftily.*

I was very conscious of this in Albiach's work; there's so much physicality and it's all words. And words are physicality. And I always had the sense of a fist that she held over the page.

*Muscular control...fastidious./continual
restiveness also.*

And there is a sense of conversation and you don't know if this conversation (it's not between quotation marks), you don't know whether this conversation is between yourself and some apparition. I believe that I call [my Post-Apollo book] *Quill, Solitary APPARITION* because I was conscious all the time of a sense of hauntedness, and I think that it's in many poets, this hauntedness, and either it belongs to you or it doesn't. It's not necessary, but we are haunted by something, those of us who are.

*A blissful discontinuity/orders this estrange-
ment of each//available word and the disin-
clination to advance at/that point in time) or
desire to hurry toward an abrupt/ending—.*

Don't hurry. This is one of my little problems.

Rushing or spectacular jumps over the hurdles—

That's taking chances, and writing that doesn't take a chance isn't worth the old-fashioned—I remember my father's saying "It's not worth a tinker's damn"—and he said that in North Carolina.

*An advanced punctuation bursting from
vases//into an arena of sound/the aroma
continues as a cloud of invisibility shelters.*

The invisible is what else can happen in the poem, in its arena, like

*a ghost exiting, there from center right: solid
objects, merciless.*

That's the phantom of possible

ideas, as I would translate it. Now comes the part where the poet is somewhat in charge. I don't believe one's ever in charge; I think that—I always believed that people like Dryden, Pope, were in charge. I don't think Shakespeare was; I think he was too great.

*(Maneuvering inside a volume)//the poet
employs a force majeure to shred the atmos-
phere/this fist its imprint almost/observable!*

The full meaning becomes clear to the poet.

*And all the while movement coalescing/with
thought—*

There is a strictness that the poet must place, that the writer must place upon the person, the personage that the poet/writer is occupying. It's not to lose sight of the ideas and movements—they must meet. And then comes,

Startling these maneuvers!/of idea and erasure.

And the idea of erasure is also a positive one. It is not negative. It leans to the idea of all the possible choices that there were and are in the poem and some of those that the poet did not make, but it's an idea of leaving everyone slightly hesitant, in the air, behind which are the phantoms and the possibilities of phantoms, so that the poet is never as direct in the idea that is being obtained, and as I've suggested here, the poem does develop and does maneuver itself and its ideas into and past the erasure.

[Turns toward Mei-mei] So that was my essay... [laughter, clapping]

This talk was given at The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics during the 1998 Summer Writing Program, and was transcribed by Cole Swensen. The poem "Startling Maneuvers" was published in *American Letters & Commentary*, Number 10 under the title "A Reverie On the Making of a Poem."

Barbara Guest's *The Confetti Trees: Motion Picture Stories* is forthcoming from Sun & Moon Press.

Identity & Invention

Four Short Takes from the Poetry Project's 1998 Symposium

NOTES ON IDENTITY



Mei-mei Berssenbrugge

Origin is always erased and conclusion never visible.

I am a substance to which attributes inhere and a substantive to which predicates can be attached, predicates which are my properties.

It's an open system when the concepts relate to circumstances rather than essences.

Simple identity is what has become absent to us, and simple or given identity in all its forms, were these: subject and object, or matter and spirit, or society and selfhood, or knower and known.

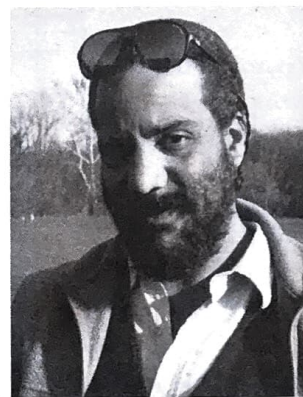
No identity whatsoever can any longer stand forth which is only itself.

Transitory points of intersection and sites of passage—the intermediacy of subjectivity suggests that the self is an empty subject.

The death of self is realized in noncentered subjectivity, which, though not transcendent, is nevertheless universal.

Text collaged from *Negotiation* by Gilles Deleuze, and *Erring* by Mark Taylor. Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's most recent book is *Four Year Old Girl*.

THE SHAPE OF THE WOLF



C. S. Giscombe

photo by Katharine Wright

All my life I've depended on geography, acknowledged it and considered it as basic meaning, as that which is in the world & irreducible in the world. I've seen that we (myself & people aside from me) affiliate ourselves with it more or less willingly: Where you from? we want to know. Sniffing each other out, seeking the native stink on one another. To what, static, are you connected? How far back can you go? How far out? Now, the body's a "site," everyone says—"contested ground," "inscribed upon," the body's a place among places.

Identity? A black American of West Indian descent? A male baby boomer? That "the country I come from is called the Midwest"? "If you've already said all you have to say about a particular identity," went the Poetry Project's instructions for symposium participants, "choose a different aspect of your identity." Very well, my identity as moviegoer. What movie was it, asked someone last week on the awful Bob & Tom radio show, what specific movie was it that scared the be-jesus out of you at an early age? Is yours the same as mine? Where you from, before & beyond whatever frightened you into recognizing yourself?

Invention? It's not representation. "The nature of invention," George Bowering said, opposing it to "the culture of mastery." The ends are open & prone to contamination. To me, prose isn't like that, open-ended, but I've found it useful for documenting. This is prose, this is a description. In my work as a poet I try to suggest a shape that "identity" might take, I try to invent several shapes or stages,

or refer to them anyway: that's human nature. Poetry's an endless series: now, now, now, now, now, now, now, etc.

Prose is different: it's the closed set of transitions, sometimes useful in describing poetry. Here's a story about movies:

"He a wolf now?" asked the child a row behind me in the dollar theatre in Normal, Illinois where we were watching *Wolf*. It should have been good—script by Jim Harrison, directed by Mike Nichols, starring Jack Nicholson. "Mama, he a wolf now?" asked the child's voice again. All those white guys together couldn't convince a child—or even adequately suggest to him—that anybody had turned into anything. But at the Sherwood Twin Drive-in at the western edge of Dayton, Ohio in 1961! It was a treat for me, that summer, watching relatively youthful Oliver Reed in *Curse of the Werewolf*. It was the classic punchline formula—don't show

it until the end of the film. Suddenly on the big outdoors screen we could see Oliver Reed's broad back and hear wolfish noises as he savaged some fellow—in the front seat my father said, "This time when he turns around he's really going to look like something." This is no metaphor of some sexual fear of my father's angry self, this is a werewolf story. Indeed he did look different when he faced the camera and me—all the hairy make-up and the canines and two tufty wolf-ears up at the top of his head. He was absolutely terrifying as that made-up creature, that synthesis: the be-jesus was scared out of me and I spent all that summer night awake until dawn listening to the radio, the reassurance of prattling disk jockeys. Leon, the werewolf's name was Leon, and more frightening than made-up Oliver Reed had been the child actor who'd played "young Leon"—no furry make-up on his face as he rattled the bars that his parents,

intuitive about the wolf already in him, had installed on his bedroom window. Leon was out there I knew as a child myself in my bedroom. Here was a shape. I was out there.

(Years later on TV, I saw the elusive metaphor of the wolf surface in *The Wolfman*. Shock Theatre, snowy channel 9 from Cincinnati, every Friday night at 11:30. Not scary, more interesting, set in Britain. People in the movie said it was a wolf out there past town, but on the screen it was old Lon Chaney—as the visiting American nephew Larry Talbot—done up with kinky fur, a flat nose, a dark skin. He went after white girls.)

The body mutates. We re-invent it in our own images, our most furred & furtive-colored selves, the conglomeration of deceptions & fears from whence we came. We do the same with region.

C.S. Giscombe is the author of, most recently, *Giscome Road* from Dalkey Archives. He teaches creative writing at Penn State.

