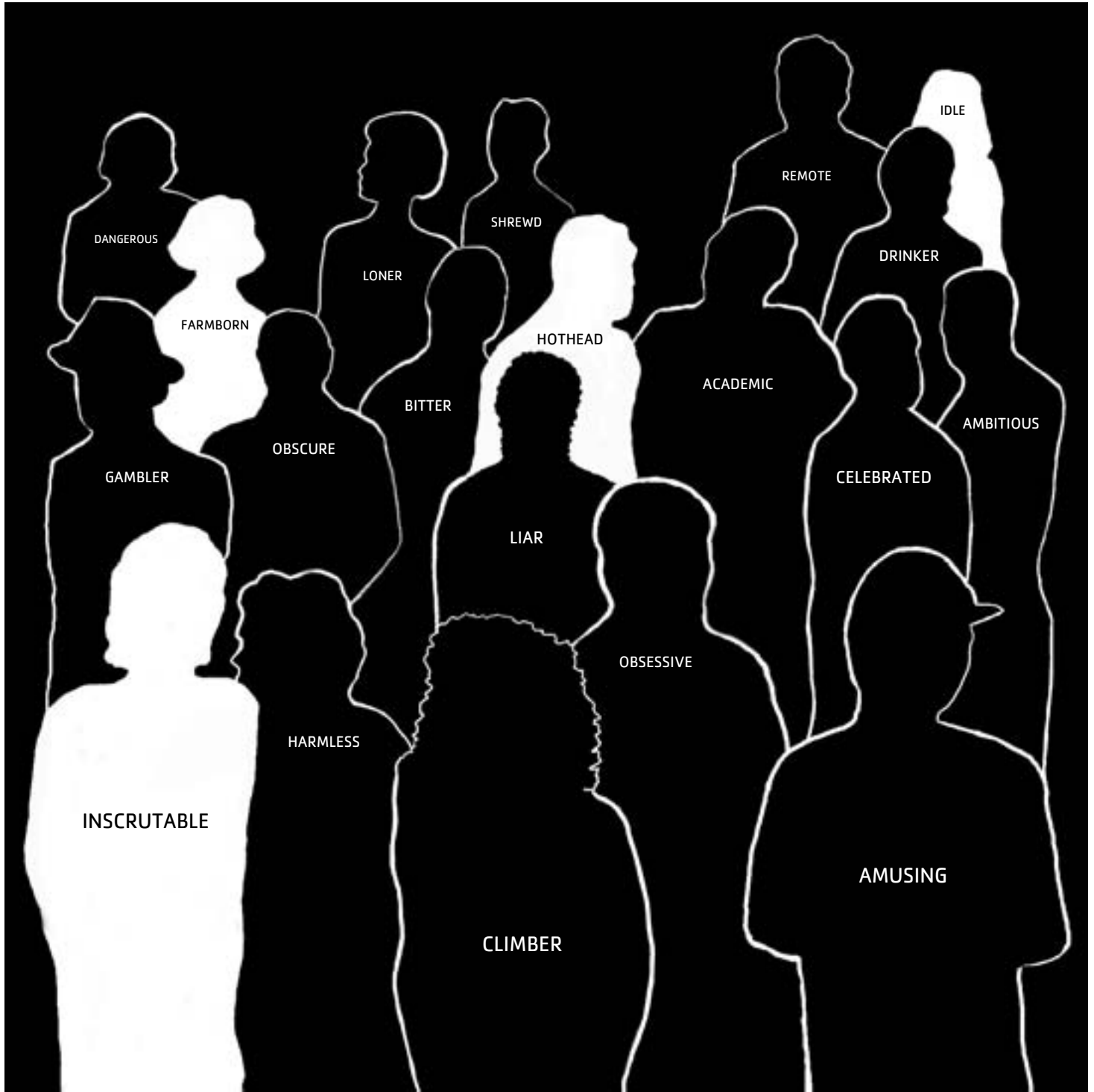


# THE POETRY PROJECT NEWSLETTER

#206 FEBRUARY/MARCH 2006



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# THE POETRY PROJECT NEWSLETTER

#206 FEBRUARY / MARCH 2006

NEWSLETTER EDITOR Brendan Lorber

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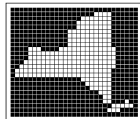
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State of the Arts



NYSCA

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# ANNOUNCEMENTS

## FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Readers,

We had a great New Year's Day Marathon Reading, and managed to raise over \$13,000 for the Project across the roughly ten hours of readings and performances. The lists of various thank yous will follow, but I want to particularly thank the 140 or so readers, performers, musicians and dancers who made the event happen on-stage. It is also worth noting here, as it hasn't been noted publicly yet, that the last two Marathons have included about fifty new poets and performers, maybe closer to sixty, and it has been fabulous to broaden the bill.

This year we added a number of new faces but did not bring back every person from the year before. This is going to continue - the idea is to start alternating some readers/performers each year, meaning someone who didn't read this year but has quite often in the past is likely to be invited back next year. And some folks who got the stage this year will likely not be asked back until '08. There are always more people who could perform than there are slots, so we are working deliberately to adapt the Marathon to this reality as it moves forward. May 2006 be less evil than 2005.

Cheers,  
Anselm Berrigan

## NEW YEAR'S THANK YOU'S

We would like to pay a huge public thank you to the following volunteers and donors who helped out during our Annual New Year's Day Reading. As William Shakespeare wrote in *Henry V*, "As many arrows, loosed several ways, come to one mark...so many a thousand actions, once afoot, end in one purpose." We're raising our jewel-encrusted chalices to toast the continued proliferation of poetry in 2006.

**FOOD:** 2nd Avenue Deli, Amy's Bread, Bob Rosenthal and Don Yorty, The Bourgeois Pig, Counter, DeRoberti's, Elizabeth Tung, The Hummus Place, La Palapa, Life Café, Mudspot Café, Pangea, Sullivan Street Bakery, Two Boots Pizzeria, Veselka

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**BOOKS:** Anne Tardos, Anne Waldman, Belladonna, Coffee House Press, Elizabeth Treadwell, Gillian McCain, Hanging Loose Press, Harry Burrus, Lungfull, Mary Lyon, Meritage Press, The Southern Review, Ugly Duckling Presse, United Artists

## FROM THE EDITOR

We all come from tough circumstances and now, bummed out in a city fresh out of bums, increasingly at odds with the basic assumptions, tough doesn't begin to describe it. But our one institutional asset, nothing and a few holes through which even that clatters away, means we will manage to exist despite the flight of all the CBGBs and 2nd Ave Delis from this world. Pastrami is prologue for those who know everyone who has something going is bound to have everything gone soon enough. Unlike most cultural icons, the ones who spend their lives amplifying the voracious nostalgia into which they were born and then pass away on a wilted bed, let us, the operatives behind the scheme realize we haven't yet realized our heyday. Despite the actions we take in memory of our flailings and the pixie dust we scatter in the name of belatedness, the fact is we won't ever go away because we're not even here yet. Even the secret here that we're not in yet isn't here yet. But you should see it, rife with hot bod-

dhistatavas, lucid dervishes & disillusioned American emporers, jazzed by well-dressed anarcho-syndicalists, gregarious hermits, and riled by the ghosts of wobbly rank & file, by rejected aztek dieties & oblivion's housecleaner. Is it possible that this secret location depends on you to make it exist, motherfucker? Excuse me, I mean, on you, ye distinguished professor of future history and chief reifier of everyone's private desires!

*Brendan Lorber*

## WELCOMING A NEW PRESS

Cypher Press, an new imprint started by poet Willie Perdomo and president and publisher of Rattapallax Press, Ram Devineni, came to life in late 2005 with the publication of Suheir Hammad's book of poems *ZaatarDiva*. Cypher Press will be, according to Perdomo, "devoted to publishing the best in contemporary spoken word/poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction with the occasional reprint of a classic." Congrats to Cypher, and keep the new presses coming, we say.

## AN APPRECIATION OF OUR TOKEN

During December's transit stike the easy target of our collective anger & sore feet was the transit union, but they were the wrong target. As much as each of us was hassled, the subway & bus workers lost paychecks & got fined. All because they didn't want to have to work to age 62 when the median age of death for a transit worker is 57. To help them & their families, *Lungfull!* magazine redirected \$2 from every new subscription during the action to the Transit Workers Union Strike Fund. If you're still angry at the transit workers because they asked for a for things to be bearable, you better stand clear the closing doors on your own chances.

## FAREWELL TORY DENT

We note with sadness the passing of Tory Dent, a friend to the Poetry Project. She died at home in New York on December 30, 2005 of an opportunistic infection associated with AIDS. She was 47. Since being diagnosed with HIV 17 years ago, she authored three books, *What Silence Equals*, *HIV*, *Mon Amour* and *Black Milk*.

# WRITING WORKSHOPS AT THE POETRY PROJECT

## **PRACTICAL CRITICISM: A POETRY WORKSHOP – TONY TOWLE**

TUESDAYS AT 7 PM: 10 SESSIONS BEGIN FEBRUARY 14TH

"It is assumed that participants will be serious, practicing poets and so critiques and comments will be made from the vantage point of what the person has already established, not with a view to 'prescribing' some different way of writing. However, stretching the sensibility will be encouraged, both in the group and through individual suggestion. Non-binding assignments will be given each week and poems from the past as well as those of the workshop participants will be read aloud and discussed. In the course of this, numerous poets past and present, and topics both literary and general, will arise and be talked about. Also I will make written comments on poems individuals may prefer not to have read aloud." John Ashbery has written: "Tony Towle is one of the best-kept secrets of the New York School." Tony's first reading at the Poetry Project was in 1968. Recent books include *The History of the Invitation: New & Selected Poems 1963-2000*, and *Memoir 1960-1963*.

## **THE UNPERFORMABLE: THE VISUAL SIDE OF POETRY – EVELYN REILLY**

THURSDAYS AT 7 PM: 5 SESSIONS BEGIN FEBRUARY 16TH

"The traditional notion of poetry as primarily a matter of "voice" has often obscured its graphic and visual character, and can limit the range of experiment to what can be experienced in the venue of the poetry reading. Even the most performance-based poets, however, face issues of how to spatialize their work on the page, and every line break is as much a visual as a rhythmic and aural decision. This workshop will explore a broad range of visual poetics — from modernist innovations to composition-by-field to recent spatialized text, concrete, collage, and digital poetry. We will examine work by Mallarme, Apollinaire, Cummings, Olson, Schwerner, Hak Kyung Cha, Aram Saroyan and Susan Howe, and peruse the UbuWeb site together. Everyone will be encouraged to analyze the visual assumptions behind their poems as well as to write or revise work using alternative visual conventions." Evelyn Reilly's book *Hiatus* was published by Barrow Street in 2004 and was a finalist for the Poetry Society of America's Norma Farber First Book Award.

## **INFORMATION POETICS – CAROL MIRAKOVE**

THURSDAYS AT 7 PM: 5 SESSIONS BEGIN APRIL 6

How do we get the swirling-inside/outside-the-head onto the page? What are the differences between knowledge and information, and what are we putting into our poems? Why? We will look at poets & projects confronting these questions & we will explore our own potential in navigating transitional space (community, jobs, war, media). We may look at poems by Etel Adnan, Ammiel Alcalay, Jules Boykoff, Ernesto Cardinal, Roque Dalton, Kevin Davies, Jeff Derksen, Laura Elrick, Heather Fuller, Dana Gelinas, Fanny Howe, Susan Howe, Pattie McCarthy, Yedda Morrison, Alice Notley, Mark Nowak, Douglas Oliver, Kristin Prevallet, Deborah Richards, Cristina Rivera-Garza, Kaia Sand, Leslie Scalapino, and Rodrigo Toscano. We will discuss how we read and what we value, how to assess the values of any given poem. We may address contradictions in literal or figurative yogic practice and the (in)corporate(zation) rush. How can we sustain simultaneously our health and our engagements with destruction? Carol Mirakove is the author of *Mediated* (Factory School, forthcoming in Spring 2006) and *Occupied* (Kelsey St. Press).

## **IN THE ABSENCE OF THEIR SURPRISE: A NEW YORK SCHOOL WORKSHOP – JOEL LEWIS**

FRIDAYS AT 7 PM: 5 SESSIONS BEGIN FEBRUARY 17TH

"In this workshop, we will explore the poetry and poetics of the New York School of Poetry. A school of writing more linked by personal alliances and mutual dislikes, it features a dazzling range of approaches ranging from the radical formalism of Edwin Denby to the permanently "under construction" poetry of Clark Coolidge. In between these banner holders are poets with Pulitzer Prizes (John Ashbery, James Schuyler), poets with rock bands (Jim Carroll, Patti Smith, Janet Hamill), poets who run for President (Eileen Myles) poets who are actually read by non-poets (Frank O' Hara) and poets held dear mostly by other New York School Poets (Joe Ceravolo, Steve Carey and Jim Brodey). We will explore New York School techniques such as collaborations, appropriative writing, list poems, cut ups, rewrites, lists, invented forms, reinvented forms, sonnets and the secrets of how-to-keep-going-when-you-having-nothing-interesting-to-say." Joel Lewis is the author of *Verticals Currency: Selected Poems* and edited *On The Level Everyday*, selected talks of Ted Berrigan.

## **POETRY WORKSHOP – DAVID HENDERSON**

SATURDAYS AT 12PM: 10 SESSIONS BEGIN FEBRUARY 18TH

"We are making manuscripts of our work (at whatever stage the work or the poet or both are). As poets we are also looking at and sometimes working with prose, as another form of poetry, as well other forms of poetry such as lyrics, raps, spoken word form(ats) or even simple lines – good in and of themselves. We practice exercises and routines of the poet. We often listen to the works of each other – in progress. And there is always the right to just read a work without comment or criticism." Poet, lyricist, and biographer David Henderson is the author of several books, including *Jimi Hendrix: Voodoo Child of the Aquarian Age* and *Neo-California*.

*The workshop fee is \$300, which includes a one-year individual Poetry Project membership and tuition for any and all fall spring and fall classes. Reservations are required due to limited class space, and payment must be received in advance. Please send payment and reservations to: The Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church, 131 E. 10th St., NY, NY 10003. For more information please call (212)674-0910 or e-mail info@poetryproject.com.*





## C.E.PUTNAM IN SEATTLE, WA

Chris Baker and Dr. Pasuk Phongpaichit are in the process of translating the 30,000 line Thai epic poem *Khun Chang, Khun Phaen* (trans. *Mr. Chang, Mr. Phaen*), a tale of a love triangle with courtship, war, a psychedelic pre-battle “smoke break,” romantic farce, magical tattoos, outrageous extended metaphors for sex (“Chinese Junk” & “narrow channel”), tragedy and more!

I had the pleasure of attending a short talk and a reading from selections of this epic at the University of Washington. Wild and full of fun, KCKP (*Khun Chang, Khun Phaen*) is derived from a popular series of oral tales that were later transcribed in the early 19th Century, mostly by members of the royal court. Take for example, this description of the commander of the northern cavalry, Triphetkla.

