

What We Talk About When We Talk About Negative Attachment

STEVEN SCHWARTZ

HERE I AM:

Eating lunch at the Yellow Submarine. It's a sandwich shop run by Frank, who has long gray hair and still uses expressions like "far out" and "outta sight" but makes the best subs in town. Yes, it's a funky little place—how else can I describe it? The unvarying menu is writ large in fading yellow chalk; the scratched brown tables are kept level with shims of paper squares under the legs; and there's a hand-lettered sign in front of the counter that says: "If you get your food in ten minutes or less it will be a miracle—miracles *do* happen."

I basically order the same turkey and provolone sandwich every time I come here, which is frequently. This is my big break from writing. I'm on sabbatical and my confidence hangs by a thread. My agent has stopped circulating my novel; it's an interesting function of submitting a manuscript that the lower you go down the chain of places to publish the more attenuated and stringy become the responses: "Dear G. Sorry to say no on the Schwartz manuscript. Thanks." This nine-word answer certainly gets the point across, but one feels like taking the manuscript out back, roping it to a tree, and shooting it with a .45, as one woman I knew in graduate school did with her novel. Or obsessively trying to find some significance in the editor's use of the word "no." Why not "decline" or "pass" or "return"? Parsing the rejection for the slightest hint of any deeper meaning takes me back to when I first started writing and receiving rejections, looking for validation in an editor's rare personal response scribbled at the bottom of a

form letter. Have I regressed that far? After four books, could I really be back to this same grubby, scrounging, desperate place of needing a spare word of approval? On the other hand, that's it? I mean, here's a four-hundred page novel that took three years to write and show's more than a little skill and it's passed off in *nine words*.

By a thread.

You have to be careful what you say. Complaining about the business of writing often comes down to why you and not me—if you're talking to more successful writer friends. You've done it yourself: tried to reassure those friends whose novels have been turned down that they just had to hang in there or, more to the point, that it was the writing and only the writing that counted. The Act. But of course you could say that with confidence because you were doing well at the time: you were selling your books to major houses; you were publishing in and being solicited by magazines; you were being invited to participate in conferences, give readings, judge contests. Now that it's dried up and the phone doesn't ring, you know how false your reassurances sound. You remember a story a colleague told you once about his interviewing Isaac Bashevis Singer. Your colleague did the interview at Singer's apartment in New York. The phone interrupted them constantly. Finally, your colleague, known for his directness, said, "Mr. Singer, why don't you just turn your phone off until we're finished?"

Singer leaned forward and raised an eyebrow at your colleague. "Young man," he said, "I can remember when they didn't call."

Frank delivers my sandwich in its red plastic basket lined with wax paper. His eyes have the crinkles and creases of permanent mirth scratched there from the sixties or maybe it's from nearly three decades of having his face steamed while cooking onions on the grill. "You doing good, man?" he asks.

"Real good, Frank."

"How's the writing?"

"Unbelievable," I say.

"When's the new book coming out?"

"Well . . ." and then I see the speedy look in Frank's eye. Just tell him so he can get back to making cheese steaks. He doesn't want to hear the whole spiel about the corporate cannibalizing of publishing these days, how your editor moved to a more commercial house, how your last book didn't sell well and that this is book number five and publishers don't see it "breaking you out," which sounds like escaping from jail, or how you're really not doing anything so wah-wah pedal fantastic in style that a more experimental press would be interested in you, and oh, god, you're confessing every miserable defensive excuse to him . . .

"Any day," I lie, and say, under my breath, "I hope."

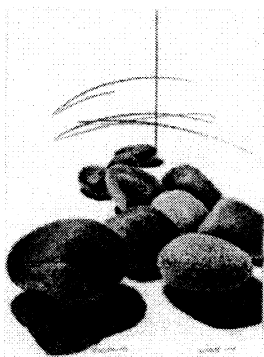
"Cool," Frank says.