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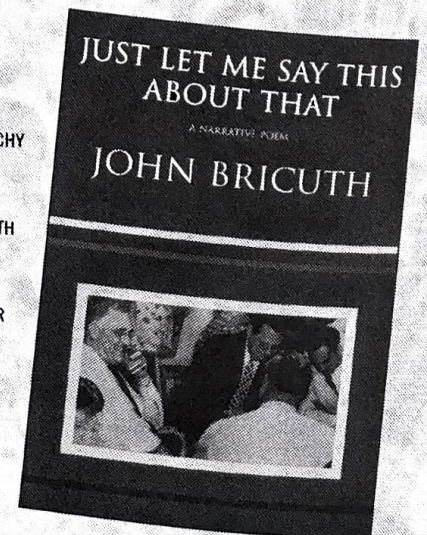
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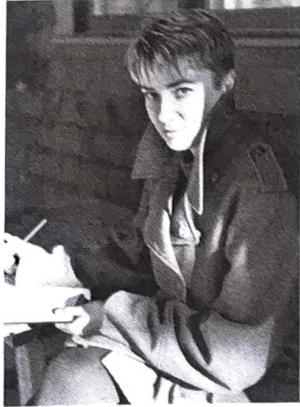
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"IT GIVES YOU THAT LIFT"



Sharon Mesmer

CLASS, POETRY, AND BREASTS

My initial response to the topic of class is uneasiness, resistance: an uneasiness at having to address it directly, publicly, even though I've been addressing it for the last twenty years in my work. The resistance is indicative of the interesting (at least to me) conjunction of class, poetry, and female body awareness. My awareness of poetry occurred around the same time as my awareness of class and gender—specifically, breast size issues. I chose the poem "Female" by Patti Smith for this panel, and hopefully it will demonstrate this conjunction. I say hopefully because my choice of this poem was intuitive rather than logical, but perhaps in this case both impulses are the same.

I became interested in poetry at fourteen, in 1975, after reading "Sunflower Sutra" for the first time in my high school library. (The librarian, Sister Patrice Marie, was young and cool.) That same year I saw a photo of Patti Smith in *Sixteen* magazine—Danny Fields, manager of the Ramones, was editor at the time. I really liked the way she looked in her white t-shirt: flat-chested, like me. I was glad I was flat-chested because I didn't want to have breasts—breasts meant you were an adult, and the focus of unwanted adult attention. But at the same time I wished I had big breasts, because I had been harassed constantly since the fifth grade (Catholic school girls are merciless) because I was flat-chested. So sometimes I wanted big breasts, for revenge purposes. It was a very schizy time, and there was no one around with whom I could discuss this conflict, although I did mention to my dad once that I didn't ever want to wear a bra.

"Why not?" he said. "I heard it gives you that 'lift.'"

So when I first saw the photo of Patti Smith I figured this was someone I could really admire: a cool flat-chested girl

poet from New York with a rock-and-roll band full of cute guys and a record coming out with songs on it about Jim Morrison, lesbian suicide, and spaceships. I knew nothing more about her (like, that she was NOT flat-chested), I hadn't even read a word by her, but in a short time I assembled a large collection of articles about and interviews with her. In one interview, with Lisa Robinson in *Hit Parader*, Patti said the following:

"I didn't want to be a girl because they wore those Elvis charm bracelets and I couldn't get into that. With a lower-class upbringing it was real desirable to have big tits and a big ass, and I wanted boys to like me, but they didn't. They liked me as a pal."

Well, there it was: "With a lower class upbringing, it was real desirable to have big tits and a big ass." Except at the time, I thought, what does that mean? I had no idea yet of the parallels between economics and female body type, I only knew that Patti, like me, had problems with breast size, and she came from a lower class background. That was important to me because in addition to my décolletage issues, my classmates were engaged in making me painfully aware of gaps in my economic standing by announcing on a daily basis that my couture revealed a lack of consumer buying power, and the fact that we were the only white family in a black neighborhood meant that we were too poor to move to their "better" white neighborhoods. My recourse was to join Patti's fan club and order her books through the mail. *Seventh Heaven*, her first book, auspiciously arrived on my fifteenth birthday. In it, I found the poem, "Female," which announced in no uncertain terms that Patti did NOT want to have breasts. Reading that was like seeing the Comiskey Park scoreboard exploding for the first time, like it was 1969 again and the Cubs won the pennant. Finally, I was yelling "Bingo!" All the key words were there: horror; breasts; bowling alley. My lifelong (since fifth grade) problem was being addressed in a poem! My chosen art form had reached out to me in my language and addressed the issue closest to my heart. It was like I'd had a secret crush on poetry and now poetry was asking me to the prom. Whereas in reality a boy I had a big crush on had caught me staring at him and sneered, "Mesmer, you're so ugly." Poetry had thrown its cloak over the puddle of my misery and told me to step on it. Right then I decided—I was gonna be a poet! Everything I did, from that moment on, would be a move toward becoming a poet.

Whereas "Sunflower Sutra" exploded the expectations I had of poetry in terms of structure and content, the images and language of "Female" were another kind of revelation. First of all, they were the images of my own existence, not the perfectly delicate images of high school textbook poems by Walter de la Mare and Alfred Lord Tennyson. And the

WHAT ME WORRY



Tim Davis

SECTION 3

single white male...umm....*I means lotions...I'm totally independentist...* in a recent poem by tim davis (author of pop-eye's upper arm now unquotable due to legal squabbles), tim davis is a single taupe hermaphrodite member of the guild of collective, desperate unaffiliation single local frontal globe sport lobotomists of the glyph of the all-meringue single caspar weinberger buddha nature illegal flashcard traffic single blunderbuss versus nanorobots single latin scholar stuck with identity meaning sameness single poetry chapbook released into orbit, rips through the hull of a billion dollar space station, killing crew and timorous beakersful—fucking hell—there's hope single debtor—owes kim's video his firstborn, can't find lust for life single white hawaiian triple negatives single jewish when they come for the camps again hygienist or less single poet with one lone tool: that'd be *69, think about it, back-assed through the studly duststorm of miscommunications that can't even stay missed, they'll speak to us no matter what we see fit to slam shut

"What Me Worry" appeared online in its entirety in *Passages 6*. Tim Davis is a _____ noun. His latest collection, *Dailies*, will be published by Hard Press in 1999.

Sharon Mesmer (continued from page 13)

language was like my own language: the words "puking" and "bitch." Secondly, "Female" taught me how emotions could be expressed in words—especially emotions that I didn't even have words for yet, like the hatred of being a woman, of having breasts. It was shameful to feel that kind of hatred then, in the midst of the flowering of the women's movement. If I hated being a woman, then there was something really wrong with and different about me. But now I knew I could exploit that difference. That difference, those conflicts, could be a fertile field of images and language particular to me.

Sharon Mesmer is the author of *Half Angel, Half Lunch* (Hard Press) published in 1998, and *The Empty Quarter* (Hanging Loose), upcoming in 1999.

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 Bill T. Jones, Jennifer Monson, Mary
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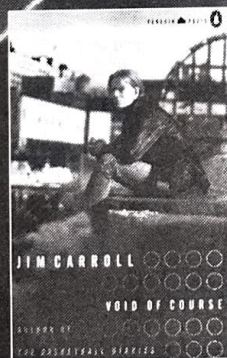
jim carroll

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poetry project calendar

EVENTS

DECEMBER



2 WEDNESDAY

Kenward Elmslie

Kenward Elmslie's recent books include the just-published and long-awaited *Routine Disruptions* (Coffee House Press, 1998), *The Champ*, and *Sung Sex*, both with drawings by Joe Brainard. Elmslie has written six opera librettos, including *Lizzie Borden*, and the book and lyrics for the Broadway musical *The Grass Harp*. He has toured widely, giving solo performances of his musical, *Postcards on Parade*.

4 FRIDAY

New York Stories—from the Streets of NYC

Featuring Willie Perdomo, Jill Rapaport, Merry Fortune and Carl Watson. Willie Perdomo is the author of *Where A Nickel Costs a Dime* (W.W. Norton), and has appeared on several PBS documentaries. Jill Rapaport is a poet, essayist, and playwright whose work has appeared in the anthologies *Crimes of the Beats* and *Unbearables* (Autonomedia). Merry Fortune's books include *Moral: Poems & Stories* and most recently *Blind Stints* (Linear Arts). Carl Watson's books include *Beneath the Empire of the Birds*. [10:30 pm]

7 MONDAY

Open Reading, sign-up at 7:30 pm. [8pm]

9 WEDNESDAY

Lee Harwood & Ange Mlinko

Lee Harwood's many books of poetry include *The Man with Blue Eyes* (Angel Hair Press), *Crossing the Frozen River: Selected Poems* (Paladin), and his latest, the first full-length collection in 10 years, *Morning Light* (Slow Dancer Press). Ange Mlinko's new book, *Matinees*, is forthcoming from Zoland Books in April, 1999. She is also the author of *Immediate Orgy* and *Audit* (lift books).