His whole body was a mass of lumps and bumps in rows. Since birth, he had never been touched by a weapon, and did not carry even the scratch from a thorn.

He was tall and broad like a tiger, very powerful, with firm flesh. His moustache was twisted and curved upwards. His teeth were white, and his mouth green like a giant leech.

...

He did not sleep with his wife throughout the year. From youth until adulthood, he did not bathe but applied a paste of medicinal herbs. Only before battle, would he bathe.

What is special about KCKP is that, unlike the other Thai Epics, KCKP is an original Thai cultural product rather than an Thai-ified epic adapted from another country. So along with the fantastic and courtly scenes, there are also scenes of everyday life and experience. Chris and Pasuk had a blast reading the verbal sparring between a courting couple:

“I was too easily persuaded by a sweet tongue. They say real smart guys have about thirty-two tricks. By comparison, this fellow has at least sixty-four. You speak as beautifully as a gamelan playing, but you don’t love. “

During the Q&A period, Pasuk agreed to read/sing a few lines in Thai. Similar to Anglo-Saxon accentual meter, the meter of KCKP (klon sepha) divides each line with a strong pause (in Thailand blocks are pounded together at the pause-thwack!). The recitation style is like a very slow yodel that is more like a wail that

could be at some moments light / humorous and at others heavy / dramatic. Wow. You can read a draft of the translation project to date and learn more about KCKP at <http://pioneer.netserv.chula.ac.th/~ppasuk/kckp/>

\*\*\*\*

On the way to attend the monthly installment of the Subtext Reading Series (November = Kevin Killian and Dodie Bellamy (personal humiliation poems!)), I could hear the loud rumble of the “sound check” for the BlöödHag show. I’ve always appreciated BlöödHag’s contributions to Seattle’s literary landscape by “encouraging literacy through the heavy metal format, because you read more when you’re deaf.”

But I need my ears, or do I? Then, an odd announcement (could I be hearing this right?) that new poems of Jack Spicer were recently found in Robin Blaser’s car trunk and Kevin might be reading some of them tonight!?! What else might be found in Mr. Blaser’s trunk: a collection of Allen Ginsberg’s ether soaked underpants, Creeley’s coal miner’s hat, Opal Whitely’s “Elizabeth Barrett Browning” sugar lumps, the head of Walt Whitman? Poets check your trunks!

Note: The preceding report had to be constructed without the use of a notebook lost on the outskirts of a hospital and probably blown away by a leaf blower man. He said: “Whatever was there, cannot be there anymore.”

*C.E. Putnam operates the Putnam Institute for Space Opera Research (P.I.S.O.R) in Seattle, Washington*

## JULIE REID IN PETALUMA, CA

When the composer Harry Partch came to Petaluma in 1962, the town’s claim to fame as “the world’s egg basket” was no longer accurate. By then, the thousands of chicken farms that had been put out of business by a handful of large producers in the 1940’s were already a distant memory. Harry took up residence in an unused chick hatchery slated for demolition. The day he went to look at the space, there were flower petals strewn all along the lane leading up to it. This visual was the germ for a piece he would begin recording in the spring of ’64, and finish in San Diego in ’66, a sequence of 34 one-minute “musical portraits,” using 22 of his handmade instruments made from salvaged materials. One

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such instrument, which he called the *zymo-xylo*, was a kind of xylophone enhanced with liquor bottles. (You can see it and play a virtual version of it and all his other instruments at the very cool American Mavericks website: [http://musicmavericks.publicradio.org/features/feature\\_partch.html](http://musicmavericks.publicradio.org/features/feature_partch.html).) Several attempts at recording in the hatchery had to be abandoned because of the noise of the bulldozer which had already begun demolition of the building. Soon Harry had to vacate altogether.

The overall title for his work, “And on the Seventh Day Petals Fell in Petaluma,” is more well known than the individual titles he gave each of the verses, names like “Transfigured on the Post Office Steps”, “And climax—In the Public Library” (literally across the street from where I now live), and “The Egg is Wondrous.” Ruminating on these impetuses of Harry, of the rich rhythms that sprung from these scenes of his daily life, spaces upon which our eyes have landed forty years apart, I can’t help but feel myself detecting old lovelinesses anew, catching a glimpse, of the world I know too well to ever see properly. As Shelley said, “The mist of familiarity obscures from us the wonder of our being.”

The university I attend is a ten minute drive away, between Petaluma and the town of Cotati, between the one-time Egg Capital and the home of the Annual Accordion Festival. In the middle of all this I’m learning to speak French. One of the joys, I think, of learning another language is that it re-acquaints you with your own. It takes you back to the fundamental structure of saying something. There are statements so obvious that no one ever says them. Such as: *In order to make a cake you need sugar. Or: I sleep well at night because I’m very tired.* Because you see, it’s easy to take vanilla ice cream for granted until you learn what it’s composed of in French. Then you learn *une glace à la vanille*, an ice cream of a vanilla nature.

*Julie Reid doesn’t think the egg can be properly appreciated by anyone who hasn’t seen a hen through the laying of one. Smooch.*

## JAMES MEETZE IN SAN DIEGO, CA

Since moving to San Diego in February of 2005, I have been asked on numerous occasions, “what possessed you to leave the Bay Area for San Diego?” And before I offer my usual reply, I’ll say this: San Diego is a big, sprawling city with nearly twice the

population of San Francisco and Oakland combined, however the number of active poets known to me is merely a fraction of that in the Bay Area. I view this as a good thing. While living in the Bay Area, which has one of the two largest concentrations of poets and writers in America, I felt almost obligated to attend the numerous readings and book releases and poetry related events that happen all too often. Not that it is a bad thing that there is so much action, but it does tend to take away from one’s reading and writing time. Actually, it’s amazing to me that the poets there are so productive. That said, San Diego seems to me, a place with a very small but dedicated group of poets, where the readings that do happen are events of greater magnitude.

When I first arrived in San Diego, I knew that Rae Armantrout, Eileen Myles, Michael Davidson and Roberto Tejada were teaching at UCSD and that they were bringing interesting poets there to read, but that was about it. I soon learned of the TMI series, hosted by Anna Joy Springer, a fiction writer also teaching at UCSD. In addition, Mark Wallace took a teaching position at CSU San Marcos, in North San Diego County, where he is planning to start a reading series. With a handful of poets here, all of them doing interesting work, it seemed that a small but vibrant community, or should I say, audience, existed and it occurred to me that a non-university-affiliated reading series would be a good idea. It was not, however, as easy to begin as I had thought. When the Kava Lounge offered me their not yet opened art gallery in which to hold a series, the Design Poetry Series was born. We just had our first reading in November, which featured a young poet from Oakland, Kathleen Miller, and Rae Armantrout. I will admit, I was worried that it would be difficult to find an audience greater than the sum of the aforementioned poets but an audience came. Hopefully, it will also grow, as the series, which happens the third Saturday of each month, has a good lineup of readers scheduled through Spring. Information can be found at [www.tougherdisguises.com](http://www.tougherdisguises.com).

Is it needless to say that it’s nice to have more time to spend reading and writing? Perhaps not. I will also say that it is wonderful to have been received so warmly in a new community and to see that community growing. And although I do miss seeing all the faces of those people in the Bay Area, I am happily using the Design Poetry Series as a means to bring them and people from farther away to visit, dare I say it, Sunny San Diego.

*James Meetze sings and plays guitar for the band Dreamtiger and is the publisher of Tougher Disguises Press.*

# WORLD NEWS

## FARID MATUK IN AUSTIN, TX

Last night Scott Pierce of Effing Press and I interrupted our conversation about building inclusive poetry communities to watch the end of *The Biggest Loser*, a show about extreme weight loss. The fatties-no-longer displayed new six-pack abs for a chance to win \$250,000. The event's MC did not acknowledge the loose skin flapping at one contestant's waistline. Effing Press just released a chap by Tony Tost called *World Jelly* and will soon publish a new chap by Tom Clark about trains, snow and gutted industrial towns.

Corrine Lee and Joe Hoppe read for the Skanky Possum Reading Series this December 10th at 12th Street Books here in Austin. Both the venue and reading series have earned a degree of infamy among local tramps who come for the free beer and a chance to tussle with the poets. The last three guys that came by had their car door bent off its hinges courtesy of the dark angels Dale Smith and Scott Pierce.

I called Dale the other night and he was reading Coleridge's early notebooks. According to Dale, Coleridge was turning his attentions then to the problem of knowledge, writing in extensive digressions – a mode that gave Coleridge some relief from an array of assholes he kept running into who wanted to lecture him on the certainty of knowing. Then Dale's kid, Waylon, started crying and we had to get off the phone. Recently Skanky Possum Press put out Basil King's chap, *Twin Towers*, and will soon put out a chap by David Hadbawnik. Dale is also busy editing a feature on the recently departed Carl Thayer for *Jacket* and another on Tom Clark for *Big Bridge*.

Maybe the biggest news in town is the coming of *Superflux*, a journal for new writing curated by Susan Briante, Chris Murray and Hoa Nguyen. The inaugural issue features work by Alice Notley, Elizabeth Robinson, Rosa Alcalá, Cathy Wagner and others. *Superflux* launches the night of Wednesday March 8th at the Cactus Café with readings by Eileen Myles, Betsy Andrews, Rosa Alcalá, Elizabeth Robinson and more – finally, a reason to come to AWP.

In other journal news, grad students from UT Austin put out the first issue of *The Bat City Review*, a poetry and fiction pub – consider this fair warning, *Georgia Review*. Phil Pardi, Vive Griffith and I ended our tour of duty with *Borderlands: a Journal of Texas Poetry* this season with issue #25, it includes a suite of on work by David Wevill. David Hadbawnik and I will co-edit the much-anticipated return of *Effing Magazine*, issue #4.

Briante is writing some great new poems that are partly about recording impressions of the free market's mania with redevelopment. She's reading the artist Robert Smithson on landscape, ruins and memory. There's not much in Austin that's older than

any one of us walking around. It's disgusting to live only in one's own lifetime, poor to be the only measure.

It's been a while since we've gathered at Phillip Trussell's studio on Thursday nights to read from our journals and from the hive of books deep within which Phillip paints and reigns. It's a great sweet pleasure to grow fat there, each within our wax cells.

We've all of us got colds and the CDC's got nothing to say about it. The poet Peggy Kelley told Hoa Nguyen to feed her kids hefty dustings of turmeric in honey – an ayurvedic treatment for the excess mucus in our heads.

*Farid Matuk is a poet and translator living in Austin, TX.*

## ERIC LORBERER IN THE TWIN CITIES, MN

I write this having just put the 10th Anniversary Issue of *Rain Taxi* to bed, and it's got me thinking about big and small. We recently had Alice Notley out visiting, and in addition to giving a terrific reading from her work, she joined us for a small gathering to celebrate *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan*. Crammed into a cozy living room, we read favorite poems from the book. Those who knew Ted told stories and passed around photos. Those who didn't talked about what his work meant to them. We played a recording of Ted reading "Red Shift," which brought a tear to more than one set of peepers. And then we gobbled down a cake, which had been decorated to resemble the George Schneeman painting that graces the *Collected's* cover. Although this was a tiny affair—only nineteen people, an opposite number to the Poetry Project's enormous, standing-room-only affair—we had big fun nonetheless, and it reminded me that some of the best poetry readings I can remember have been heard from a hassock.

But if small can connote the innumerable pleasures of the intimate, it's also often a catchword for independent, which itself is often a euphemism for beleaguered, in danger of disappearing. I recently received the new issue of the excellent, small (literally) literary magazine *Paragraph* in the mail, and was discomfited to find it was not only their 20th Anniversary Issue but also their last. Skipping the usual arguments and theories of prose poetry, short-shorts, and the like, *Paragraph*—or more accurately "¶: A Magazine of Paragraphs"—simply printed what it said, and left it to the reader to decide whether these were stand-alone works or gorgeous fragments of a larger fiction. The editors put a graceful spin on the stoppage in their headnote, perhaps rightly acknowledging that the audience for the form it championed has grown in both size and sophistication, but I'll miss that occasional little envelope dearly, and I can't help but think that with more support, it might've kept coming.

I'm also morose about the news that one of my favorite newer lit mags, *3rd Bed*, is calling it quits. Here the news is less complex: as editor Vincent Standley writes, "We've hit a financial brick wall, and barring some radical new development, we've decided to cease publication." In addition to simply being a beautifully edit-



ed journal, *3rd Bed* (as well as its small press wing, which was smartly reprinting fiction that needed reprinting) had high production values commensurate with its vision of writing, and that's probably what sunk them—few magazines outside a university publishing environment can afford those bills. But that smaller projects of excellence have trouble finding support in our literary culture, while money continues to flow uphill to big dinosaurs that should've died out (or at least had their DNA reengineered) long ago, is worrisome to say the least.

And what does all this have to do with the poetry scene in the Twin Cities? Well, bub, that's where I read these things; as a child of the 20th century

(am I nostalgic for it already?), I resolutely believe our local scene shouldn't revolve around the merely local; furthermore, literary magazines are arguably our publishing's circulatory system, reinvigorating all the outposts with fresh blood. So if any of my other favorite independent lit mags (and you know who you are—or if you don't, check out our newly revised Top Ten lists at [www.rain-taxi.com](http://www.rain-taxi.com)) are thinking of calling it quits, know that your readers out here would consider the Twin Cities an even colder place without your publication.

*Eric Lorberer edits Rain Taxi Review of Books from a secret location in Minneapolis.*

## MICHAEL KELLEHER IN BUFFALO, NY

October is the coolest month! First, I got to hang out with literary glam couple number one – Paul Auster and Siri Hustvedt – who were in town for Just Buffalo's citywide celebration of Auster's, *The Invention of Solitude*. Our falls trip took us across the Rainbow Bridge to Canada. We briefly slowed at the international border to bask in a moment of being exactly “nowhere,” passed through customs and down to the lot by the falls. The sun was unseasonably strong, so we popped into the gift shop to pick up a cap and some shades for the fair-skinned Siri, who managed to transform a glittery “Niagara Falls” kitsch cap into high fashion. Returning, we made a quick stop at the statue of Nikola Tesla, who appears as a character in Auster's *Moon Palace*. The main event was one of the more haunting readings I've attended. Choosing a random passage from the second half of the book, A. read aloud, his rich voice resonating through the cavernous church. As the passage segued into a meditation on the deaths of children in Cambodia and the monstrosity of a world that allows for such things, a palpable discomfort swelled in the audience. Rather than skip to a passage offering a way out of said unease, A. read on, sinking



INEVITABLY, YOU SPENT

MORE AND MORE EFFORT

REACHING LESS AND LESS.

deeper and deeper into the atrocity until it felt like a living presence in the room. The next night we screened the Auster-penned film, “Smoke.” I sat next to A., whose enthusiasm for the 10-year old film hasn't dampened, and I was privy to all kinds of on-screen secrets – like the fact that he had to write the play-by-play for a baseball game showing on a television because the network wanted too much money for rebroadcast rights.