11 FRIDAY

Jaywalking Blues: d.a. levy Lives

The kickoff reading of the two-day festival celebrating the life and work of Cleveland poet and publisher d.a. levy. Featuring Edward Sanders, Kent Taylor, Mike Golden, Bari Kennedy, Michael Basinski, and Douglas Brinkley. Co-sponsored by Boog Literature and the Eisenhower Center of American Studies at the University of New Orleans. [10:30 pm]

14 MONDAY

Robert Bové & Janice Lowe

Robert Bové is the editor and publisher of *Room Temperature* (GRIST On-Line). He is the author of *Nine from Metronome* (Pisces Press), *Nectar* (The Norton Coker Press), and other books. A co-founder of the Dark Room Collective, Janice Lowe recently served as composer and musical director of *Alice Underground* at NADA, and *Sleepwalker's Diner* at La Mama.

16 WEDNESDAY

Mitch Highfill & Ed Roberson

Mitch Highfill is the author of *Liquid Affairs* (United Artists), *Turn* (Situations Press), and *The Blue Dahlia*, forthcoming from Detour Press. Ed Roberson was selected by the 1998 National Poetry Series Competition for his book, *Atmosphere Conditions*, to be published by Sun & Moon Press in 1999. His book *Just In/Word of Navigational Challenges: New and Selected Work* will be published by Talisman House this December.

18 FRIDAY

Not Home for the Holidays—Dysfunctional Family Stories:

Writers share their family traumas and holiday horrors. Featuring Todd Colby, Sarah Schulman, Bonny Finberg, Hal Sirowitz and Taylor Mead. Todd Colby is a poet, actor, musician, and the author of *Cush and Ripsnort* (Soft Skull). Sarah Schulman is the author of seven books of fiction, including *Shimmer*. Bonny Finberg's poetry, fiction and reviews have appeared in *Crimes of the Beats* and *Best American Erotica-1998*. Hal Sirowitz is the author of *Mother Said and My Therapist Said*. Taylor Mead is the author of *The Anonymous Diary of a New York Youth* and *Son of Andy Warhol*.

JANUARY



1 FRIDAY

25th Annual New Year's Day Marathon Reading

Featuring over 120 poets, performers, dancers, musicians, and artists, including Richard Hell, Richard Foreman, Vernon Reid, Yoshiko Chuma, John Giorno, Peter & Emma Straub, Nick Zedd, Jackson Mac Low, Douglas Dunn, Edwin Torres, Todd Colby, Lisa Jarnot, Reg E. Gaines, Tuli Kupferberg, Patricia Spears Jones, Eleni Sikelianos, Bill Kushner, Hal Sirowitz, Paul Violi, Tom Carey, Ed Friedman, Marcella Durand, Anselm Berrigan, Brenda Coultas, Joe Elliot, Greg Masters, Laurie Stone, Elena Alexander, Bob Hershon, Laird Hunt, Anne Tardos, Charles Borkhuis, Wendy Kramer, Tom Savage, Cliff Fyman, Stephen Rodefer, Ange Mlinko, Bruce Andrews, Paul Schmidt, Murat Nemet-Nejat, Katy Lederer, Tim Davis, Christian X. Hunter, Peter Bushveager, Luis Francia, David Trinidad, Jeff Wright, and many more! This year the Poetry Project celebrates the 25th Anniversary of this downtown tradition. Refreshments will be available. [2 pm-1 am, \$15, \$12 for Poetry Project Members]

4 MONDAY

Open Reading, sign-up at 7:30 pm [8 pm]

6 WEDNESDAY

Charles North & Martine Bellen

Charles North's most recent book is *No Other Way: Selected Prose* (Hanging Loose Press). His *New and Selected Poems* is due out soon from Sun & Moon Press. His latest book of poetry is *The Year of the Olive Oil*. Martine Bellen's newest book, *Tales of Murasaki and Other Poems*, is a recipient of the 1997 National Poetry Series, and will be published by Sun & Moon in January. She is also the author of *Wild Women and Places People Dare Not Enter*, and has received awards from NYFA, the Fund for Poetry, and the Academy of American Poets.

8 FRIDAY

Unquell the Dawn Now: an Exploration of English-German Interdimensionality

A celebration of the publication of *Unquell the Dawn Now*, a linked series of homophonic and literal translations between German and English based on Friedrich Holderlin's work "Am Quell der Donau." Featuring readings by authors Robert Kelly and the German poet Schuldt with four additional performers, plus appreciations of Holderlin. *Unquell The Dawn Now* is being published under the Documentext imprint of McPhersen & Company. A booksigning will follow the reading. [10:30 pm]

11 MONDAY

Wendy Kramer & Rachel Levitsky

Wendy Kramer has work in *Cartografitti*, *Chain*, *Nedge*

and forthcoming in *Essex*. She has published two chapbooks, *Patinas* and *Fairyland Park* (Meow Press). Rachel Levitsky is the author of *2(1X1)* (Baksun Books, 1998) and *Cartographies of Error* (Detour, 1998). *The Continued Adventures of Yaya and Grace* is forthcoming. For the past two years, she has been the organizer of the Left Hand Reading Series in Boulder, Colorado.

13 WEDNESDAY

Michael Friedman & Sarah Schulman

Michael Friedman's last two books of poetry are *arts and letters* (The Figures, 1996) and *Cameo* (The Figures, 1994). He is the editor of *Shiny* magazine. Sarah Schulman is the author of seven books of fiction, most recently *Shimmer* (Avon, 1998). She has also published two non-fiction books, the latest is *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS and Marketing*. Her new play, *The Child*, will be directed by Craig Lucas next year.

15 FRIDAY

Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration

Readings honoring the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. Featuring David Henderson, Hettie Jones, Sharan Strange, Patricia Spears Jones, and others. David Henderson is the author of *'Seuse Me While I Kiss the Sky: A Biography of Jimi Hendrix* (Doubleday) and most recently, *Neo-California* (North Atlantic). Hettie Jones is an editor, teacher and author of *Drive* (Hanging Loose) and *How I Became Hettie Jones*. Patricia Spears Jones is the author of *The Weather That Kills* (Coffee House Press) and *Mythologizing Always* (Telephone Books). Sharan Strange is a poet and teacher living in Washington DC. Her work has appeared in *The Radcliffe Quarterly* and *American Poetry Review*. [10:30 pm]

20 WEDNESDAY

Nicole Brossard & Heather Fuller

Quebec writer Nicole Brossard's books include *Picture Theory*, *Rédaction de Journal Intime* and *Elle Serait la Première Phrase de Mon Prochain Roman She Would Be the Next Sentence of My Next Novel* (a bilingual edition with a translation from Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood). She was twice awarded the Governor General's Award for Poetry and in 1991 received Le Prix Athanase-David. Her work has been translated into English, Italian, German, and Spanish and has appeared in many international anthologies. Heather Fuller is the author of *perhaps this is a rescue fantasy* (Edge Books). Forthcoming are *C Ration Dog & Pony* (Like Books) and *Madonna Fatigue* (Meow Press). She edits poetry and book reviews for the *washington review* and co-coordinates the *IN YOUR EAR* reading series in Washington, DC.

25 MONDAY

Nava Fader & David Mills

Nava Fader is a 1998 recipient of a Poet-in-Residence Award from Just Buffalo. Her work has appeared in *Orpheus Grid* and *Kiosk*, and she has work forthcoming in *Explosive*, *Situation* and *Nedge*. David Mills is a poet, a songwriter, and he has written four plays. His essays are included in *Luna, Luna: Creative Writing Ideas from Spanish, Latin American, and Latino Literature* and *Old Faithful: 18 Writers Present Their Favorite Writing Assignments* (Teachers & Writers).

27 WEDNESDAY

Cole Swenson & Linh Dinh

Cole Swenson's latest book is *Noon*, which received the National American Writing Award and was published by Sun & Moon Press this year. Her book *Try* received the 1998 Iowa Prize for Poetry and will be published by University of Iowa Press in 1999. She currently directs the Creative Writing Program at the University of Denver. Linh Dinh is the author of the chapbook *Drunkard Boxing* (Singing Horse Press). His poems, stories and translations have appeared in *Sulfur*, *Chicago Review*, and *New American Writing American Poetry* and other journals.

29 FRIDAY

Fall Workshop Readings

An evening of readings by members of the Poetry Project's Fall 1998 Writing Workshops. Workshop leaders are Frank Lima, Maureen Owen, and Stephen Rodefer. [10:30 pm]



The Poetry Project is located at St. Mark's Church in the Bowery
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All events are \$7 and begin at 8 PM unless otherwise noted. Programs are subject to change.
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book reviews

ANNE-MARIE ALBIACH

A Geometry

Burning Deck (Providence, RI), 1998, 26 pages, \$5.00.

We are not accustomed to a poetry as naked as this: with the three poems ("Vertical Effort in White," "Incantation," "Figures of Memory") collected in *A Geometry*, Albiach's alliance of honesty and elegance is here to dazzle once again. (For those who have not yet discovered *Mezza Voce* (Post-Apollo Press, 1988), *Etat* (Awede, 1989), or *Vocative Figure* (Allardyce-Barnett, 1992)—all available in translation—*A Geometry* is a good introduction.) The translations are excellent—viable American language retaining enough strangeness to resist naturalization—whose mastery testifies to the Waldrops' multi-decade career of translating Albiach, along with many of her French contemporaries. A modern Hamlet with the skull of "Lucy" in hand, Albiach uses the very literal parameters of writing—a fist, a page, a book, letters, words, marks, spaces—to enact a ritual encounter of (self-) consciousness with the human archaic. This is not pitiful, rather a profound homage in language stripped of familiarity, an "archaic/failure of eloquence," in face of the ancestral obscurity. The scale is maximal. However, Albiach refuses any easy otherness for language in the body (the ear or breath), with writing that cuts along a frank sense of the difficulty, even the cruelty, of this here-there. She postulates no clear address in the "unconscious," no blurring of the lines between sleep—"where the censor menaces"—and waking.

Poetry is an "incantation" that at once invokes and extinguishes the ancestral light, singing into the genetic code to undo it, where the poet "gives birth in the lineage of chance." Such (re)birth is an effort to stand up within the horizon of writing—"vertical effort"—literally on the white of the page; *A Geometry* is the exploration of this horizon (bounded by eye and page), feeling along the "tactile memory" of words. What is the "geometry" of a language? How would we begin to map the world between written and perceived word, between

the page itself and the body? To conceive of the page as a theatre might be one way to frame the elaboration: "barely perceptible stage business," a "page poetry" deploying words with exact intuition. "Figures of Memory"—readable across the spine as well as down each page—splendidly exemplifies such a geometry. The spacing is no merely "formal" arrangement on neutral ground, but erasure or silence itself as a term of syntax. What gets signified—in "the blankness of symbols"—is not (as in some page poetry) ideal. Rather, Albiach attempts the impossible de-idealization, a descent between ticks of the second hand, into space as dark and immeasurable as the "vertebral distance" to instinct.

A Geometry also introduces us to a different mode, more "geologic" than geometric. "Incantation" (like the recent piece for Du Bouchet, "Whiteness and Sediment," published in *American Poetry Review*, March/April, 1998) subtracts the spacing for a denser cake of language: "the voice mortal amidst sediment." To find a meaning in these pieces is like remembering

the edifice that became an arch that collapsed. A kind of eroded Freudian scene develops: "the law of succession the blankness of symbols/ vertebral distance." It is a syntax of compression, rather than space, but the effect is the same. This is a deceptively "little" book—its breadth, in space and time, will leave you reeling.



photo by Claude Royet-Journoud

—Jonathan Skinner

Jonathan Skinner is the author of *Fat Sun* and a *Firebook*. He is currently at work on translations from the *Provençal*.

NATHALIE BLONDEL

Mary Butts: Scenes From the Life

McPherson & Co. (P.O. Box 1126, Kingston, NY 12402), 1998, 55+ pages, \$35.00.

I cannot remember a time when I was not enraptured at or tortured by words. Always there have been words which, sometimes for their sound alone, sometimes for their

sound and sense, I would not use. From a loathing of their grossness or their sickliness, their weight or want of weight. Their inexactitude, their feeling of acidity or insipidity. Their action, not only on the intelligence but on the nerves, was instant; instant and constant, as my joy at other combinations, and also at what was nothing more or less than our old friend *le mot juste* ... There were words. I could make words do things. But words could do things to me. Words would make me use them.

—Mary Butts, from *The Crystal Cabinet*

One of the brightest flames to burn out in the modern era was that of British writer Mary Butts. Along with Mina Loy and Harry Crosby, her work has suffered from the worst kind of neglect. Not that of hostile critics and publishers who have bones to pick with her style or her subjects, but rather the indifference of critics and publishers distracted by the weighty controversies generated by Pound's anti-Semitism, Eliot's Catholicism, Breton's Communism, and various sundryisms and anti-isms of the period. In recent years, the works of Mina Loy have come back into print, and the critical establishment has begun to reassess modernist writers such as Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes, at long last.

So it is exciting to discover that McPherson & Company has been republishing the bulk of Mary Butts' writing, starting with *The Taverner Novels* and selected stories, *From Altar to Chimney-piece*, in 1992, and then *The Classical Novels* and a book of essays on her work, *A Sacred Quest*, in 1995. This year, they have published *Ashe of Rings and Other Writings*, and this biography, *Mary Butts: Scenes from the Life*. For readers unfamiliar with her work, the biography provides a context for reading the novels and short stories. For students of modernism, it might come as a surprise that Mary Butts was on the scene wherever the scene was. She was in London, hanging

out with the Vorticists and Ford Madox Ford. She was in Paris, hanging out with Gertrude Stein and the exiles. She was in Villefranche with Cocteau. She studied magick in Sicily with Crowley. Her connections included Douglas Goldring, Ezra Pound, Bryher, Wyndham Lewis, Virgil Thomson, E.M. Forster; the list goes on. She was an avid bar-hopper, and could be seen at many of the literary soirées of the day. As Lord Buckley said of Prince Minsky, she "made every scene there was." In the meantime, Butts wrote short stories, novels, novellas, book reviews, poems, and kept what appears to be a remarkable diary for most of her life. She developed an addiction to opium fairly early on, and had frustrating love affairs and two unsatisfying marriages.

Born in 1890 to an aristocratic family in decline, it was her misfortune to watch as her mother sold off all of the things which had been dear to her as a child; first the Blake collection (her great-grandfather had been a chief patron of the poet/artist), then the china and the other art works, then the family home in Dorset. It was to be a source of great bitterness between her and her mother ever after. At Westfield College, Butts had several female lovers, for whom she served as mother or healer. This became a pattern for her in future relationships. She met her first husband John Rodker while she was working for a pro-Conscientious Objector organization in London. They lived a modest lifestyle, provided for by occasional financial gifts from her mother, and Rodker established a name for himself by publishing deluxe editions of Pound, Eliot and Lewis. Their marriage turned sour, and in 1920, she started an affair with the influential mystical writer, Cecil Maitland. Maitland was a junkie, and he introduced Butts to opium, automatic writing, and Aleister Crowley. Butts later fell in love with a Russian exile, who could

take her money, but, being gay, could not return her passion. She had a brief affair with the composer Virgil Thomson. Butts had a tendency to fall for lovers who needed her in some way (financially, emotionally or artistically), but who either could not or would not fulfill her needs (sexual or otherwise):

I have always had since I can remember an incomparable pleasure in finding someone psychically sick, and hearing about it and seeing if there is a way out...I've always wanted to make my lovers well, sense powers liberated in them, fears in the dustbin, raw life taken in and coming out translated.

Her second husband, Gabriel Atkin, was an alcoholic who spent most of his days in a depressed funk. They had moved to a small bungalow on the Cornish coast, living in isolation. That is where Mary Butts died alone at the age of 46, of an undiagnosed gastric ulcer.

Nathalie Blondel's biography renders all of this through Butts' diaries, which are generously quoted throughout. It is a bit dry going at first, but as the story develops, it becomes hard to put down. The book is copiously footnoted, and in a book of this scope, that is a relief. The reader wants to know where a scrap of information comes from, or if there is more to an incident than the text indicates. What is clear is that Blondel did her homework. There are also many passages from Butts' stories and novels, essential in a writer's biography. I do miss the atmospherics of Butts' drug use. One wonders where or how she scored, but that is only a minor complaint. On the other hand, Blondel chooses not to moralize about Butts' life. That, too is a relief. The reader can make those decisions.