As if that alone didn't make my month, John Ashbery came to town two weeks later. Our first night, we ate dinner at a little bistro. While waiting for a table, I noticed J.A. sipping his martini and mumbling something as he watched a TV set behind the bar. “Jeopardy” was on, and he wasn't just talking to himself, he was answering the questions – all of them! Turns out he did a stint on a Chicago radio program as a whiz kid in the thirties. I took J.A. and partner David Kermani to the American falls, then on the Buffalo Entropy Tour and the Buffalo Architecture Tour. (Out of a nervous desire to impress, I actually bought and read a book on Buffalo architecture beforehand). J.A. asked if I knew of a particular street in Buffalo on which his uncle used to live and which he often visited as a boy. I told him it was now quite a dangerous neighborhood, which seemed to quell his desire to drive down memory lane. Unfortunately, it didn't quell mine. I drove them through the desolate East Side streets, past the boarded up homes and shops, until we reached the street he'd known. As we turned the corner a (literal) gang of teenagers was standing in the street, blocking our passage. We took a collective deep breath, which we then collectively let out as they moved aside. At the reading, all the Buffaliterati and, I think, the whole Friday night gallery crowd at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, showed up. J.A. read to a full house and received a standing ovation. During the Q & A, one hostile questioner asked, “Do you want other people to understand your work or do you not give a shit about us?” to which J.A. replied, quoting Stein, “I am writing for myself and strangers.”

*Michael Kelleher is the author of To Be Sung (Blazevox, 2005) and the Artistic Director of Just Buffalo Literary Center.*

# WORLD NEWS

SPARROW IN

## THE CATSKILLS, NY

I received the following letter from poet and raging humanist Mikhail Horowitz. (A palindrome, of course, is a word, phrase, or Hollywood screenplay which reads the same backwards and forwards.)

Senor Sparrow:

I have proposed to Gov. Pataki that he establish a New York State Palindrome Day, to raise awareness of this linguistic phenomenon. It would take place on June 6th of this year (6/06/06), and would entail the writing and reciting of palindromes throughout the day, at precisely 12:21, 1:01, 2:22, 3:13, 4:44, 5:35, 6:16, 7:07, 8:48, 9:19, 10:01, and 11:11 a.m. and p.m.

I have also suggested that he put you in charge of the Palindromic Outreach Program (POP), and have taken the liberty of giving one of his aides your phone number.

I think Gov. Pataki will be very receptive to this idea. For one thing, he drives a Civic, one of the only two palindromes on the road (the other being "a Toyota"). For another thing, he has a Japanese relative whose name is a palindrome – Ikata Pataki.

Too hot to hoot,  
Mikhail

I spoke to Laura Lonshein Ludwig, who moved from Brooklyn to Cairo, NY (pronounced "Kay-roe") in 2002. She returns monthly to New York City for poetry adventures – recently she read at the Soldiers, Sailors, Marines and Airmen's Club at 283 Lexington Avenue. For nine years she hosted the cable access TV show "Earth Is Not On Tape," on which legendary showbiz emcee Joe Franklin appeared, as well as Professor Irwin Corey (the man who said: "Marriage is like a bank account. You put it in, you take it out; you lose interest"), Bianca Jagger and other luminaries. Laura often visits Joe Franklin at his Theater District office, on her NY forays. Her new book is an updating of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* ("you can call me a home-bred classicist") entitled *Gulliver of New York*, which will appear with a novella, *The Haunted House* and the *Stolen Gold* in March, from Xlibris. (Call 1-888-795-4274 or see [www.xlibris.com](http://www.xlibris.com).) Recently Laura is reading Lillian Hellman, ancient Chinese poetry and Countee Cullen.

Publications: *Songs of Bo Baba* by Andy Clausen gathers semi-translations of vacanas of an "over-the-top Shaivite, road apostle of divine atheism" named Bo Baba. Clausen captures the intoxicating amity of the droll mystic, in which sin, desire, and devotion merge into one beckoning throb. ("I felt the fire / with no heat or burn / I endured the unmanifested wound / no doctor could diagnose...") The book is published by Shivastan on handmade paper in Nepal, and illustrated with images from spiritual Indian comic books. For more info, write [Shivastan@hotmail.com](mailto:Shivastan@hotmail.com) or Shivastan, 54E Tinker Street, Woodstock, NY 12498.

At an open reading in The Mudd Puddle Cafe in New Paltz, I saw a bold, mustachioed youth with an occasional English accent recite poems from a stapled magazine. His name is Daryl Gilson;

the zine is *Meaningless Beyond Measure*. (Daryl was reading issue #1, which is actually the third issue, following numbers #0 and #0.5.) Daryl wrote the entire contents, and his friend Tom illustrated it – with heroic, sometimes destitute space aliens, wielding battleaxes. Most of the poems are a page long, but some are as short as: "I've smiled thousands of times / at hundreds of people / but I don't feel any better." For a copy, try e-mailing him at: [evidentiallyabraxas@yahoo.com](mailto:evidentiallyabraxas@yahoo.com).

Local poet Mark Dorrity visited me the other night, while eating a slice of pizza. "Being poor is easy," he said. "You just take smaller bites."

*Sparrow had his breakthrough in Su Doku, with his daughter, Sylvia (who is 14). His new book is America: A Prophecy (www.softskull.com).*

CACONRAD IN

## PHILADELPHIA, PA

When crusading, it is first good not to autobahn. The expressway is full of bleeding stations. If you notice, this is a baton. I swear this rhythm is Dickian: you can smell the bag pipes sighing. Replacing the fakes with fake fakes sing to be real starts with the coq of the way and ends with your horsepower angio. Temporary asphalt ground swell valentine or knot, in love, ergo geaux, it is best, marzipan thorn width or without, not to be crusaded upon. When life pipes a self-havocking crucible, spoiler venty cruise-ade and fly.

–from *Ways to Use Lance*, by Brett Evans

Hurricane Katrina brought poet Brett Evans and his wife Janine Hayes back to Philadelphia after living in New Orleans for many years. The excerpt above is from Brett's *Ways to Use Lance*, a chapbook put out on Mooncalf Press. If you are interested in purchasing a copy of this terrific book, write to [CAConrad13@aol.com](mailto:CAConrad13@aol.com)

The hard work of Chris and Jenn McCreary's *ixnay press* brings us volume two of *the ixnay reader*, an ongoing, occasional mini-anthology. This issue features work by: Fran Ryan, Kaia Sand, Kevin Varrone, Daniel Hales, Jen Coleman, Pattie McCarthy, Eric Keenaghan, and Eli Goldblatt. 135 pages of poetic pleasure can be yours for a mere \$5, payable to Chris McCreary, c/o *ixnay press*, 1328 Tasker St, Phila PA 19148. [ixnaypress@verizon.net](mailto:ixnaypress@verizon.net).

Jenn McCreary's reading series at Benna's Café hosts one of two *ixnay reader* launches. Go to PhillySound (<http://PhillySound.blogspot.com>), click on the "sign-up for Philly Readings" to receive e-mail updates of poetry events.

Another reading series you'll be hearing from if you sign-up to receive e-mail updates is the new *Night Flag Reading Series*, hosted by Frank Sherlock (formerly the *La Tazza Series*). These readings are held on the 2nd floor of The Khyber Pass, and recently gave

us the fucking rocking delicious work of Greg Fuchs and Eileen Myles, at least 70 folks in attendance, feeling the Love in the room. Fantastic after-party for that one by the way, up till 8 the next morning, love, love, love, gotta love the coming-up sun with poets you love!

So much to mention, how is it possible? Someone's bound to hate me for missing something, oh boy, oh well, give me hell then. Tune into PhillySound blog (address above) for some of the missing details, please, and thanks.

*CAConrad's childhood included selling cut flowers along the highway for his mother and helping her shoplift. He escaped to Philadelphia the first chance he got, where he lives and writes today with the PhillySound poets. Deviant Propulsion is his first book of poems, from Soft Skull Press.*

DGLSN.RØTHSJCHLD IN

## ALBANY, NY

Dear Readers,

The report from Albany is that it's cold. Cold enough to have a mind of winter & to regard the frost & boughs crusted with snow & behold nothing that is not there. That is to say, cold enough to see the cold as just that—not beautiful, not terrible, not idyllic, not a harbinger of 'special' holiday—just cold, a fact from the world. Which surprisingly brings me to some of the most eye-opening Albany News-7 [that's 4 more than 3!] Poets from Albany made it down to the Poetry Project's OLSON NOW conference on December 3rd. {Among them, Don Byrd, Nicole Peyrafitte, Pierre Joris, Rachel Zitomer—who recently presented a great paper at the CCCP on local poetic communities—[hey, maybe i should get her to write one of these reports?]}—at the CUNY Grad Center & Dan Wilcox—who, some of you might remember—slapped me around a little in the last newsletter.} I defy anyone to find a group of 7 (any category) who traveled 3 hours for some Poetry. The highlight for me was the clip of Olson thumping his head with his finger. It went "Thunk! Thunk!" Do not miss this again! Go to the olsonnow.blogspot.com!

So back in Albany there are 2 fabulous new Performative Venues crowding onto the scene. "Some time next year," the transplanted Daniel Nester will be running a reading series to be held on Thursdays {i'm not sure if that's 2nd, 3rd, or every other} at the new & exciting Red Square (directly across Broadway from the SUNY Brain). [Now, i have been to this bar for some readings in the Jawbone Series—but the management has been blundering & double booking the readings & musical acts at the same time. {This is a no-no} One night they even had a pub crawl—& the

reading was cancelled...] Anyway, go to unpleasanteventschedule.com & bug Dan for a reading. & now, on the Second Monday of every month, you can come to Albany & get thee to the Lark Tavern [a great space for performers, run by some great people] for Nicole Peyrafitte's Performance Cabaret—Music Poetry Videos Performance—Nicole has got some great stuff lined up.

Albany, it's not just a state capitol anymore.

Solsticely Yours, Dglss

*dglsn.rthscjhld IS A POET: The Founder of Modernism; & the creator of something often erroneously referred to as "language poetry."*

EDMUND BERRIGAN IN

## SOUTH SLOPE, BROOKLYN

You can't beat tomorrow in the South Slope, which is about as never as we get. Walski tomorrow, but that was in Williamsburg and I missed it. I was sick ad nauseam, but the vestiges of my cave provided supple, if not ample warmth. I don't have time to read books, but I like to have them. Recently spotted in Brooklyn was Sharon Mesmer, but not by me. If you missed her party, you missed a chance to add to your book collection. On my "night stand", which is really just a nonoxford blue milkcrate, I have chapbooks by the Milwaukee Movement for Beer, Peace, Entropy, and a Stronger Union. There are great lines by poets

Mike Hauser, Zack Pieper, Stacy Szymaszek, Dustin Williamson and others. Stacy tell us some others, won't you? Lines such as: "\_\_\_\_\_", "\_\_\_\_\_", and, of course, "\_\_\_\_\_". I will not think for you world dweller, or shovel your taste down your coal throat, which you prefer to burn to heat your arctic mental apartment. I think only of the gentleman who again has sung me Arabic poetry that I did not understand, and was too shy (or otherwise incapacitated) to ask about as I attempted to purchase cat litter in the bitter wind on 20th St and 4th Avenue.

This time he clapped his hands when he sang to me, before selling me goods. But I did manage to thank him, and offer that he might have a nice day, and it seemed well received. Yes folks, I am an idiot, barely managing to feed myself, unable to cross the secret barriers of simple transactions. But Red Cloud and Foil do not have the technologies nor vocabularies to create their own or utilize my current indoor plumbing system, so I braved the weather of my own stupidity to accommodate their tiny ways. And that my friends, is how we do poetry in South Slope. I know, I know, drop out while you still can. You don't need a degree to write poetry, unless you have nothing else to write on.

*Edmund Berrigan is a poet who cannot recommend a roofer.*



# WORLD NEWS

## JACK KIMBALL IN NEW ENGLAND

Kick-off to 'high season' reprised the town-gown, paucity-plethora divide characteristic of Boston poetry readings. There were semi-private events, like Harvard's Adams House reading by younger poets under the auspices of U Cal. Press. Otherwise, with notable exceptions – a November tribute to Allen Ginsberg at Blacksmith House, Cambridge, and Bill Corbett's ongoing MIT reading series – there were few venues for the non-academically-affiliated.

The Green Street Grille in Central Square, Cambridge shut its doors in October on Demolicious, the last monthly series in the Boston area that typically features an open mic and spotlights accomplished readers. (Jackson Mac Low, for instance, gave his last joint reading with Anne Tardos at Demolicious about a year ago.) With the shut-down as backdrop, John Mercuri Dooley, co-curator for Demolicious, invited local poets to read work of others and their own pieces, including Jenny Lawton Grass showing poems in long, Photoshop scrolls with enormous visual and textual detail, and Moses Sekajja, an Ugandan now studying at U. Mass., reading a manuscript that will be published by Pressed Wafer. Demolicious found temporary quarters at the Enormous Room bar in Central Square in November, hosting Michael Basinski in a "one work reading." Basinski made music by reading syllables of numbers in any order, shifting vowels in words, reading fragments from a pennysaver as iambic verse. Dooley and others held another home-based open reading in December while curators continued their search for a permanent venue.

In November Anselm Berrigan and Tom Raworth paired up at MIT to read selections from a newly released *Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan*. Anselm Berrigan read his own work as well, demonstrating the art of looking, looking a few or many steps ahead, looking "normal but in fact a whack-job," looking for "the you and the you you you with," and the diseased look of the will, a "televised image / faking consensus." At least half of Tom Raworth's fast reading was given over to Ted Berrigan's poems. Mixing in what he called ad libs (whose?), Raworth made Ted Berrigan sound a living force, "talking on the phone, with various rubber stamps hung," etc. Reading an unpublished manuscript, Raworth continued with his own talk, "is thought calculus?" he asks, or "a network of cracks...life traffic aimed at brains."

Meanwhile, both town and gown readings in Providence thrive thanks in part to more tightly knit coordination among curators. There was a peculiar confluence at the Downcity reading in October, for example, featuring Kasey Silem Mohammad and Kent Johnson. Mohammad rolled out adjectives and noun phrases that appeal to those who cut their eye teeth in the stand-up 1980s, "stupid exorcist," "goofy," "spooky," and "boo," cartoon-lean, melancholy-balloon vocabulary from *Deer Head Nation* and *A Thousand Devils*, as well as unpublished material. Mohammad's pieces, new and vintage, appeal through a muddled hilarity ("crea-tionism's ... third nipple") and ripened disgust by way of reitera-

tions of key phrases, moving from easy laughs to more deep-seated guffaws that prompt belly- and heart-aches. Kent Johnson read all over the map of genres: an intentionally unhumorous translation; a single page from the more ambiguously comedic collection, *Also, with My Throat...* ("I am sorry for this language, which is rags"); an epigram to David Shapiro; and other pieces that took in recent events in New Orleans ("I hope you're ok") and science ("fractal ironies"). Johnson's were excesses that conveyed disgust on a similar plane with Mohammad's. Johnson's humor was more inset with generic spoofery than Mohammad's stand-up, but both poets came together as proportioned satirists making for a solid poetic dual.