The most important fact about Mary Butts is that she was one of the finest writers of her time. She is capable of shifting perspectives from one point of view to another with

dazzling technique. There is often a magical sense of things. Her knowledge of occult lore and fairy tales is always just below the surface of the narrative, popping up gently to illuminate a relationship or as a further tangent to explore. Her characters tend to embody the places they come from without having to explain those places. There is a poetic quality to her prose, which might explain why her chief advocates in recent years have been poets (John Ashbery, Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser, Gerritt Lansing and Ken Irby have all referenced Butts). Perhaps it is the incongruity of the thoroughly modern settings and the mythic subtexts of so many of her stories that compels a deeper reading. Or maybe poets are drawn to the precision of her style and musical way with words. Butts is often referred to as a poet's prose writer.

Janet Byrne, writing in *The New York Times*, gives Mary Butts the back of her hand. She holds that the reason Butts has been out of print for

so long is that she was not a significant writer. Byrne states that "Nathalie Blondel has provided an interesting footnote to modernism..." The publication of this biography (along with those of Mina Loy and Laura Riding) gives the lie to such pompous pronouncements. The fact is that the whole machinery of canon-making is being dismantled before our eyes. For some, this is a painful thing. For others, it is liberating. For the open-minded, it is a welcome opportunity to reexamine the works of "forgotten" writers. It may be 60 years late, but now Mary Butts gets the readership she has richly deserved.

— Mitch Highfill

Mitch Highfill's *Blue Dahlia* is forthcoming from Detour Press.

MARY MARGARET SLOAN, EDITOR
Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing By Women
 Talisman House (PO Box 3157, Jersey City, NJ 07303-3157), 1998, 740 pages, \$29.95 paper.

Mary Margaret Sloan's new *Moving Borders* anthology is big. I mean physically big, as in 740 pages of excellent writing by women, and historically big in the same way. It's a book that functions not only as a collection of creative works, but also as a document of the processes and progresses of North American avant-garde writing during the second half of this century. As Sloan says in her introduction to the book, "The collective writing and publishing histories of the contributors to *Moving Borders* inscribe the changes in the social and political culture of innovative writing that previously located women at the periphery. The writings included here are evidence of the actions women have taken to shift that perimeter." And certainly, a lot has changed since

burning deck



translations

Ilma Rakusa: STEPPE [Dichten =, #3, trans. from German by Solveig Emerson]
 Love stories? Shifting relations, power games, failures. The tension between the closeness of love and the claims of the individual. In a language both brilliant and simple, cool and intense, spare and eloquent. Stories, 80 pp., ISBN 1-886224-27-7, paper \$10

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Marcel Cohen: THE PEACOCK EMPEROR MOTH [Série d'écriture #9; trans. Cid Corman]
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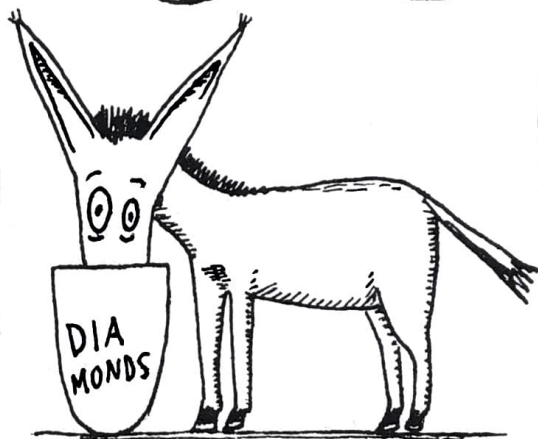
Don Allen's key anthology *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, where tossed into the ranks of the many men was the work of four women—Helen Adam, Barbara Guest, Madeline Gleason, and Denise Levertov.

Moving Borders collects the work of fifty women, most of them highly visible in experimental writing scenes, many of them formidable scholars, editors, and translators, in addition to being terrific poets and prose writers. When one opens the pages of the anthology, it is all very clear that out of the meeting of these voices emerges a blueprint of the path that non-mainstream American poetries as a whole have followed since the Allen anthology. *Moving Borders* is a testament to the role that women writers have played in exploring and exploding the Olsonian parameters of composition by field, while simultaneously integrating theoretical considerations of language alongside an attention to the lyric and to continuing narratives of the human condition.

Moving Borders is also a project which fluidly recontextualizes the work of writers generally grouped into less flexible categories of "school" or community. Clusters of works viewed side by side give the reader a greater sense of the connections between seemingly disparate projects. It is a book which opens with the poetry of Lorine Niedecker and closes with the poetry of Melanie Neilson, creating a range of dialogues, and pointing to the richness of shared experiment and experience—where a lineup of works by Bernadette Mayer, Rosmarie Waldrop, and Nicole Brossard suddenly take on an aesthetic allegiance, where Anne Waldman's *Iovis* and Hannah Weiner's *Clairvoyant Journal* stand side by side pointing to like-minded typographies, where a run of work by Kathy Acker, Susan Howe, and Joanna Drucker point to the incredible range of vision that characterizes writing by women in recent years. And the really good news is that *Moving Borders* doesn't end there. The anthology also includes a selection of critical essays, and a set of bibliographic and biographical notes which are invaluable to anyone interested in further pursuing the works of individual writers.

Sloan's attentions to the perils of anthology editing are part of what makes the book a success. For her, the criteria of "innovative" had to be clearly defined, and it's through the creation of such a definition that a continuity of work emerges in the book. As she said recently in an interview in *Poetry Flash*, "Innovation is the introduction of something new, so all definitions of innovation are constantly under revision as the new becomes familiar." (Hence the attention to "moving borders.") Sloan continues, "In the period covered by *Moving Borders*, roughly the mid-sixties to 1990, those stresses circulate around the constitution of particular kinds of work, so they focus on questions of genre and medium, as well as around the formal properties within individual works. Beyond—or really, before—challenges to given literary forms lies speculation regarding the formal stuff of which literature is made, the territory of the entire structure of meaning in language." Take this into consideration alongside what Sloan writes in her introduction—"It should be noted that the writ-

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ing here took an alternative path to the one chosen by other women writing in the early seventies, a writing predicated on a unified, vocalized 'I' and on the maintenance of received forms of the poem newly filled with different subject matter." And here you have the basic criteria for the inclusion of works in *Moving Borders*.

While I've always been a sucker for "the confessional strain of mid-century American poetry" that Sloan thinks of as "an unfortunate direction for women writers to choose," I have to applaud the achievements of this book. Anthologies are kind of like suitcases, it never all fits. There are certainly works which fall curiously just outside of the aesthetic considerations of this collection. I think particularly of the writings of Diane di Prima and Joanne Kyger which arguably lend themselves to innova-

tion as well as to traditional forms. But in the end, *Moving Borders* is a pleasure on many levels. I certainly remember my first experiences reading poetry by women via a late 1980s anthology called *Early Ripening*, edited by Marge Piercy. Even then, as a know-nothing poet, my intuition was that the emphasis on stereotypes of "women" and "what women write about" was pretty out to lunch. Had I come into contact with an anthology like *Moving Borders* a decade ago, it would have saved me a lot of time and it would have provided me with a lot of information. As is the case with experimental writing communities, one plods along, searching out the great works of fellow writers slowly, in waves, and sometimes only via the means of placing oneself within the physical geographies of certain communities. *Moving Borders* is an anthology that facilitates that type of travel. It's a book worth owning.

—Lisa Jarnot

Lisa Jarnot's second collection of poetry, *Ring of Fire*, is forthcoming from Zoland Books.

EDWARD FOSTER
boy in the key of e

Goats + Compasses, 1998, 28 pages, \$10.00.

ZHANG ER
winter garden

(Translated from Mandarin Chinese by the author with Leonard Schwartz), Goats + Compasses (Brownsville, Vermont 05037-0524, 1997), 24 pages, \$7.00.

Two intriguing and highly accomplished new chapbooks from Goats + Compasses' beautifully produced letterpress series give us penetrating but quite different takes on the transcendental experience in contemporary poetry. For Ed Foster, transcendence is a matter of critical uncertainty and imaginative grace notes, while Zhang Er enters the transformative dream directly and rides the rushes until a meditative stillness emerges.

With an admirable balance of

unflinching honesty and delicate indirection, Ed Foster's *boy in the key of e* offers a work of measured thoughtfulness and intense delight. By restraining his emotional effects through a subtle orchestration of sound, image, and idea, he has allowed his forms to speak, while his themes resonate discreetly throughout. His central focus concerns the promise of transcendence with its open and closed horizons and the lightness of the imagination that slips Hermes-like between these connotative and denotative states, as we see in the first section of the poem "four last songs for shubert."

Veneration's not my theme;
I want to answer them.
The sky's their golden cord
with which, they say, we're known.
It drew me up,
tethered to the sun.

Foster identifies the objects of our veneration as ego-constructions and like William Bronk (to whom this volume is dedicated) limits the idea of transcendence with all its requisite false fronts and trompe l'oeil staircases to a phenomenology of the imagination.

My history and my intellect
are show. I made this
concert, and this chapel,
for myself.

What I promote's
my own deception.
I am my hierophant.

Frequently, these ego-constructions stand motionless as a still life or a palace as in the Residenz at Wurtzburg. But unlike Bronk, Foster allows metaphor to surface in these poems because the "boy" in the title is allegory personified, appearing and disappearing as a Pan-angel, both rough and sublime, when in "their bad music overheard at royal albert hall," he says,

Streets and
airports are for looking—
walking through the mirrors,

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like the angels hidden there.

It is through the character of the "boy" flitting between worlds that the element of translation appears. For Foster, transcendence is a kind of translation from one language to another or one art to another. With the introduction of this theme, Foster sees the promise of transcendence in the creation of a parallel world which tries to retain the spiritual likeness and intention of the original. In this regard, translation traditionally attempts to catch the spirit of the original within the material demands of the new language or genre. References to painters, musicians, and poets abound (Schubert, Tasso, Puccini, Goya, Cezanne, Delacroix, Novalis, Traherne, Shakespeare, and Moreau)—personae who, through Foster, are translated into a spiritual-material reawakening, which is apparent in his poem "we all translate but you":

And so the ikon says,
if sound is what you feel,
let pictures
bring it out.

I say:
I found the boy
as half a pair,
black belt with studs,
short hair—an allegory
where
whatever he will
do
is odd.

Here as elsewhere, Foster has his Duncan, just as Bronk has his Stevens. But there is also an implied Kafka in the wings, standing parabolically "Before the Law," observing the closed doors we once thought were open, as Foster confirms in his last poem "the old idiom, violating its rule."

But no. The door's
not merely there or property (if you
must say as well as see each thing);
it never could be there unless the
moment it were made,
it had been shut.

Foster closes by mirroring his earlier reflections, "I can't enlarge the world," and, "Who says there's still a magic tongue?" This critical-lyric element in Foster finds its roots in an important reading of the symbolist metaphor through objectivist field poetry, offering us the reflection that art cannot transcend itself except, perhaps, through the hermetic, trickster-god, translation.

Zhang Er's *Winter Garden* introduces us to a lush, sensual world of fluctuating, elemental forces rich in the

bubble and brine of creation. It is a primal, mythic poetry whose themes of metaphysical transformation and cataclysmic reversal make their way through the poems like a cosmic dragon twisting between polar opposites. But beneath these furious changes, a transcendental stillness watches and waits to be recognized like "an egg as hard as stone,/an eye, its pupil the depth of water."

In the opening poem "Story," images of striking clarity ride upon the surface of calm waters or plunge into the depths of dynamic torrents. With hooks of alchemical mercury embedded in their lips, they "penetrate protoplasm, thrusting into the throbbing nucleus: the arrow of vision reversed in the direction of memory." Convulsive in the fury of conception and the birth swill of opposing forces, swirling elements, and "fish falling from the sky," the poem turns suddenly to find "there is this nothingness, muffled thunder/arising from the egg towering like a cliff/And there is the wind."

In the title poem, quietude reigns as a tourist senses in herself the spirit of an enslaved gardener, self-exiled from this withered place a hundred years ago, and "the scenery dimly recognizable/as in the dream of a previous life/or the instant before birth." But it is to the spirit of the winter garden that this poem is written and with whom the tourist-poet most deeply responds, recognizing that it has remained "enslaved for generations." The poem ends with the tourist-poet closing her eyes to "see this winter garden serene again."

The last poem "Reading 'Thunder: Perfect Mind,'" uses quotations from the anonymous, gnostic author to spur the imaginative flights of its reader. Here Zhang Er returns to her theme of primal energies raging and reversing their courses on the surface of a deep calm. Internal reflections buzz and swirl around early morning light on a river, and "as in a dream a woman appears /running in a gust of wind," who soon "turns into the desire of man/the emotion of an uncontainable mind." This image of a transformational female-male spirit that flashes through the poem is counter-pointed by the solemn voice and pure consciousness of "Thunder: Perfect Mind"—the alpha and omega poised at the point of revelation. What is revealed in this exchange is the immense stillness at the heart of the running woman and desiring man who ride "the wave from west to east—/it seems there is a profit to be made." But by the end of the poem it is clear that what is really being sought cannot be found in the rush toward desire-bound ends: what is profoundly present is "the spiritual mind hidden out of kindness" to which desire must awaken.

—Charles Borkhuis

Charles Borkhuis is the author of *Proximity* (Stolen Arrows) from Sink Press and *Alpha Ruins*, forthcoming from Bucknell University Press.

JARNOT, SCHWARTZ, STROFFOLINO, EDITORS*An Anthology of New (American) Poets*

Talisman House (Jersey City, NJ), 1998, 352 pages, \$21.95.

This is it: the first full disclosure of the new. There will now be others. After years when theoretical questions have split poetry into camps, this may be the one generation not to feel so embattled, so defensive. Older poets can look to the new generation with hope. We're not looking for brand-new techniques but for this, the forward generation on the move. The anthology, the latest of three from Talisman, confirms that besides feminism and multi-culturalism, the most avant-garde, currently most experimental thing is the creative tension between younger and older generations. The least experimental thing is to look back into one's own poetry to see how it anticipates these new moves. Without losing our writing identities, us older lot need to go leaning forward alongside these younger writers, trying to spot where they're headed, not in youth worship, but to see if we have anything to contribute as peers (not as influences) being ready for constant change and development just as they are.

Common to many poems in this anthology is an extremely subtle movement between surface and depth: that's how we may play with human relationships or plumb their tragic aspects. Lisa Jarnot's introduction catches it: after the disintegration of social hopes in the 1970s and 1980s, now "a keen desire for social interaction, an openness to diversity of experiment, and an earnestness in . . . intellectual and philosophical pursuits . . ." Haven't our minds many genres of activity, and don't the genres of life found in a great nation surpass our mere individuality to an extent that no one approach to writing can match?

Six particular enthusiasms: Renee Gladman's constantly unexpected exploration of Black-Lesbian assertion in *Arlem*; Jennifer Moxley's philosophicky lyrics poised as delicately as an upside-down prism, holding exactly; Elizabeth Willis already striking a very grand tone; Juliana Spahr's spiky, intense intelligence; and Lisa Jarnot herself, whose work is coming to seem considerable, mature in its devices of repetition as if to incorporate a city into feminine consciousness. Eleni Sikelianos has a sweetly tuned ear that restores faith in new poetic music—I've heard her read a California elegy that wins the heart like few poems I've recently encountered.

Jordan Davis, sometimes in need of casting an anchor, has an exciting poetic intelligence that ranges widely across vivid phrasal surfaces. Try the never-draw-breath surge of editor Chris Stroffolino—"Does he speak as fast as this?" I asked Alice [Notley]. The third editor, Leonard Schwartz, is here working out his broad literary positions, and I have a special soft spot for the

sentence-handling in Garrett Kalleberg's "Limbic Odes." In the bluesy tradition of Baraka, I find only Thomas Sayers Ellis's fun-riff, "Sir Nose d'Voidoffunk," which when you teach it reads like a dream, and he has other styles too. Check out the emotional faceting in Hoa Nguyen, the sheer cleverness of Peter Gizzi, or Mary Burger's acerbic resonances. There's very young work heading upward—Judith Goldman here—and writers whose reputations came on really fast—Lee Ann Brown with her practised feeling for forms, or the abstract but interesting work of Heather Ramsdell.

Despite a disclaimer from Lisa Jarnot, I note that the Brown University influence predominates over, say, New York City, San Francisco, or Buffalo. Consequently, perhaps, there's an over-burdening of the abstractly philosophical, even from contributors who have other ranges. My jury is out on Mark McMorris's ambitious prose-poetry structures, but that means I'm positively interested, need to see more. Bill Luoma's translations tug at me, but the wonderfully-sly diary style of my favorite book of his, *My Trip to New York* is not represented. Rod Smith, too, has even better work elsewhere. Also, the pickings from different ethnicities, slammer, truly-democratic traditions for example, are comparatively slender (the gravest flaw), and the emphasis on high tone means there's not too much sheer fun—though see Brenda Coultas' poetic action-wit, Edwin Torres' verbal extravaganzas if you like them, and Ellis aforesaid. The late Elio Schneeman takes us into his highly individual sky-realms, as if a pure tutelary spirit to the anthology. Just 36 poets. Tight editing. I refuse to do "Who's left out?" though evidently many are. Lisa Jarnot's sober introduction admits that any flaws or omissions should be corrected by further anthologies. That's the whole point of making a fine start like this: the air becomes keen and salty. We all get inspired. The new wave has begun to grow.