*Jack Kimball's "An Idea that Spreads" and "Four Marquees for John Wieners" are recent web projects accessible at <fauxpress.com/kimball/poe.htm>.*

## YAGO CURA IN SPAIN

I went to Spain for a bout of good, old-fashioned lechery. I went to get laid and drink beer in public parks and make of my head a rolling stone. I went to see, first-hand, the picaresque waters of my fool. I went to oaf around, to bumble, and to steal some books from the right people.

I spent 11 hours on a train from Toulouse to Madrid; 11 hours where sleep and life intertwined; I dreamt I saw castles lit up by floodlights—gargantuan sand dunes—and somnambulant train yards. My train seemed to go no faster than an auteur in a pickup, but it didn't really matter because I had a hangover to conquer (egregious amounts of Calimocho—Pepsi and Wine). On top of that, I had Luis Garcia Montero's *Habitaciones Seperadas* (Separate Rooms) and tore into it.

Montero's *Habitaciones* feels largely autobiographical; in a way, it attests to the aftermath of a defunct relationship; the part where the players decide to get separate rooms, separate lives. In that sense, the book can be hard to get into, especially if you've just gotten out of a relationship. But if readers peer deeper, they will see some of the poems open and pony up motives, rationales, excuses. Don't be fooled though, these poems aren't lyrical or exuberant. In "Mujeres," Montero enumerates the litany of women at a bus stop in Spain. There are the laborers, "in opaque clothes with sleep in their eyes / in search of their hour / They get on and off in the nude" and there are the static women in the ads, "from their perfect kingdom in pictures / no schedule, no hurry / obscene like a bronze dream," but it is the memory of his love's "skin, white and sad" that makes him bless the feminine tableau with, "May you have a nice day / may luck seek you / in your small and prim house / may life treat you with dignity."

On an another jaunt, I did Madrid-Barcelona on a bus in a little over eight hours. This time I had Leopoldo Maria Panero's, *Guardia de un Animal que no Existe* (Lair of an Animal that Doesn't Exist). It is written in a desperate register, and it's full of self-loathing and blasphemy. There are "Odes to Hell" and "Hymns to Satan" in sparse but tangy lashings; Panero's poems pummel operatic. More importantly, at every turn, there is *the Poem*: accusatory, treacherous, delinquent. In "Hell" Panero writes "the

suffering that is the most atrocious is the suffering that doesn't exist / the suffering on the page / that doesn't exist." And "Nomme Du Dieu" concludes with "the atrocious liminal where man dies / fallen / at the feet of the poem."

It's all a little laughable, this business of blasphemy; after a while, Panero's poetic invectives grow pedestrian, almost predictable; however, *Guarida* concludes with a section of ten poems titled "Poemas de la Vieja" that cut to the quick and linger in the amygdala. These poems are little monologues in the voice of "la Vieja" (old woman), a grubby, misanthropic octogenarian that says things like "they say the dead are vile / but being old is worse / than death for the world / a noise so small in the room / that the youth hear while laughing."

*Yago Cura is the author of Rubberroom (Hinchas de Poesia, 2006) and a Teaching Fellow in the Bronx.*

## GWENDOLYN ALBERT IN BRATISLAVA, SLOVAKIA

In terms of the number of artists, Bratislava's third international Ars Poetica Festival, 2-12 November, was more ambitious than in previous years. Our hosts were generous and kind, the atmosphere safe, bordering on tame. Those seeking respite from news of the relentless global violence that has marked the start of the millennium probably found it; those seeking explicit commentary on the state of the world in 2005 found it only rarely.

The festival included dance and music as well as poetry, and few performances during the week ever came close to the opening piece, choreographer Réka Szabó's "Cleaning the Attic." It would have been impressive enough for her to simply stand still and surprise us with a series of flowing words in excellent English, but she recited in mid-air, from flat on her back, and from all manner of athletic transitions in between, well-calculated to punctuate the unfolding narrative. Her fellow Hungarian, Ákos Hargitai, a dancer with the physique of a weightlifter, followed with an hilarious piece involving choreographic vignettes ("Bee Gees", "Pioneer," etc.) which he encouraged the audience to command him to combine. Despite this promising start, and Saturday night's attempt by French poet Philippe Dupont to shake things up with his energetic delivery over various amplified music forms, the "fourth wall" remained intact the rest of the week.

Quantity came at the expense of quality most evenings, when eight or more readers ping-ponged between languages for an hour and a half. Slovak translations of *almost* all of the poetry (why was Arim Chaib of Tunisia presented in Arabic only?) were expertly read by two young actors, Lucia Hurajová – whose wardrobe was attractive but distracting – and the dressed-down Ľuboš Kostelný, while the poets stood stage left. Center stage was filled by an enor-

mous screen upon which Slovak "VJ" Zdeno Hlinka projected digital doodling; some of the images were apt and some were not, but all of them were unavoidable. On Friday and Saturday evenings the crowded venue (called "A4" after the European standard for a sheet of writing paper) became unbearably hot and stuffy. I am not sure it was such an honor for Slovak poet Petr Repka to have the debut of his collected works preceded by eight other writers, but he seemed happy enough.

For me the poetry highlight was Robert Minhinnick's "St John's Sunflowers" (*I take the communion of the sunflowers / - the green loaf, the black wine -*). Unfortunately for non-Slovak speakers, some of the best work was read in Czech or Slovak only, or in the echo chamber of a Slavic language original (Croatian, Polish, etc.) followed by Slovak translation. A better use of the technology (well exploited by Russian poets Artur Punte and Sergej Timofejev) would have been to project the English translations from the festival anthology behind the poets – although given their uneven quality, perhaps not. Robert Gal's Slovak aphorisms deserve a more careful English translation, as do the works of Croatian poet Ivica Prtenjača; perhaps Justin Quinn, the Irish

poet who has done such lovely work for Czech poet Petr Borkovec, can be persuaded to expand his Slavic language repertoire.

The ratio of male to female poets was 23:7, and Slovak women were quite underrepresented; one of the two featured, Penelope Toomey, even confessed that she had begun her writing career in English before moving to her native language. Female musicians were better represented, and Czech singer Ridine Ahmed captivated the audience with her solo, nonverbal vocalizations, sampling and mixing them in real time into hypnotic choral compositions that felt like a blessing.

As Ahmed and Szabó's solo performances proved, less sometimes really is more. Hopefully the next Ars Poetica will benefit from their example.

*Gwendolyn Albert is a poet and human rights activist living in Prague.*

## EUGENE OSTASHEVSKY IN FLORENCE, ITALY

4. Let us say that Homer created his poems not by writing them down, but by improvising them according to the rules of oral composition. If he free-styled *The Odyssey* on a Tuesday and then again on a Thursday,

- The words would not be exactly the same.
- The meter (dactylic hexameter) would not be exactly the same.
- There might be no adjectives the second time around.
- Odysseus might take Calypso up on her offer the second time around.



21. Odysseus's name means:

- a. Nobody.
- b. The One Who Remembers.
- c. The Son of Pain.
- d. The Man of Twists and Turns; The Clever One.
- e. The Liar.

22. Penelope tricks her suitors by:

- a. Telling them that if they're suitors, they ought to be wearing suits.
- b. Asking them to wait until Telemachus marries.
- c. Suggesting they go woo her at her father's.
- d. Saying she must weave a shroud for her father-in-law, and then unweaving at night what she wove during the day.

23. What did Penelope say to Odysseus?

- a. "Is that a scar on your thigh or are you just happy to see me?"
- b. "Looks like we're having goose for dinner tomorrow."
- c. "Sleep alone if you're gonna be like that—we'll even get the king-size bed for you from the master bedroom."
- d. "You don't look a day older, love."
- e. "Are you gonna clean up after yourself? Your mother doesn't live here, you know. As a matter of fact, she died of grief because of you—because you were away plutzing goddesses these last twenty years!"
- f. "I want a divorce!"

24. Which of these unsavory characters are most likely to get caught in a drug bust?

- a. The Laestrygonians.
- b. The Cyclops.
- c. The Phaeacians.
- d. The Lotus-Eaters.
- e. The Cicones.

25. The plot of the *Odyssey* would have changed drastically if one of these characters had owned a washing machine. The character is:

- a. Circe.
- b. Nausicaa.
- c. Antinous.
- d. Penelope.
- e. Polyphemus.

26. The Sirens promise Odysseus they'll sing about his deeds at Troy. Had he swum towards them, he surely would have perished. What kept him alive?

- a. A massive build-up of earwax.
- b. A spell cast by Circe.
- c. His companions tied him up.
- d. He remembered Penelope.

27. The suitors are taking advantage of:

- a. The Greek rules of hospitality.
- b. The future inheritance of Telemachus.
- c. The maids.
- d. All of the above.
- e. None of the above.

29. Circe tells Odysseus to go to hell because:

- a. She is dying for a pork chop.
- b. She wants him to speak to Tiresias.
- c. She wants him to speak to Agamemnon.
- d. She is offended when he accidentally addresses her as Penelope.

30. The suitors receive several indications that it might be time for them to pack their bags (in the hints of Odysseus the beggar, as well as the prophecies of the seer brought by Telemachus). But they do not leave. Why?

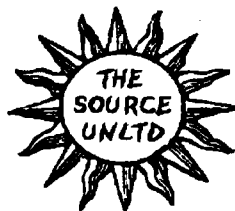
- a. Their parents don't want them back.
- b. They think that if it's fate, it's fate, and you can't do anything about it.
- c. Some god clouds their reason, to make them responsible for their own death.
- d. Zeus is messing with the weather, to make them responsible for their own death.

*Eugene Ostashevsky is currently teaching Great Books at NYU in Florence. This is an excerpt from November's midterm.*

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# you, me, and the insects

*You, Me, and the Insects* is a heartening, bittersweet story of a spiritual struggle and transformation, told in parallel universes of mother, writer, wife in secular USA and dedicated struggling western-yogini in luminously detailed India. The writing is marvelously rich, layered, the narrative is compelling. The phenomenal world is the source of terrific insight, delight and surprise. This is not a pretentious New Age memoir but an ageless picaresque and imaginative voyage. A major accomplishment for this extremely salient, charged writer. ANNE WALDMAN

This is a miracle of a book. Barbara Henning has taken seemingly unpromising materials—the demanding study of yoga in southern India; the daily incidents of life there; the recollection of starting a family with a husband now dead—and transformed them into a narrative that is gripping, entertaining, and intensely moving. It is a triumph of imagination restoring irresistible vivacity to the perishable treasures of memory. HARRY MATHEWS

Barbara Henning's astonishing new semi-autobiographical novel is set in Detroit's Cass Corridor, New York and finally in Mysore, India. . . . "It is your duty to be joyful"—this informs Henning's project as a whole: Discipline is an undeniable component in a spiritual quest, but creative force is equally vital. Enlightenment is not for the passive. In *You, Me, and the Insects*, Henning has written a testament to living and devotion. LYNN CRAWFORD (Metro Times).



# EVENTS AT THE

## FEBRUARY

WEDNESDAY 2/1

MIKE KELLEHER & KIM ROSENFELD

**Michael Kelleher** is the author of *To Be Sung*, as well as the chapbooks *Cuba*, *Bacchanalia*, and *The Necessary Elephant*. He lives in Buffalo, NY, where he works as Artistic Director for Just Buffalo Literary Center and as literary editor for *artvoice*. **Kim Rosenfield** is the author of *Good Morning—Midnight* which won the Small Press Traffic Book of the Year Award and *Tràma*. She co-edited *Object* magazine with the poet Robert Fitterman from 1993-1999.

FRIDAY 2/3 [10:30 PM]

"IN THE ARMS OF WORDS:  
POEMS FOR DISASTER RELIEF"

Book Party to promote the release of the new anthology *In the Arms of Words: Poems for Disaster Relief*. Poet Amy Ouzoonian edited a bountiful collection and is selling copies with proceeds to go to AmeriCares. Reading features poets included in the anthology: Thaddeus Rutkowski, Eve Packer, Alan Semerdjian, Nancy Mercado, George Wallace and Amy Ouzoonian.

MONDAY 2/6 [7:45PM SIGNUP 8PM START]  
OPEN MIKE

WEDNESDAY 2/8

ALAN DAVIES & TONY TOWLE

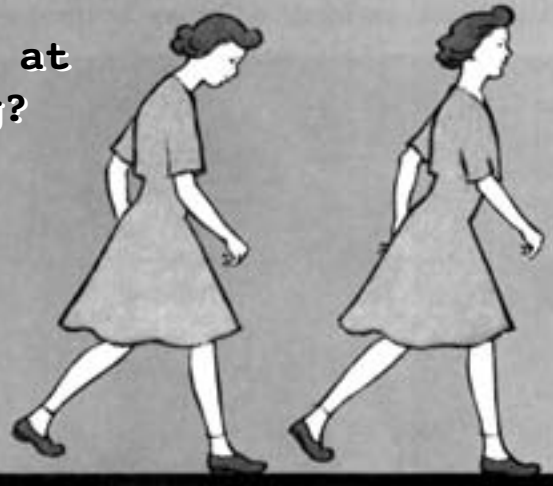
**Alan Davies** is the author of *Name, Signage, Candor*, and *Rave* as well as numerous other books and articles. His long book *Life* is forthcoming from O Books. He practices Zen and cultivates friendships. **Tony Towle** received the Frank O'Hara Award in 1970 in conjunction with his first major collection, *North*. He has published 12 books in all, most recently, *The History of the Invitation: New & Selected Poems 1963-2000*, *Memoir 1960-1963*, and *Nine Immaterial Nocturnes*.

MONDAY 2/13

MADelyn KENT & CYNTHIA SAILERS

**Madelyn Kent's** plays *Nomads*, *Black Milk*, and *Peninsula* have been presented at New York Theatre Workshop, The Public Theatre and Soho Rep, where in 1998 she was member of their first Writer/Director Lab. In 2001, she founded Shufu Theatre, presenting work

Will she be at  
my reading?



developed through improvisations with Japanese women. **Cynthia Sillers** is the author of *Lake Systems*, and the chapbooks *Rose Lungs* and *A New Season*. She co-curates The New Yipes Reading Series in Oakland, CA. She is currently in a Doctorate program in Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy.

WEDNESDAY 2/15

SHANNA COMPTON &  
RACHEL BLAU DUPLESSIS

**Shanna Compton's** book, *Down Spooky*, was published by Winnow Press. She is the former editor of *LIT* at the New School, where she currently teaches. She also publishes poetry chapbooks and broadsides via her micropress Half Empty/Half Full. **Rachel Blau DuPlessis'** newest books of poetry are *Drafts 1-38*, *Toll* (2001) and *DRAFTS: Drafts 39-57, Pledge with Draft, Unnumbered: Précis* (2004). DuPlessis is the recipient a 2002 Pew Fellowship for Artists and teaches at Temple University in Philadelphia.

MONDAY 2/20

GREGORY PARDLO & LAURA SIMS

**Gregory Pardlo** has received fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts in poetry, and the National Endowment for the Arts for translation. His poems have appeared in anthologies and journals including *Ploughshares*, *Seneca Review*, and *Volt*. **Laura Sims's** first book, *Practice, Restraint*, was the recipient of the 2005 Fence Books Alberta Prize. She was recently awarded a JUSFC / NEA Creative Artist Exchange Fellowship to spend six months in Japan next year. She lives in Madison, WI, where she teaches creative writing and composition.

WEDNESDAY 2/22

JANINE POMMY VEGA &  
JONATHAN SKINNER

**Janine Pommy Vega** is the author of over twelve books and chapbooks since 1968. Her two latest collections are *Mad Dogs of Trieste* and *The Green Piano*. Vega has worked as an educator in schools through various arts in education programs and in prisons through the Incisions/Arts organization. **Jonathan Skinner** is a poet, translator and critic, as well as editor of the journal *ecopoetics*. Skinner recently completed his Ph.D. in English at SUNY Buffalo, with a dissertation on ecology and twentieth-century innovative poetry and poetics. His first full-length poetry collection, *Political Cactus Poems*, appeared this year with Palm Press.

MONDAY 2/27 [7:00 PM]

TALK SERIES: ROBERT FITTERMAN:  
IDENTITY THEFT: MY SUBJECTIVITY

"The purloined, the sampled, the borrowed, the recycled, the reprocessed, the micromanaged. Tendencies in 21st Century innovative writing and culture-making point convincingly to a shift from *invention* to *inventory*. What is the social frame that has fostered this possibility and how has the media and the Internet participated? In this talk, I want to explore how "identity" in contemporary poetry shifts to include many identities—personal, global, multiple."

**Robert Fitterman** is the author of 8 books of poetry, including 3 installments of his ongoing poem *Metropolis*. He teaches at New York University.



# THE POETRY PROJECT

## MARCH

WEDNESDAY 3/1

ERICA DOYLE & DAVID MILLS

**Erica Doyle** is a writer of Trinidadian descent whose poetry and fiction has appeared in *Callaloo*, *Ploughshares*, *Best Black Women's Erotica* and *Best American Poetry*. A fellow of Cave Canem: A Workshop and Retreat for African American poets, she currently teaches creative writing and English at Vanguard High School in New York City. **David Mills** is a 2005-2006 NYFA award winner in poetry. His work has appeared in journals such as *Obsidian II* and *Rattapallax*. His book reviews have appeared in the *Boston Globe*, *Washington Post*, *Village Voice* and *New York Post*.

MONDAY 3/6

[6:00 PM \$5 ADULTS, \$3 STUDENTS]

EIGHTH ANNUAL URBAN WORD  
NYC TEEN POETRY SLAM

This event is open to any teenager between 13 and 19. A grassroots, non-profit arts-education organization, Urban Word NYC uses the competitive format of the Teen Poetry Slam to bring a community of teenagers together through their love of poetry and spoken word.

WEDNESDAY 3/8

ALAN HALSEY, GERALDINE MONK  
& MARTIN CORLESS-SMITH

**Alan Halsey** ran The Poetry Bookshop in Hay-on-Wye and since the mid-1990s he has been the publisher of West House Books. His books include *The Text of Shelley's Death*, *A Robin Hood Book* and *Fit To Print*, a collaboration with Karen Mac Cormack. *Marginalien*, a collection of poetry, prose & graphics 1988-2004, was published in 2005. **Geraldine Monk's** *Selected Poems* appeared in 2003 from Salt Publications and *Escafeld Hangings*, her latest collection, was published by West House Books. **Martin Corless-Smith's** books include *Of Piscator*, *Complete Travels*, *Nota*, and *Swallows*. He teaches in Boise, Idaho.

MONDAY 3/13

BRENT CUNNINGHAM & BEN LERNER

**Brent Cunningham's** first book, *Bird & Forest*, was published in June by Ugly Duckling Presse. He received an M.A. degree from the poetics program at the University at Buffalo, and since 1999 he has worked for Small Press Distribution in Berkeley. **Ben Lerner's** first book is *The Lichtenberg Figures*, published by Copper Canyon Press. Copper Canyon will publish his second book, *Angle of Yaw*, in 2007. He co-founded and co-edits *No: a journal of the arts*.

WEDNESDAY 3/15

HOA NGUYEN & DALE SMITH

**Hoa Nguyen** is author of *Your Ancient See Through* and *Red Juice*. She leads a popular online workshop for Teachers & Writers and lives in Austin Texas where she teaches creative writing, edits the poetry journal *Superflux*, and curates a monthly reading series. **Dale Smith** publishes Skanky Possum Books with Hoa Nguyen. *American Rambler* and *The Flood & The Garden* are available through SPD. His essays, reviews, and poems have appeared in the *Chicago Review*, *Damn The Caesars*, *Sentence*, and *Best American Poetry 2002*.

MONDAY 3/20

LIDIJA DIMKOVSKA & ANTHONY HAWLEY

**Lidija Dimkovska** was born in Skopje, Macedonia. She has published three books of poetry, a novel, and an anthology of Macedonian Women Poets. She is a translator of Romanian literature, and her first book in English translation, *Do Not Awaken Them With Hammers*, is forthcoming from Ugly Duckling Presse's Eastern European Poets Series. **Anthony Hawley's** first full-length collection of poetry, *The Concerto Form*, will be published by Shearsman Books this spring. He is the author of the chapbooks *Afield* and *Vocative*, and his poems have appeared or are forthcoming in various publications, including *26*, *Colorado Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *The Hat*, *LIT*, *The New Republic*, *The Paris Review*, and *Volt*.

WEDNESDAY 3/22

DAVID MELTZER & MICHAEL ROTHENBERG

**David Meltzer's** *Beat Thing* won the Josephine Miles PEN Award for 2005. He was editor and interviewer for *San Francisco Beat: Talking With The Poets*, and teaches in the graduate MA/MFA Poetics program at New College of California. *David's Copy*, selected poems, was published in 2005 by Viking/Penguin. **Michael Rothenberg** has been an active environmentalist in the San Francisco Bay Area for the past 25 years. His books of poems include *The Paris Journals*, *Monk Daddy* and *Unhurried Vision*. Rothenberg is editor and publisher of Big Bridge, [www.bigbridge.org](http://www.bigbridge.org).

MONDAY 3/27 [7:00 P.M.]

TALK SERIES:

FRED SCHMALZ:

HOW-TO/GET LOST

This talk explores the intersection of utilitarian language and poetic language: the high rate of interaction in the city, how we practice talking, learn forms of code language to order at the deli, use slang, (mis)understand each other, listen, ask, and invent as we give directions or instructions. The talk will incorporate works by Paul Blackburn, Lisel Mueller, Gunter Kunert, Joshua Beckman, John Cage, Harriet Mullen, Frank O'Hara and others to explore how poems are guides, and how they may be read as instruction manuals.

Fred Schmalz is a poet and publisher of the literature and art journal *swerve*. Schmalz's chapbook *Ticket* was published by Fuori Editions in 2002. His poems have appeared in *Jubilat*, *Divide* and other magazines.

WEDNESDAY 3/29

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM  
& MAGGIE NELSON

**Wayne Koestenbaum** has published five books of poetry: *Best-Selling Jewish Porn Films*, *Model Homes*, *The Milk of Inquiry*, *Rhapsodies of a Repeat Offender*, and *Ode to Anna Moffo and Other Poems*. He is a Professor of English at the CUNY Graduate Center. **Maggie Nelson** is most recently the author of *Jane: A Murder*, a mixed-genre book about the life and 1969 murder of her aunt Jane, as well as two previous collections of poetry. After many years of living in and around New York City, she recently moved to Los Angeles, where she joined the faculty of the School of Critical Studies at CalArts.

ALL EVENTS BEGIN AT 8PM UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED  
ADMISSION \$8 / STUDENTS AND SENIORS \$7 / MEMBERS \$5 OR FREE  
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# INTERVIEW

## LOOKING IN THE MIRROR A TALK WITH NOAM CHOMSKY

[PART 2]

In the second half of our conversation, Noam Chomsky explores ideas of universal linguistic & moral structures that both unite all humanity and provide the basis for its resistance to authoritarian means of control — the reason those in power are so adamantly opposed to such notions. Along the way, we discuss indoctrination at home and in the Middle East, the nature of being an “intellectual” & the constraints placed on people’s efforts to do anything beyond showing up for work on Monday morning. His decades of analysis & activism have placed him in the spotlight, yet he is but one of a growing number of people challenging received ways of understanding society. Always vigilant against personalizing these concepts, Chomsky is meticulous in citing other sources and framing himself as a conduit of information rather than the leader of a vertically structured movement. His rigor is an inspiration to those who would pursue additional investigations into the institutions that define the possible... and how they might be restructured to maximize the freedoms towards which we naturally gravitate.

**Lorber:** You have argued that, just as there is an underlying structure of the mind, common to all people, that allows for cognitive and linguistic development, that there are universal structures which allow for “moral consciousness, cultural achievement and even participation in a free and just community.” What’s the nature of that moral substructure and under what conditions could it find its fullest development and expression?

**Chomsky:** These ideas aren’t original to me. These are Enlightenment themes. Actually they go back to Cartesian philosophy but they’re major themes in the Enlightenment. They’re the basis of classical liberalism. But we don’t know much about human nature. For that matter, we don’t know much about insect nature. We know it plays an enormous role in the life of any organism, but to try to find out what it is is a hard question.

In the case of humans, first of all it’s very complicated. Secondly you can’t do any experiments. The only evidence you have is history, tradition, experience, perception. In the last couple of years there’s been a revival of interest in themes from traditional philosophy, which was originally considered an empirical science, in an effort to find the roots and principles of our moral nature. It sort of disappeared during the period of analytic philosophy, but it was picked up again by John Rawls in his *Theory of Justice* which very explicitly uses a linguistic model to prepare a grounds for justice. That’s been picked up recently by a couple of people who are doing experimental work asking how children make moral judgments in complex situations. Interesting cases have been studied in the philosophical literature. Rawls had some very sharp intuition about this and it turns out children have it too — and it’s cross cultural.

You go back 25 years ago and, as you’d expect for the richest country in the world, Americans had the highest wages and lowest work hours. Now the figures are reversed.

The famous example is, suppose you have a train coming down a track that goes off in two directions. If it goes in this direction it’s going to kill a guy and if it goes in that direction it’ll kill five people. You’re controlling the switch. There’s no way to stop the train so which direction do you pick? Everybody says kill the one person.

Here’s another one — there’s a train going down a track with five people in front of it and it’s going to kill them if it gets there. You’re on a bridge over the track and standing right next to you is a fat man. If you push him over the edge, the train will hit him and it won’t kill the five people. Would you do it? It’s the same situation but you’re somehow willing to do it if it’s remote but not willing to do it if you’re actually killing the person not by just pushing a switch. You are still making the person die. Again, that is cross cultural. Young children who have never met but hear this story will have the same intuition and there’s some effort being made to uncover the principle from which we derive these judgments. They’ve got to be there. We live our lives by making moral judgments all the time.

There is some thin empirical research but mostly, as with most of human life, we just rely on intuitive understanding. Yet I think that there is at least some reason to pay attention to a traditional theme here. At the core of human nature, and maybe animal nature, is a instinct for freedom, ranging from a fly trying to get out of a spider web to a person trying to escape the oppression of a large institution. To a large part, history turns around these instincts.

**Lorber:** It seems as though the more we can increase specialization within every field the more there can be the structural imposition of distancing from any moral decision. That is, if someone’s just manufacturing the bolts on a missile....

**Chomsky:** You're not going to throw the guy in front of a train as easily as you would if it were just flipping a switch. It's even more distant if you can get the government to send troops somewhere to massacre people with napalm.

**Lorber:** It's difficult to offer a critique of power when power, definitionally, would prefer to operate without those kinds of hindrances. Some people have argued that you have no right to establish social, political and economic critiques because your academic training is in linguistics. Other people have labeled you an intellectual which you've refuted on several grounds, in part because such a title frames anything you might say in a specific and limiting context. The demand that everyone be a specialist seems to be growing.

**Chomsky:** A very interesting critique. I have a tremendous amount of experience with this and the fact of the matter is I don't have any professional credentials, including linguistics. Which is why I started teaching at MIT – it's a scientific university where, if they cared about the work you were doing, you didn't need credentials. I'm self-taught in just about every area. and I have done work ranging from social-political issues to pure mathematics. At one time I was working on the theory of automata. And over the years I've been invited to give talks to the graduate math seminar at Harvard and conferences. They knew I wasn't a trained mathematician. If they didn't know before they knew after five minutes, but they didn't care about that, they just wanted to hear what I had to say. The point is nobody ever raised the question of credentials.

On the other hand when I talk about social or political issues they always raise it. And you can see why. Again it's pretty easy to explain. In fields that have intellectual substance nobody gives a damn about credentials. In fields that are nearly vacuous you have to defend yourself with a guild card. They make sure you can't get in unless you a member of the guild.

**Lorber:** But even in entering the department here at MIT...

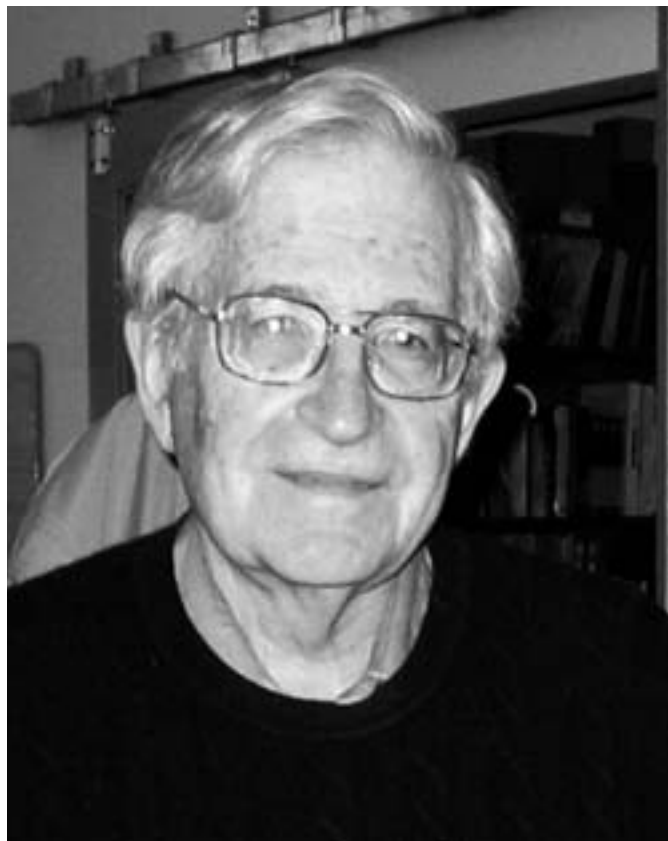
**Chomsky:** I got in through the electronics lab. I couldn't tell a radio from a tape recorder. This was in the 50's. They had a ton of money, most of it from the Pentagon, and they were just looking for interesting work. So I worked in the electronics lab and a couple years later they managed to start a language program and it became a department. All the people in the department are professional linguists.