—Douglas Oliver

Douglas Oliver is a British poet living in Paris, where he edits *Gare du Nord* with Alice Notley. His forthcoming book is *A Salvo for Africa*, from Bloodaxe.

TOM CAREY*Desire*

Painted Leaf Press (P.O. Box 2480, Times Square Station, New York City 10108-4940), 1997, 75 pages, \$12.00.

In David Lehman's new book, *The Last Avant-Garde*, he lists Tom Carey among those whose writing has been "enriched" by the New York School poets. It's true. Carey's recent book *Desire* distinguishes him as a poet o

ability, as well as one who is in conversation (sometimes literally) with the likes of O'Hara, Ashbery, Schuyler, Berrigan, and Myles—or as the legacy of this skillfully casual tradition allows us to say affectionately—Frank, John, James, Ted and Eileen, to name but a very few. The book itself is dedicated to James Schuyler.

Carey's poetry gains much of its kick from a subjective head objectively rendered. Much like the gloaming-tensions and releasing-meditations of Schuyler's "Nature"—whose achievement we're still trying to take in—we are in Carey's photo-shop mind when in "Plain Air," (for Schuyler) he notices the world turning and clouds drinking their way across Manhattan, he remarks, "Silly, that koan about sound:/the one about the tree/crashing noiselessly," he registers, "Having fallen,/doesn't it lie there and hum? /And what about everything/under and around it?/Don't bugs have ears?" The poem continues:

In walking
There's the feeling of walking
concrete under foot;
water in the hair, dew
from someone's air conditioner.
There are rivers that flow
between buildings,
the city is a forest
and we are its trees and rocks.
You taught me to look up:
Clouds from a cab on a June
evening,
how the architecture disappears
into indigo matting
the edge of New York blurs.

Since 1988 Carey has been a Franciscan brother—an order in the Episcopal Church. Several of the strongest poems in *Desire* artfully explore issues of faith as well as its flip-side, which are embodied in a correspondence between Thomas the apostle and Tom Carey the poet. St. Thomas the cautious, susceptible, skeptic—the only apostle who did not deserve proof and the only one who really got it. In "The Old

Adonis," Carey writes, "I will not leave/until I have traced that wax/profile with my forefinger, /kissed the bloodless shoulder, /stuck my digit,/Thomas-like, into the tear/above his left hip." In "Gay Pharmacy," he writes, "The glass case contains/mystical text/compiled and copied/centuries ago by devout fairies/who knew what it is to put your ear/to Jesus's breast/and listen to the divine heart beat." And the next line, "If your god can't contain you get another," is a pithy offering to the god of admonitions. "Jesus Dreaming" is another such poem of note:

Jesus saw everything
upside down.
Light
entered his eyes,
through cornea
of deepest brown,
his retina an iridescent
salad bowl.
His disciples' feet
pointed to heaven.
Jesus knew that gravity
is a trick.
He saw edges darker or lighter
than they really were.
His body was assailed
by wind,
a too-blue sky.
His body felt, then forgot.
Jesus could not remember
more than seven items
at one time.
When he went
from cold into heat
Jesus shivered.
He could not see well
at night.
Jesus' dreams disappeared
moments after waking.
When he slept
his eyeballs moved

under their lids,
but his body
was absolutely still.

—Tom Devaney

Tom Devaney is the author of *The American Pragmatist Fell in Love* forthcoming from Banshee Press.

BILL LUOMA

Works & Days

Hard Press/The Figures (West Stockbridge, MA 01266), 1998, 152 pages, \$15.00.

Bill Luoma's *Works & Days* ends twice, once with the line "Stay late for dinner," and a second time with the sentence, "These slides are for Scott another San Diego friend who wanted me to send him some." "Stay late for dinner" is a sentence that is a line, while "These slides..." is mostly just a sentence. The play between sentences that are lines & sentences that are mostly just sentences represent the mechanics of Luoma's prose tone, a knapsack with separate pockets for goofy, sleazy, sleepy & dopey. However, *Works & Days* really isn't made up of prose. It's poetry without line breaks, speech-based bent phrasings that seem to wear the pants of prose, but actually contain too much fluidity, grace & weirdness to keep those pants on:

I got an attitude from being around the New York jokers. Let me tell you that I kicked a moving car and took part in ritual cross checks to the boards. I learned to

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swing on the scaffolding, but I could not bunny hop an entire mail box. Brian can do a 180 over a parking meter on a side note. He just got new Barkley's.

That's from "My Trip To New York City," one of thirteen pieces included in the book. Luoma claims "My Trip..." is an allegory for a poetics. I heard him read it once in Brooklyn & ask the crowd if that made sense & the crowd shouted "NO." Nonetheless, the whole book itself can be read as an allegory for a poetics given the author's focus on friendship and community as cause and subject of his writing. Throughout *Works & Days*, but particularly in "My Trip To New York City," Luoma takes groups of friends & gives them an existence outside of their individual lives. Using friends and acquaintances in poetry is a technique that extends back to, at least, classic Renaissance literature: the incessant cropping up of names may seem like a New York School device to local-minded occupants of our times, but is, in fact, a device employed by Dante, among others.

Works & Days doesn't sound like anything else in the air right now. It's shocking to me how many times I've heard different people respond to Luoma's work by intimating that he's getting too close to other people's lives, that the attention to personal detail, be it a shared language, a physical attribute, or a spot-on personality sketch, is actually getting too near to what a person might be like for general comfort, i.e., who wants to know what Brian said, etc. In the hands of a good writer anything anyone says is immediately interesting & capable of irreparably altering the cosmos.

Look how your old hat sits on the hat rack tree. Now you go to buy a new hat. Should it be just like it? One poet wore a raiders hat and hugged another. The poets were urged to come back next week to hear Patricia Spears

Jones and Lydia Davis. They were also urged to pay their bills, tip big, and leave the room so the workers could set up for dinner.

(Ear Inn Reading Report Nov. 16, 1996)

Works & Days is a good book to read. Now that may seem too oddly banal a thing to say in what should be a somewhat depthful review, but Luoma's readability, & I mean that in an intangible (outside language) sense, free of rigid definitions like "simple" or "complex," makes up a large part of his talent as a writer. Thus the range of material written through in *Works & Days* includes astrophysics, baseball, the nature of overstuffed burritos, coping with the death of an intimate (and, by extension, death occupying spaces of intimacy), personal jargon, the inevitable power, uselessness & humor behind naming, the slow social death of ambition in the New York poetry world & the pleasant dilemma of explaining a phrase like "they can reach beyond the call" into another language (Note: "The Annotated My Trip to NYC," IOI answers to IOI questions posed by some French translators, is the secret thrill of this book).

The depth of Luoma's writing is inseparable from its charm. Its charm is its ability to make you read aspects of a life that open up to countless levels of meaning as the idiosyncrasies of the writer, words, and characters reveal themselves over and over again without coming off as forced or manipulative. Influences are not interesting in looking at this work. The reader is not required to punch the clock. The author is naked by the end of the book.

—Anselm Berrigan

Anselm Berrigan is working on a secular miracle play.

CHARLES BERNSTEIN, EDITOR.

Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word

Oxford University Press, 1998, 390 pages, \$19.95.

As someone who participated in the rowdy beginnings of the revival of performance poetry in Chicago, I was surprised to find out in *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* that something similarly raucous was occurring on the West Coast around the same time (late 70s—early 80s)—and among a group of writers I always assumed was about as far from this type of poetry stylistically as they were geographically. In one of the wittiest pieces in this fine collection of essays, Bob Perelman describes the atmosphere around a group of talks that occurred in the Bay Area in those days, replete with the kind of heckling, think-on-your-feet improvisation, and outbreaks of laughter, derision and anarchy that I always associated with doing a reading, say, in a punk bar. Significantly, Perelman uses sports terminology to describe these events; as he puts it, they were "group discussions of poetics centered around an initial speaker with an audience chiming in, interrupting, suggesting detours, wrestling over control of terms and of the verbal arena..."

I don't think Perelman's choice of metaphors here is in any way unintentional, especially in the context of a book that offers some of the first really incisive commentary and critique of that pugilistic practice called the poetry slam. And what's immediately appealing about this piece, and many others in this collection, is that, by writing about poetry from the vantage point of performance these writers enable you to see connections between poetic and cultural styles and practices in places where you might imagine you'd only find contradiction and opposition. There is a liberating impulse here that works to

collapse hierarchies—between the populist and the avant-garde, the page and the stage, the written and the said, the said and the seen (scene).

Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word is a collection of 17 essays, all written specifically for this volume by noteworthy poets and scholars, whose basic goal is to fill a critical gap. As editor Charles Bernstein writes in the introduction, “while the performance of poetry is as old as poetry itself, critical attention to modern and contemporary poetry performance has been negligible.” This fact seems odd in our time, when the performance aspect of poetry is not only gaining in importance, but the technology to preserve performances is better and more available than ever. And if I sense a bit of carnivalesque overturning in some of these pieces, it is no doubt because the very subject matter of the volume demands it. Concentrating on performance almost forces one to critique what cultural historian Michel de Certeau called the imperialism of writing, which shows itself in literary studies (and ideologies) as a subordination of the performed text to the written—and especially published—one.

At the same time, this anthology doesn't represent some simple re-embrace of the oral tradition. Essays like Susan M. Schultz's (on Hawaii's pidgin literature and performance) remind us that performance is often the result of a “reconstruction of the oral out of the written”—and pieces by Johanna Drucker and Marjorie Perloff question the whole notion of performance as only vocal in the first place, each showing how the visual aspect of a poem or a book contains its own theatricality.

This is to say that, despite the many surprising connections you discover here between different schools of poetry (where else would you find out that the late Hannah Wiener once won a poetry slam at the Nuyorican?), what you don't get is some utopian notion that the poetry world is really one big happy family, once you ignore its highly competitive brand names. In fact, one of the pleasures of this book is to watch these writers get into the ring. From one corner/essay, for example, Ron Silliman argues that despite the anti-academic goals of slam poetry, this mode reinstates hierarchies and the will-toward-canon by its obsessive ranking of winners and losers. From another corner, Maria Damon, a defender of slam and open mike, critiques avant-garde notions “that, for example, ‘Fuck the Police’ is a less politically (because less syntactically) radical phrase than, say, ‘Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe’ because the former echoes ‘Buy Guess Jeans’”

In view of the presence of such contention, then, what might be the source of the unexpected alliances and surprising sympathies you find in this collection? I think the very impulse of questioning the privileging of “writing” (over “speech,” “performance,” “the visual,” etc.) opens up new avenues of study and vantage points

from which to view poetry. Although there are many close readings of individual poems here (if that's what you like), for many of these writers there's plenty outside of the text. My favorite parts of this book, in fact, are when these writers complement and sometimes overwhelm their interests in linguistics with that of history. By contextualizing the works they write about, they help demystify aesthetics, showing how what we have been taught to hold “sacred” (the “poetic text”) arises from some pretty profane sources (and, for that matter, what we call popular steals some of its oomph from the canonized).


For its sheer proliferation of hitherto unrecorded histories alone this book is worth a careful reading. And each of these histories crosses a border and questions a hierarchy. Johanna Drucker, for example, shows how concrete poetry drew inspiration from advertising. Lorenzo Thomas, on the other hand, tracks how the popular poetry of the Black Arts Movement drew its aesthetics from Olson's *Projective Verse*. Jed Rasula suggests a connection between Hopkins' tongue-twisting style and nineteenth-century elocution manuals. And Peter Middleton's impressive history of the poetry reading goes all the way back to classical times in an account of the practice of “reading aloud.” Additionally, there are histories of Sound Poetry (Steve McCaffery), slam and open mike readings (Maria Damon) and “Free Verse” (Marjorie Perloff).

By offering this array of histories, the anthology necessarily acknowledges the messiness, tension and contradiction that make any static view of poetry by school problematic. Put another way, the book does what Bruce Andrews (in his essay) recommends any poetic practice should do—allow the social to make its presence and pressure felt. Again, there's simply no way to avoid this if you're writing about that most social aspect of poetry—the public reading. But one of the rewards of this move toward inclusiveness is that it encourages some of these writers to adopt vantage points still too rare in poetic commentary. In short, they look at the poem not only as the production of an author, but of an audience.

Cultural criticism has shown, as of late, how the act of consumption is at least as creative as that of production (and Marx, of course, showed how both categories could be seen as identical).¹ *Close Listening* is one of the first books to apply these insights to the consumption of contemporary poetic texts, as essay after essay acknowledges the power and creativity of the listener in the production of meaning. Bernstein, in fact, suggests that all poems are works in progress, with many authors, because their meaning changes with each audience that takes them over. And Nick Piombino, in a piece titled “The Aural Ellipses and the Nature of Listening in Contemporary Poetry,” takes this notion a step further,

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and begins to collapse the subject positions of author/reader, producer/consumer: "...the writing of contemporary poetry," Piombino comments, "has a tendency to become more and more a collaborative process with the creative functions of writer and reader becoming less and less distinguishable from one another." This democratic impulse makes Piombino's essay one of the most important, and daring, in the collection. For, not only does he cede some of the rights of authorship to the reader/consumer, he does so in a style that eschews much of the technical jargon associated with literary expertise. Thus, he offers a kind of shortcut to readerly competence for what initially look like some pretty forbidding texts, and thereby encourages and enables your own participation.

It's this sort of encouragement to join into the fray that I find most exciting about *Close Listening*. So let me add another history to the many the book offers, in order to shed some light on the main questions it raises: i.e., "why performance, why now?"

While reading these essays, I was reminded of work done by film scholar Tom Gunning on the influence early cinema had on the avant-garde.² Gunning tells us that early Modernists, especially Futurists like Marinetti and Eisenstein, praised mass art forms not merely for the purposes of *épater les bourgeois*, but because they saw in

popular aesthetics a potential for establishing a new, more involved and direct relationship with audiences. Early film (before 1907), was not primarily a narrative mode. Rather than drawing on the legitimate theater and the novel for inspiration, it looked to the amusement park, the freak show "dime museums," and the vaudeville house (where many early movies were shown as part of the bill). As a result, early film, rather than being an absorptive medium, relied on exhibitionism, breaking the fourth wall, and the joy of pure visual display. Gunning termed this aesthetic the "Cinema of Attractions," and hypothesized that its goal was to get a rise from its audiences by addressing them more directly, soliciting their participation in a way that was impossible for nineteenth-century art. Writing in the late 80s, Gunning saw this alternative mode of address as one of the abandoned paths of cinema and wondered, now that (as he put it) "contemplative subjectivity... seems to have run its course" whether it might not be time for at least avant-garde filmmakers to take up this earlier style again.

Perhaps performance poetry is a "Poetry of Attractions," whether it involves the exhibitionism of a slam, or the reliance on pure visual display of a concrete poem. And maybe the reason why so many essayists in this book trace ancestries to early Modernism (Marinetti appears many times) is that they, like the performance poets and poetries they write about, are, in an age of spectacle, feeling that the old contemplative, and passive modes of reception are becoming stale. This dissatisfaction (on the part of both authors and audiences) may be part of what's fueling our current performance vogue. Because whether the style of performance is avant-garde or populist, it seems everybody wants to get in on the act.

¹ See Preface and Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Foreign Language Press, 1976.

² Gunning's work on this topic can be found in "The Cinema of Attractions," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narration* (London: BFI, 1990), and in "An Aesthetic of Astonishment," *Art & Text*, Spring 1989.

— Jerome Sala

Jerome Sala's poems are forthcoming in *The Boston Book Review*, *Boundary II*, and *The Oulipo Compendium*. His most recent book is *Raw Deal: New & Selected Poems* from Jensen/Daniels.



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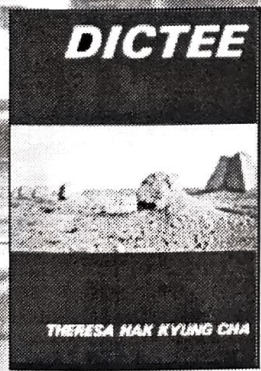
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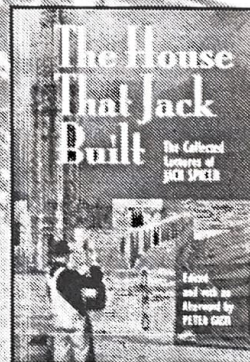
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