As for being an intellectual, the best-educated person I ever met in my life since childhood was a newsstand operator.

**Lorber:** The newsstand on 72nd street.

**Chomsky:** Yes. My uncle. He managed to get a newsstand put together, through a program in the 1930's for people with disabilities. He had a hunchback. He let me read everything for free and we talked about it all. You're an intellectual if you put your mind to work. I know plenty of people teaching at Harvard, distinguished professors who are doing clerical work that could be done by a secretary with a high school education. That's what a lot of scholarship is really, even a lot of science is unbelievably routine work. If you are in the experimental sciences you may not be putting your mind to work at all. I have friends who are carpenters who are a lot more creative than a lot of people I know at the university.

**Lorber:** Your theory of universal grammar, like Jung's psycho-



Noam Chomsky outside his office at MIT.

logical Collective Unconscious, Joseph Campbell's mythological Hero with a Thousand Faces or Alan Lomax's musical system of Choriometrics, was met with resistance. Why would one resist the notion that there are fundamental similarities among all people that trump surface differences?

**Chomsky:** I'm not a biologist but there is the truism that we are all one species. Humans are all genetically almost identical. We're all descendants of some small breeding group from East Africa maybe 50,000 years ago, which isn't enough time for any substantial changes to have occurred. From a Martian point of view we're all as similar as frogs, or even more so because there are many species of frogs. So if we have a rich capacity, like the capacity for language, it's got to be genetically dependent, it's got to be shared. There's no other option. So there's no resistance to the idea within biology.

There is a *great* resistance to it within the social sciences, cultural studies, philosophy. But you can't really ask why because it's totally irrational. It's a complicated matter and the history is kind of interesting. You get it across the ideological spectrum. Partly, I suspect, and we're guessing about the unconscious motives, but it seems to me to be correlated with the fact that intellectuals are basically managers. They're not corporate managers or political managers, they're doctrinal managers. Teachers, public intellectuals who tell you how to live your life, people who write about history, they're creating certain doctrinal systems. Managers want to control and if you want to control, it's useful to eliminate moral barriers to control. One way of eliminating moral barriers to control is to say there is no intrinsic human nature, that people are malleable – and that I, their leader, am someone above all that. I'm not like those pieces of clay out there and I'm going to mold them in the right direction. I'm like a good father who is

going to train his children. They are empty vessels into whom I will pour what they have to know and do. That's a very convenient attitude to take for people who regard themselves as responsible. Imperialism works this way too. We have to raise the people of Iraq and all the backward races.

Sometimes it's almost comical. Like a couple of days ago the government sent PR specialist Karen Hughes to the Middle East to try to convince them that we really love them and they just misunderstand us. It was reported soberly in the press without irony. Her opening line was "First of all, I'm a mom, so you can trust me." Then she went on and gave her spiel and the press reported it. There was the most inadvertently comical article about the visit in *The New York Times* by Stephen Weiss.

What he said was Hughes was keeping to concise soundbites and avoiding sustained argument. He explained that this works in the United States. The president produces the soundbites, the media repeat them, they're amplified by extensive advertising and this sort of works. He said this just doesn't work in the "lively and percussive atmosphere" of the Middle East where people want sustained arguments, they want reasons and they think democracy involves something beyond repeating soundbites which are then amplified by advertising. So we're having a hard time training them for democracy.

As far as I could tell this was being written without irony. I mean, if it was written by Jonathan Swift I could've understood it. But he was describing it as though this is the way things ought to be: That's what democracy means. It means your leader says something, we, the free press repeat it, advertisers expand it and these backwards people who we're trying to train in democracy don't understand it. They want arguments and reasons so we're having a lot of trouble.

I happened to read a report in the Lebanese press about a discussion at the American University in Beirut. Beirut's an unusually vibrant place at the moment. The Public Affairs Officer at the American embassy there was giving a talk and they described it as being like an executive giving a Powerpoint presentation. He said our approach involves the Four E's [Engagement, Exchanges, Education and Empowerment]. Of course everybody there just laughed. But the validity of that approach is very deeply inculcated into us here and understandably.

I suspect the idea that people have a nature is the reason for objection, the barrier to control, in the political sciences. If they actually have an instinct for freedom and you're restricting it, you are doing something violent. If you're not allowing them to find their own path towards forms of self-expression, that's

immoral. If you are running a No Child Left Behind educational program for kids who are forced to memorize enough stuff to pass the next standardized test, that's immoral. Now that's an unpleasant idea from the point of view of the managers. It's a lot easier to be a stern disciplinarian than to try to help people find their own way.

**Lorber:** It's a form of imprisonment

**Chomsky:** It is.

**Lorber:** I guess we're running out of time, but could I ask one quick final question. Wages have fallen, by some accounts, as much as 25% in the past 30 years which means everyone must work longer hours just to get by. What's the net effect on the pursuit of creative inquiry, on the intimacy of relationships and on the degree of compassion we can have for one another under such circumstances.

**Chomsky:** It's not quite as bad as that. The actual facts are that over the last 25 years real wages for the majority of the population have stagnated or declined. This is unique in American economic history. You go back 25 years ago and, as you'd expect for the richest country in the world, Americans had the highest wages and lowest work hours. Now the figures are reversed. In the industrialized world the US has the lowest wages and the highest work hours just so people can keep their incomes up. Also, people are *intensely* propagandized to spend. It's just driven home every moment of your life.

You've got to buy, you've got to want. And even if you don't want it, you have to get it, in order to be in step with your neighbor. People are driven by consumption. Their wages are such that the only way they can keep their income up is by working harder, which makes them marginalized and atomized to the point where they're not having the experiences that would allow them care about anyone but themselves.

**Lorber:** It's difficult if you want to be a poet.

**Chomsky:** It's difficult for anyone in all kinds of ways. I mean, look at students. Students nowadays, and this is by design, come out of college with huge debts. And this has a disciplinary effect. In the 60's kids could just go off and do my thing and then get back into it. But if you're coming out of school with enormous debt you have to pay off you can't do that. You have to go right into a corporation and become a slave. And that has a very strong disciplinary effect and it was instituted for just this reason.

**Lorber:** Thanks for taking the time to sit down and talk today.

**Chomsky:** Hey, good luck to you.

**Lorber:** Good luck to all of us.



Chomsky delivering a talk "The Exercise of American Power: Problems and Prospects" at MIT on October 25, 2005.

# THE ROMANTIC-MODERN LYRIC: POETRY FOR THE NON-POET

FEATURE

BY DALE SMITH

The romantic-modern history of poetry has grown increasingly self-referential, rarely able to extend arguments beyond a small tribe of practitioners and students. In turn, poetry becomes a formal exercise when it addresses only an audience predisposed to shared goals and causes. Coleridge, publishing *The Friend* (1809-1810), may have been the first to perceive this inadequacy, offering limited subscriptions to those whom he considered capable of disseminating ideas beyond the sphere of a limited poetic coterie. And while poetry since Coleridge has achieved a kind of popular distinction for itself in the culture (thanks partially to his example of wide-ranging concerns and exceptional energy), it has failed to form a greater connection to other audiences. The social and creative visions of modernism, for instance, most notably found in the fragmented epics of Pound's *Cantos*, Williams' *Paterson*, and Olson's *Maximus Poems*, in many ways address those who are already in sympathy with makers of, as Pound claimed, "words charged with meaning."

The authority and perceived authenticity of the poet's vision, not his or her arguments, reveals poetic insight, lyric sensitivity or even political subversion to those whose sympathies have already been claimed by the art. There is a formal obligation between the poet and audience, rather than an inquiry into the varied circumstances of communication. While rhetoric, through oratory and pedagogy, has retained its relevancy for its pragmatic utility in civic discourse, poetry today is often assigned to a kind of no-man's zone for failing to adequately address a broader world it professes to engage. The great poets of the romantic-modern period aspired to such broad, civic roles for their work, but for many reasons, they have failed to extend relevant conversations to a larger public, their writing residing most prominently within a few pages of respected anthologies. Contemporary poets need to re-consider their roles in communication, exploring how language affects an audience, and how to make effective argu-

ments that appeal more broadly to people whose situations in the world are different from our own.

The archaic origins of poetry and rhetoric are in part obscured by the narratives we construct to understand our relationships to the past, and by our modern usage of key terms. Even Aristotle's discussions of the most basic elements of poetry and rhetoric elide definitions that would make more apparent to us what he means by such terms as *enthymeme*. And while traditional narratives of poetry and rhetoric have evolved over time, often to reveal a given era's sense of identity more than to present an accurate description of its history, many of our conceptions of these now distinct arts are derived from a diverse body of sources that have been only digested in fragmented form from antiquity to the present.

Jeffrey Walker's *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* (Oxford University Press, 2000) boldly challenges assumptions about the history of poetry and rhetoric in Europe, seeking to reclaim a shared ground between these bodies of discourse. He claims that the "assumptions...of 'rhetoric' in which the art is seen to 'rise' and 'fall' with the fortunes of practical civic oratory in Greek and Roman polities" is, as he notes with the words of Stesichorus, "not true, that tale" (4). Instead, he begins by looking at the emergent forms of writing to first enter Greek culture, carefully placing his arguments within this period of transformation from orality to written texts. Many of the key terms we take for granted in rhetoric and poetics had yet to be made in the eighth century B.C. Archaic tribal rulers in Greece effectively developed a formal discourse based in poetry to give authority to a king's legal decisions and acts. A good king understood the virtue of speaking well, and went to poetry for knowledge of language. The language of

religion, law and commerce also came from poetry, which had developed from its oral roots an effective *techne* for the description of reality and the relation of it to the tribe.

For Hesiod (eighth century B.C.), we are reminded "the words 'poetry' and 'rhetoric' do not exist. *Poïesis*, *poiêtês*, and *rhêtôr* will not appear until the fifth century, and *rhêtōrikê* will not emerge as a disciplinary term until the fourth, where its first known use is in Plato's *Gorgias*" (4). Instead, Hesiod's terminology gives us song ("aoidê") or hymns ("hymnoi"). And it is here where the basic terms for an archaic religious self-consciousness in language are

realized as "psychagogic eloquence," (4) in the skilled relation between *aoidos* and *basileus* (king). Walker defines his argument in this period of social transformation, presenting evidence for poetic language as the origin of a later oratical discourse. He distinguishes, for instance, epideictic and pragmatic language as the roots of Hesiod's rhetoric, considering in detail the needs of a culture at the threshold of transformation from an oral, tribal and essentially religious society to a larger functioning body of state. The pragmatic oratory of statecraft, Walker says, is derived from the epideictic traditions of poetry. He is careful to distinguish, however, our current understanding of how poetry works from how it worked for an eighth century B.C. audience. For instance, he observes how

The power of epideictic discourse in oral societies is difficult to overestimate. In the first place, because it is designed to be memorable and repeatable at significant, recurring occasions in a culture's pattern of experience, it is felt to be more "permanent" than the comparatively ephemeral language of everyday business talk. As Walter Ong has noted, such business talk has no means of being preserved in a non-

We need... to reflect more thoroughly upon the communicative force of poetry

literate society and is thus “used up” as soon as its immediate, practical function has been performed. The felt “permanence” and memorability of epideictic, by contrast, give it a cultural presence, or prominence, that the more ephemeral pragmatic genres lack (40).

The practicality of Walker’s study, the sheer range of his preoccupations with language and his sympathy for the roots of discourse, enables him to present a cogent, though complex, argument for the transformation of formal language.

Perhaps most radically perceptive and challenging to our received narratives of poetry and rhetoric is Walker’s re-estimation of the lyric and of the enthymeme. While understandings of the lyric have been divisive and controversial for romantic-modern poetry, (for instance, should the lyric express a stable subjectivity or should it be used to subvert dominate ideologies and political paradigms?), Walker offers a provocative and necessary redefinition. Indeed, by reconsidering the function of lyric in relation to the enthymeme, he revives arguments for the contested lyric with energetic and pragmatic possibilities. He “adopt[s] the name of ‘lyric’ for an epideictic ‘speech’ composed in verse and meant typically to be performed in ritual, festal, symposiastic, or paideutic settings.”

Walker gives us a transpersonal view of the lyric, opposing this to the self-regarding and self-situated author of lyric sensitivity and consciousness. Lyric poetry “makes arguments” according to this view, and runs counter to romantic-modern notions that perceive the lyric as a “state of feeling” or “subjectivity” (168). While modern critics have been skeptical of this romantic view of the lyric, few have examined it as a means of interrogating specific ideologies because they perceive in the lyric a problem, itself a malignant ideological structure used to “embody a state of subjectivity” (168). Charles Bernstein, for instance, “retain[s] a more or less traditional romantic-modernist suspicion of what [he] calls ‘argument,’ ‘rhetoric,’ and ‘rationalistic expository unity’ as forms of socially constructed false consciousness.” Moreover, this “tends to presuppose an extraordinarily narrow conception of ‘argument’ as something like formal syllogistic or ‘scientific’ reasoning” (169). And “this is a rhetoric,” Walker continues, “that can only tell the knowing what they know already,

or remind them, or reinforce their commitment to the already known by re-presenting it in new and varied forms: a rhetoric that, in short, cannot in fact provoke any real ‘insight’ whatsoever” (169).

Language Poetry, for Walker, reformulates in innovative ways what is already known rather than presenting new arguments to broad audiences. To be fair, this is not a problem only with Bernstein and Language poetry, nor is Bernstein’s poetics so narrowly and rigidly constituted. Instead, this is more broadly a limitation of romantic-modern poetry, most notably in the epic works of Pound, Williams, and others. Against this, Walker proposes an argumentative relationship to the lyric for poetry, so that it can indeed focus its questions and claims to retrieve knowledge and present it to others who may not already be among its persuaded disciples.

Walker proposes the enthymeme as an answer to this dilemma. He is careful to reconsider the rhetorical understanding and reception of the term from Aristotle, noting, in particular, how the Toulminesque syllogistic model for it is inaccurate. Instead, Walker prefers an etymological evaluation: “from en and thymos, ‘in heart’” (171). The enthymeme is an elliptical form of argumentation depending on shared assumptions, involv[ing] a dialogic, cocreative relationship between the audience and rhetor, in which the audience engages in a kind of ‘self-persuasion’ by completing or constructing for itself the tacit, elided aspects of the enthymeme (170).

Moreover, it “is not a ‘device’ that has been ‘invented’ by rhetoricians, or by Aristotle, any more than ‘metaphor’ is; it is an everyday discursive practice, an existing feature of human behavior, that rhetoricians can attempt to name and describe” (172). The enthymeme’s “power lies in its use of emotively significant oppositions” (178) and it “also relies on a basic, intuitive capacity in human beings for deriving inferences and forming judgments...or, more precisely, from relationships between the various kinds of mental representations and physiological states that can act as ‘premises’ within the psyches, in particular those that act with greatest force, energy, or ‘presence’ at the moment of decision” (183). It “will generally not be perceivable, memorable, or energetically operative in an audience’s consciousness, unless given specific

form...” (183).

In other words, the lyric does not need to be interrogated as a pejorative element of poetry, nor does it need to be subverted to show readers how they are being manipulated by it. For the ancients, it was a tool, to be used to persuade an audience. It could take many forms, but it was never a simple, reductive representation of stable subjectivity. What’s at stake, it seems to me, is a consideration of the lyric as a dynamic force, not a static self-projection nor a formal “device” removed from its rhetorical use.

Of course, many poets today use the lyric as a tool for argumentation. Kent Johnson’s socially critical projects use ancient models of the lyric to advance provocative cultural critiques within a broader popular context. Edward Sanders’ *America: A History in Verse* uses a down home lyric force (with considerable ancient scramblings) committed to the revision of American social history. Lorenzo Thomas’s *Dancing On Main Street* (Coffee House 2004) combined barbed lyric insight with socially poignant critical positions to make arguments for diverse audiences. His sensitivity to the transpersonal use of the lyric allowed him to create instruments of measurement and presentation in his claims for public justice and private vision. Fanny Howe projects her lyric craft with “psychagogic eloquence” to bring readers into reception of her psycho-religious claims. Tom Clark registers the pathos of individual action in a world that is largely indifferent to its human occupants. And there are others of course who approach the question of audience with instrumental uses of the lyric as a tool rather than a self-indulgent extension of personality to make their work essential to our moment. And behind this, the history of post-war writing from Jack Kerouac and the Beats to Frank O’Hara and the New York School (as well as so many others) provides models of a native lyric intelligence that is transpersonal and motivated by a complex range of situations—political, social, and personal. We need, however, to reflect more thoroughly upon the communicative force of poetry, and to understand its value in the world. If the nature of experience is to be tested, the lyric is our means of relating that measure.

*Dale Smith publishes Skanky Possum Books with Hoa Nguyen. American Rambler (Thorpe Springs 2000) and The Flood & The Garden (First Intensity 2002) are available through SPD.*

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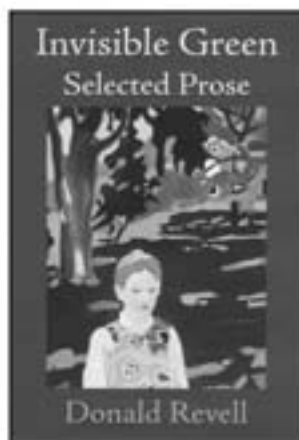


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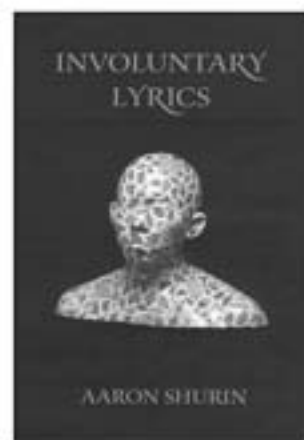
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# BOOK REVIEWS

TED BERRIGAN

*THE COLLECTED POEMS OF TED BERRIGAN*

University of California Press / 2005

Nola Burger, the designer of *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan* should get some sort of award for designing the most friendly-looking 750 page book I've ever seen. Most of the collected poems on my shelves have the taint of the library about them— a good example of this phenomenon being *The Collected Poems of Paul Blackburn*, which, while being a fine example of diligent and scholarly editing, seems to entomb Blackburn in a crowded and sober format that is at odds with the poet's wit and offhand brilliance.

What *does* account for the mysterious concept of a poet's "reputation?" Harold Bloom may think it's the task of the scholar and critic, but this might simply be an academic's attempt to claim a stake much greater than their actual role. In the end, it is poets reading other poets and then participating in the underground economy of talking and writing that establishes a poet's position within the active literary culture. Poets as diverse as Neidecker, Bronk, Oppen, Guest, Zukofsky and Schuyler owe their reputations to poets, often a single poet, who cared enough about the work to advocate, edit, publish and polemicize. The scholars who later arrive are akin to colonialists who civilize the landscapes that explorers cut trails through.

Ted Berrigan was one of those poets who fought for the "lives" of poets he cared about. He cajoled poems from the ever-reticent Edwin Denby and devoted an entire issue of "C" magazine to his work. In conversation and in the classroom, he advocated for poets as diverse as Philip Whalen, Tom Raworth, Joe Ceravolo and F.T. Prince.

In Berrigan's lifetime, there were no critics or scholars I'm aware of that wrote about him in either a favorable or critical manner. John Ashbery's positive review of *The Sonnets* appears to have been suppressed by *The New York Times Book Review*. His important collection *So Going Around Cities* was ignored by that same Book Review. Berrigan's exclusion from the failed revision of the *New American Poetry*, *The Post Moderns* created something of a scandal at the time among poets.

The continuity of Berrigan's work for the last 23 years has been the work of family, friends and a new generation of poets who came upon the work and found in it a voice that connected to the current moment. Late work was published by Leslie Scalapino's O Press. Ed Foster's Talisman House published a collection of talks. Anne Waldman put together the homage *Nice To See You*. Useful memoirs were written by Tom Clark and Ron Padgett, and Aram Saroyan edited a *Selected Poems* which made Berrigan's work available again to a new generation of writers.

*The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan*, which is the culmination of that process of keeping Berrigan's work available, is a terrific achievement. Edited by his widow, the remarkable poet Alice Notley, in collaboration with their poet sons Anselm and Edmund, the book aims to be both writerly and readerly and manages both tasks

rather nicely. The ins and outs of Berrigan's publishing career are deftly handled and the scholarly apparatus sheds fascinating information for even this longtime reader of the poet.

Notley made a wise choice in organizing this collection as "sort of" Collected Books. As the editor notes: "though Ted wrote sequences and constructed books, he didn't produce a linear succession of discrete tidy volumes." As anyone who attended his readings were aware, he was just as likely to read a poem written a week before as he was a poem written in the early 60s. The sobering thought is that, despite the book's heft, we are dealing with a writing career that existed for only 25 years, as opposed to the half-century of poetry contained in Kenneth Koch's recent collected opus.

There is a hefty amount of uncollected and fugitive pieces collected, plus a few earlier pieces that help set the stage for his master poem *The Sonnets*. The "major" inclusion in this volume is *Easter Monday*, a sequence which Berrigan finalized shortly before his death. Although most of the poems had already appeared in print and are familiar to readers of his work, Berrigan saw this sequence as a major statement. In a reading I attended at an Alice Notley workshop in 1980, he noted that the title alluded to his marriage to Alice Notley and the start of a new family — I recall him saying something about "what happens the day after the resurrection?" A bigger-picture question that Berrigan preferred over the issue of what's with a glowing, formerly dead guy who probably had a thing against drug use and modern art.

Many of Ted's old friends who attended the packed reading celebrating the collected's publication were touched by the crowd of younger people who were in attendance. Perhaps young writers can identify with lines like: "It was gloomy being broke today, and baffled / in love. Love, why do you always take my heart away?" ("For You"). Or maybe it's the insouciance and audacity of poems like "Ass-face" ("This is the only language you understand, Ass-Face!") that offer up a dose of courage syrup to writers wondering *can I say that?*

In a larger sense, the genius and appeal of Berrigan's work is a supreme example in poetry of what film critic/artist Manny Farber calls "Termite Art" in his 1962 essay *White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art*. You're probably all too familiar with White Elephant Art: Steven Spielberg films, Meryl Streep, Bruce Springsteen, i.e., "a yawning production of overripe technique shrieking with preciosity, fame, ambition." You know, *Great Art*.

Sadly, a lot of American poetry is a herd of White Elephants. Much of what Ron Silliman calls the "School of Quietude." Big shiny edifices like James Merrill's "The Changing Lights At Sandover." Galway Kinnell. Anne Carson. Thalia Field. Berrigan, on the other hand, had little use for *vers elephant blanc*. While visiting poet Ed Foster, he put his hands over the last two lines of a Richard Wilbur sonnet, refusing to read the envoy. He declared that the poem ended at the 12th line and Wilbur filled out the last two lines for the sake of an assumed need for symmetry.

According to Farber, "Good work usually arises usually arises



where the creators... seem to have no ambitions towards gilt culture but are involved in a kind of squandering-beaverish endeavor that isn't anywhere or for anything. A peculiar fact about termite-tapeworm-fungus-moss art is that it goes always forward eating its own boundaries, and, likely as not, leaves nothing in its path other than signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity."

Berrigan, through his often gleeful use of assemblage, writing games, samplings, mash-ups, rewrites, borrowings (from both the Greats of the Past and the Poet Down The Block), imitations and juice from his own personal verse factory became an American original. Despite shallow readings by critics like Marjorie Perloff who dismissed him as a faux Frank O' Hara, there are elements of Berrigan's art that transcend his masters. His undramatic use of the quotidian is unprecedented in American poetry. What infuriated his more socially conservative readers about the mention of "pills" and "give yourself the needle" was the casual, unapologetic, non-confessional manner in which these statements were uttered.

Berrigan's friendly tone, and an intentional and strategic use of sentimentality, distinguishes him from mentors like O'Hara, Schuyler and Whalen, who always have a touch of elitism and "the smartest kid in the class" about their works. Berrigan was a poet of the working-class and, particularly, of working-class communities. He was class-conscious, but not in the sense of a socialist poet like Thomas McGrath. With a dual sense of irony and reality, he sometimes described himself as a smalltime capitalist entrepreneur, with poetry as his stock in trade. On other occasions he'd declare: "I'd love to sell out, the trouble is—I have nothing to sell."

So, the standard Berrigan is here—from a high class university press (no less) that also houses fellow travelers Olson and Creeley—not bad for a poet whose first and last publication were mimeo books. "Everything turns into writing" Berrigan repeated over and over in *The Sonnets*. And in 634 pages of poetry, that phrase is realized in every possible permutation. Berrigan's work precisely realizes Kenneth Burke's definition of literature: "Equipment for living."

Joel Lewis is New Jersey's Unofficial Poetry Goodwill Ambassador. His most recent book is *The Tasks Of The Youth Leagues*.

## EMILY XYZ

### **THE EMILY XYZ SONGBOOK: POEMS FOR TWO VOICES BY EMILY XYZ Rattapallax Press / 2005**

// *Hi it's me, Emily XYZ, the X is for ex-junkie, the Y is for yes, Z equals the unknown* // this explosive little signifier appears at the end of "Matt Kahn's Email." In *The Emily XYZ Songbook* published by Rattapallax Press, America (disguised as Dialogue) shows up wearing leather-jacket and pumps, reaching out from fingertip Kama Sutra to two voices, in a combination of the written and the spoken which fuses a jolt into poetry's membrane.

Her well-traveled biographic pieces about Frank Sinatra // *Your information stinks lady, broads always think they know best, right?* // and Jimmy Page // *He said, All you gotta do is say my name and your wishes will come true, Jimmy Page, Jimmy Page, Jimmy Page, Jimmy Page*

// intermingle the populist with the tragic, bringing desire and truth to the same shaky footing.

I toured with Emily XYZ as part of the poetry collective *Nuyorican Poets Cafe Live* back in the heyday of spoken word...or rather, one heyday, figuring there's a rebirth every few years. With dead-on timing and raw rock and roll energy, Emily and her vocal partner Myers Bartlett, a performer whose mellifluous, expansive voice is in perfect harmony with Emily's grounded, piercing tone, would work as one instrument, debating, call and responding, attacking, embellishing and navigating language through meaning and sound at its core, converting legions and groupies in the process...one of whom decided to drop out of school and move to NYC from Virginia so he could become a poet. That didn't work out.

Bigger than a poetry book, smaller than a canon, *The Emily XYZ Songbook's* large user-friendly pages make it easy to "sing" along with the CD or practice on your own. Her interest in two-voiced pieces, developed from church litanies and loud nightclubs (the secular at its extremes), are covered in the book's introduction, along with syllable stress and breath, giving us a brief primer on performance. Each poem is also followed by notes on either its history or some performance tips...Contemporary Poetry classes should have this book as required reading/listening. The music was written and produced by her husband, composer and musician Virgil Moorefield, who created electronically-charged music in symbiotic relationship with the text. The dense compositions mirror the density of the poems. Hieronymous Bosch meets Robert Ashley meets The Ramones updated through the XYZ-scope.

During the bravura climax of "Slot Machine," both voices evolve from protagonist to machine in a brilliant cascade of polyphonics // *orange-cherry-lemon, orange-cherry-lemon, cherry-cherry-lemon, cherry-cherry-lemon, orange-cherry-blank*, etc // the wheels roll and we're seduced into the outcome, waiting for the payoff in an experiential Futurist utopia called Vegas.

Emily is acutely aware that voice follows body after body follows sound – free your ass and your poem will follow // *A person is only a case, a holder for all manner of things, a random arrangement of idiocy and glory* // "Sinatra Walks In." Hearing is the last of our senses to leave, the first one to arrive, the first and last sensation our body allows – a primal connection understood by shamans, like Cecilia Vicuña, an expert transformer of the listening air, and Robert Creeley, whose line breaks transform space into breath.

The shaman is in full-effect during "Possession," a kinetic tour de force which hypnotizes while repelling the funky-up density of friction spanked into meaning. A drone underneath the rhythmic attack functions as an ocean swell over which the various states of possession are laid bare. Whereas "She Promised Me" hovers as a dark heart over an all-knowing trust of evil // *Feed me daddy feed me seeds daddy, feed me stars* // an epic drama of victimization, violence and city life that revels in its creepiness // *When death closed in, he closed in on death* // Moorefield paints a soundscape of long notes drawn over a minimal noir setting // *light of a strange moon rising over an open road* // echoing the chilling narrative as it unfolds // *and how do you keep a woman like that, and how do you keep a woman, and how do you keep a woman like that from fucking you up* //.

# BOOK REVIEWS

The mantra, “Syd Barrett Part 2,” recorded accapella with guest Tracie Morris, is one of the purest statements of artistic empowerment I’ve heard // *If they don’t get it, if they don’t get it, if they don’t get it, if they don’t get it, it’s alright, it’s alright, it’s alright, it’s alright* // countered by // *don’t-be-scared-to-blow-your-own-mind* // anyone whose work has ever been doubted will memorize this prayer.

XYZ’s existential vision enters an intricate mandala of layered text which sonically allows a palimpsest to reveal its chosen experience on every new visit. The book gives us our two columns to follow, our religion to accept or modify, our belief implied as decision, our hierarchy displayed as rank against government. // *When you know what’s best, for the rest, of the world, that’s a sign it’s time, to shut up* // “Bill Of Rights.” From choice to envy, feel to flow, spoken poetry to transcendent possibility, Emily XYZ shakes ignorance into awakening and you, out there, are witness as this review has become sound, this text has become ur-text, a riff off the end of the alphabet. This collection of symbols, a span for readers to experience, for doubters to affirm, for who wants to get it to get.

For alphetogs who dare invent their names as letters, *The Emily XYZ Songbook* is a rimshot into a cantilevered universe. A parallel duality at fire with posture, no mere book or CD but a rope descended from above, a chance for us to grab hold, and climb.

*Edwin Torres’s next collection* Electrobabylist: the popedology of an ambient language *will be published by Atelos Books.*

## JULIE CARR

### MEAD AN EPITHALAMION

University of Georgia Press / 2004

“The leg, a segment only, spins like a moral or a flame.” Julie Carr conducts poetic form as if it were choreography in her “verse novel,” *MEAD An Epithalamion*, winner of the University of Georgia Press’s Contemporary Poetry Series. Carr’s book has the texture of clay, as bodies of words reappear in different shapes. At the same time, it radiates with a clean beauty in the way that words group and regroup, creating alternations in syntax, much as dancers use their bodies to gesture. These words-as-dancers pair off in different combinations to explore the edges of things, formally and thematically. Gesture is a major, if not the key, impulse behind this poetic sensibility.

As opposed to the traditional epithalamion, meant to celebrate a wedding from start to finish, this modern-day epithalamion tracks a marriage in crisis from sun up to sun down. The crisis morphs impressionistically, an approach akin to Spencer’s 365-lined “Epithalamion,” which appears to have been the poetic bud behind this book-length poem. (Hopkin’s “Epithalamion” and Arnold’s “Dover Beach” also contributed).

However, marriage—a particular marriage, or its nature in general—is looked at within the wider context of a “field.” Carr writes, “Time-wrapped my rest is a field now advancing, now remembered. Nowhere appearing to rise up and meet, dissolves again. The rest is here.”

Structurally, the choreography of the book shifts onto several stage sets that recycle throughout. Early on, Carr writes:

What can be added here to suggest development?  
as story makes way for theme, theme for method.

“Problem: what to do with the body,”  
once fed, clothed, put to bed...

Like the pages and pages, thousands upon thousands  
the philosopher filled in the effort to prove something  
could be known because it was invented by the knower.

Later, she writes:

Is it because the self, unable to fully see itself, is unable  
to represent itself?

This duality of self has, of course, its parallel in the marriage between husband and wife. Even as these poems demonstrate Carr’s jeweler’s-like eye as she directs energy, like light, through language, they have another function:

each sentence, each word,  
hides its own finitude—

And, to the husband/lover: “I am a sentence and you a note held. Pocketed and so stuck in the wandering.” Terms resurface to be excavated in a poetical dictionary, accreting understanding for the reader, as well, as the tale proceeds. The patterning of the different stage sets and how they intersect combine as a virtuoso geometric dance. “Leaves turn and children turn out, as do the dancer’s feet.”

Braided in are poems that riff on Spencer, Hopkins, and Arnold. A poem called simply, “Definite/Indefinite,” locates the conflict everpresent in this book. Others, like “Arrow,” and “Doing” makes one think of an abacus, as the words, like beads, slide forward and back. Carr also writes hyperdirectly using concrete images in contrast with her disjunctive realm, images that jut out with a painterly and visceral sensuality.

He zips up his leather tight as an orange peel.  
I put my tongue to the button.

The individual poems do serve as chapters, developing the “plot-line” further; as much fracturing as there is in the syntax of this book, there is a seamless continuity, an organicity that is almost animal-like in its ability to mutate and stay as one.

Musically, the book enacts the refrain “and my eccho ring” in Spencer’s “Epithalamion”: rhythm, alliteration, symmetry, and circling around. As Carr says: “Measure becomes direction.” And: “Rhythm is a powerful component of a tale.” Finally: “Over and over, a kind of rhythmic stubbornness, that, rocking us, like an echo does, let us sleep again, surrounded by cushions of intermittent fulfillment.”

Carr posits three readers: one favors the end, reads for the solution; one rereads the beginning, never to arrive; and one is entranced with the middle, bathes in water unbound, unbroken. I posit the existence of all three simultaneously in the reader of **MEAD**.

*Shira Dentz’s work has appeared or is forthcoming in* Electronic Poetry Review, American Letters & Commentary, Colorado Review, Field, Chelsea, Seneca Review, How2, Painted Bride Quarterly, Web del Sol, *and others.*

CARLA HARRYMAN  
*BABY*

Adventures in Poetry / 2005

“Baby was a modernist. What is the feeling of freedom?”

The probing of attention and its related lexicon is at the core of Carla Harryman’s latest book, *Baby*. This serves another purpose: how objects in a narrative construct the arc around them. The baby at the center of *Baby* serves as a child, but also as the emergence of a new word, and perhaps most interestingly as the word “baby” in a narrative that creates a series of connections around it. In the book, Harryman investigates the point where object status and narrative meet: “As the separation between objects and narrative became less and less obvious, webs of knowledge created stable concepts. These systems took hold in the mind, which reproduced them in variations that indicated an infinity under construction.”

In this conception of narrative, the object of baby creates an infinite web of possible directions in which the narrative can progress, not as the baby progresses in a linear process, but at its conception of potentiality as an object. That potentiality in narrative ties in with the inclusion of the object to begin with; in one section of *Baby*, Harryman writes, “Then you ask yourself why must there be a berry bush in the middle of the lake? And why a swimmer? If you swim for a long time, you will be hungry for the berries. You will look for the berries halfway between the shore and the horizon.” The inclusion of the objects propels the narrative out of a necessity because attention focuses on the object. The asking of these questions examines how certain objects in narrative compel certain actions within the web of possibility: if this

and this object, then these further objects and their requisite actions. This is story logic; if you include a detail it must have a purpose in the narrative arc. If there is a berry bush in middle of the lake, it follows that there must be a swimmer compelled to get to the bush.

Inevitably, because of these same possible connections, *Baby* touches on wonder of the world represented by the sorts of impossible situations that children’s books and comic strips use, in which the child protagonist creates the world around them as they move forward in it. For example, like in *Calvin and Hobbes*, the baby’s best friend and mentor is a tiger. In one section the tiger explains how the forest melted thought balloons inside of it. The idea of captioning reality is never far from the scene; visual images of objects in a comic strip compel the narrative and often tell us more about what is going to happen than the bubbles above characters’ heads. Like Harold of *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, baby creates her own peril by inventing the circumstances for danger: “This is my drawing and I can go where I want, are the thoughts the baby did not express.” Different from Harold however, baby appears unable to draw herself back into bed, safe from harm, in part perhaps because her ruminations have consequence on the narratives of the objects (lives) around her:

“When she reached the surface of the world and faced again the horrific site of the spoiled mountains, she defiled the hitherto unnamable part of the mountain with words from a revelation. With big clumsy baby letters she wrote out the words State Death then sat back on her haunches looking down at her map in grief stricken astonishment as if she were peering into the shroud of her own best impulses.”

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by Reed Bye

Philosophical, precise, always mindful of “quick surprise,” Reed Bye’s poems are quite unlike anyone else’s. Saying that, I think I mean that they are for and about and around everybody else in the poets’ company that has long delighted in their wit and musicality. There are times when their intelligent slapstick is like James Stewart splitting a pill with Alice, then following her down the rabbit hole and proceeding, impeccably, hand in hand, through wondrous narrative territories that go way beyond doctrinaire surrealism in their absolute real-ness. It is a great pleasure to see this substantial, long overdue collection of Reed’s brilliant works in print.

*Anselm Hollo*



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# BOOK REVIEWS

Although a baby, as a real child or burgeoning infantile concept, may not be able to communicate in a normative way to its progenitors, it would be a disservice to assume that the newly born are unaware of the world. Because the baby has no way to give a nuanced description to an adult of its concept of the world, the adult either projects what they think the baby's awareness consists of or views the baby as only receptive instead of perceptive. Harryman may be making the case that the new, or things (children, words, ideas, etc.) that are not fully realized/articulated, are more observant than the mature. A baby hasn't been given the language of description and therefore a filter as to what demands attention and what there is that doesn't have a way to describe it. If the language of attention hasn't been invented for a given phenomenon, an adult will not notice it (in Oscar Wilde's example, no one noticed the London fog until artists created a dialogue to give it attention) but baby has no language, perhaps allowing it to give attention to everything.

*Dustin Williamson wants to have your baby.*

## MARY BURGER

### SONNY

Leon Works Press / 2005

It begins with rabbits, penned, docile, the subject of endless experiments. It begins with a boy, a girl's secret boyhood, "the immateriality of representation." Reading Mary Burger's *Sonny* is like peeping into an old-fashioned picture box, a geometry of images whose juxtapositions create story.

As if a family began with automobile, motorcycle, sports car, sedan.

What first appeared to be a man revealed itself, on closer approach, as a cloud of black flies, hovering in a column solid but indistinct, in fact not so different from a man but with more space between the particles.

I am not the first to think of leaving here. All down the rows wives put dinner on the table.

The simplest device used a trigger mechanism that almost anyone could understand—one ball shot through a barrel and collided with a bigger ball—it was so simple that no one expected it to work. There was no test—the first use was the experiment.

*Sonny* is at once historic and imagined. With each turn of the page, with each tilt of the box, you see: brother, Oppenheimer, a horse, base camp, jumbled equations, "a cocktail with a tiny sun." The nuclear explosion, the book's central core, has no beginning nor end, contained and contaminating from infinite stills of its mushroom cloud. "It was the moment of implosion that we lived for but the aftermath that made it interesting."

*Sonny*, like an atom, is more orbit than mass. Figures of imagina-

tion and history inhabit the book like particles of the same element, moving without touching. The girl never knew her brother. The husband never knew the woman he called his wife. Scientists failed to understand the results of their calculations, after the detonation "the young scientists stone cold sober retching into the bushes."

*Sonny* is not a series of interlinking connections; it is a mosaic of abandoned fragments, of a generation that despises the values of its parents, of parents who stare fixedly and without understanding at a present that denies their past and erases their future, of scientists who wish to take it all back, of a girl whose secret boyhood died along with a horse who followed a path both known and nonexistent.

The writing is beautiful in the way of a well-scrubbed young woman. Unadorned and glowing. The author is and is not this beauty. She is everywhere and nowhere. She is the girl, the boy, the wife, Oppenheimer. She is the great experiment and a witness to its aftermath. Mary Burger has crafted a book which is its own point of view. *Sonny* begins in the past and ends in the past, in between is our future, a future with history and its imperative. "Get up," she said.... "Get up."

The rabbit dies and so it begins, the great experiment: the atomic bomb, family, epistemology, girlhood. The language is fallout, dusting the reader with radioactive ash. After the bomb, nothing was ever the same. After reading *Sonny*, you won't be either.

*Aja Couchois Duncan is an educator and complaint investigator by day and a writer in the brief hour of early morning light.*

## TYEHIMBA JESS

### LEADBELLY

Verse Press / 2005

The problem with the book meets you at the first page.

*the guitar refused to get naked / with haney. he would fumble / up the seams of its hidden croon; / hook, clasp and bodice of each tune.*

What begins, for this reader, as a sinking suspicion is quickly verified to be a major leitmotif: a heavy-handed and persistent reliance on the female body to provide visual (poetical) metaphor for music as a whole and guitars in particular. In the first section, *what kind of soul has man?*, Jess assumes a handful of characters, places and belongings from Huddie Ledbetter's formative years in Louisiana. See the trope continue in the poem *fannin street signifies*,

*i stuff his ears with 1000 bales / of barrelhouse folklore, / plant his tongue in the cunt of song.*

On the next page, in *mistress stella speaks* (Stella being the given name of Leadbelly's guitar),

*you think I'm his property / 'cause he paid cash / to grab me by the neck, / swing me 'cross his knee / and stroke the living song from my hips.*

It's the justification of textual violence against women under the

guise of figurative language that I find strikingly irresponsible and too easy. Yes, the subject matter is culled from the legacy of a man known to possess violence in equivalent measure to brilliance. Regardless of biographical context, riffs like the following, from the poem *home again*, seem disappointingly sophomoric from a poet with such accolades and rising esteem as Jess.

*after it's birthed you whole and fucked you dry. after it's straddled, / rode, and stolen your sense. after your fist has swung brute magic / through bone and then bloomed fingers wide for caress. after you've nearly killed it and gladly killed for it. after it's cunted you / down and kicked you in the cold. // after you've left it tear dropped* *tongue*  
*tom. // -before and after all of this, / the body of woman stands waiting.*

Furthermore, read in its bio-chronological context (poems correlate to an appendix timeline of Leadbelly's life), *the body of woman* represents the body of woman. By this later poem, Jess has collapsed the metaphor and gone forth with describing *it* in literal verse.

Unfortunately, Jess's reduction of the female body diminishes the impact of his more engaging verse dealing with racism. There is the well-crafted breakdown of "ethnographer"/song-catcher John Lomax's field notes that makes up the section, *you don't know my*

*mind*. The crux of Jess's work on this project appears most powerfully in exactly that sentiment; in the handling by subject-poet of the immense disjunct between the experiences and the consciousnesses of black America and white America as dramatized here by Leadbelly and Lomax. Take for example the sparring lines of inversed understanding from the following poem:

*leadbelly v. lomax:  
 song hunting, 1934*

*hollers cradling shotgun shells- blasting a way beyond pain,  
 all that crimson stuffed so far into the womb of blood-song,  
 down our tunnels of throat to that place of smoke azure hope,  
 where it forgets its true colors of ebony and tan and black  
 on the way up, bends itself blue as mississippi tides:*

Jess's reference sources for information and borrowed language extend from biographies, interviews, lyrics, court records, correspondence, contracts and recordings. The legend of Leadbelly, "The King of the Twelve String Guitar" occurs somewhere beyond this amalgamation of data. The book doesn't proffer to debunk the mythology so much as it *pushes the dirt / of truth beneath myth's fertile topsoil*.

*Corrine Fitzpatrick is the Program Assistant at the Poetry Project and writes poems too.*

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