The nausea of feeling the loser stirs in your stomach with the first bite of your sandwich. Your daughter's jingle, popular with ten-year-olds, cues up in your head: *loser, loser, double-loser, as if, whatever, get the picture . . .* Say what you will about market forces, about corporate-driven publishers, about trendy books and their

New Title
from
Final Thursday Press

Kyrie

poems by Jonathan Stull



Kyrie

poems by Jonathan Stull

ISBN: 0-9742764-1-3

\$6.00 + \$0.95 S & H

ALSO AVAILABLE

Ghost Wars

poems by Vince Gotera

WINNER OF THE 2004 GLOBAL
FILIPINO LITERARY AWARD

ISBN: 09742764-0-5

\$5.00 + \$0.95 S & H

FTP
Final Thursday Press

Final Thursday Press
815 State St.
Cedar Falls, IA 50613
geocities.com/finalthursdaypress

knockoffs: if you were only the currently popular ethnicity, say, Indian (either kind), or writing about a single, urban, thirty-year-old female, wickedly observant and sexually self-deprecating, or a saga about the sea, civil war, or five generations of an Irish family, or happened to be so haute postmodern lingual you were put on the publisher's list as this year's literary curio . . . think of all the reasons *why* you've unfairly and cynically been overlooked and rejected, and then remember the famous (not until he was dead, however) writer who upon the successive failures of his five books came back one cold dark evening to his drafty garret and proceeded to spend hours moving his lone chair in a circle one degree at a time, trying to find the exact angle, that is, explanation, for his troubles.

One day . . . one day when Oprah finds your book in the library's discard bin you'll be redeemed. You won't have a single shred of reservation about whether you're too literary for her; you'll fall to your knees and bathe her feet for rescuing you from your decline; and indeed don't you, yes admit it, don't you sometimes let your fantasies slip so far that you're actually *thanking* Oprah (your lips move in bed during insomnia bouts) when she calls to inform you that your book, which she's holding at that very moment against her heart, is brilliantly, lucidly, profoundly (her adverbs gush forth) intoxicatingly *true* . . . When what it all comes down to is that you have just agreed with your agent that your (yawn) novel, having made the rounds, should be shelved.

"Take care, Frank," I say, on my way out.

Frank nods at me behind the counter. "Later, man," he says.

YOU WAIT FOR OPRAH'S CALL. WITH some good reason. Your friend B. has hand-carried your latest novel to Oprah. Here's how it happens. One afternoon you're looking through *Redbook* because you have a story in there. Oprah is on the cover. You glance at your story, see that they've altered the title from "Perfect Child" to "The Accident that Changed Everything," and do not read any further. Although it's well-written

enough, you know too it's one of your lighter stories, and you hope no one will actually read it, though the irony is that more people will see this story—the magazine has a circulation of three million—and you will get paid better for it than all of your other so-called literary stories combined. You think exponentially for a moment—entire zip codes of Cleveland, Houston, and Bismarck will have a crack at it. Newsstands in airports will stack copies twenty deep. Waiting rooms in doctor offices will shelter some piece of you, albeit with germs. This dwelling on numbers leads you to study Oprah's picture closely. No one has numbers like Oprah. Your last book has sold so poorly your publisher has decided not to do a paperback. Soon your publisher will drop you all together, but you don't know this yet. You only know that the picture of Oprah in *Redbook* standing at her office desk shows her bookcase in the background, and there, just in the upper left corner of the photograph, out of focus and barely discernable on the top shelf, sits your friend B.'s novel.

You call B. He rushes out to buy a copy of the *Redbook* issue. He calls back in an hour and tells you that it is indeed his book. You both wonder what this means. You talk several times over the next couple of weeks. At one point, while commiserating about your lackluster careers—his publisher has dropped him too and he is trying to write a mystery under a pseudonym because his agent has told him that after six books and mediocre sales his name works against him—you both make a pledge: if either one of you gets chosen for Oprah, you will bring the other's novel with you. You laugh about this because neither of you expect anything to happen. B.'s novel has been out of print for almost eight years. It may be on her shelf, but it has probably been there forever.

A year later, you discover that his novel is Oprah's new book club pick. You call B. He was about to call you but didn't want to appear to gloat. You say you would never think that, and it's true—you couldn't ask for a more generous and loyal writer friend. He has not forgotten The Pledge.

He calls you two weeks later after the show has been taped. He brought your novel with him and gave it to Oprah's most senior producer. "I told them about our deal," he says.

"You told them that? What did they say?"

"They thought it was really funny."

You become silent. You wonder why he's said this to them. You can't imagine this adds to your book's credibility: *my friend made me promise I'd drag along his book, so here it is, I guess.*

"I also told them it was one of the most gorgeous books I've ever read and they have to read it."

You swell, you kvell (inside), you quietly thank B., you wait.

Four years later you still wait out of habit for the literary lottery to hit in Oprah's now defunct living authors book club.

HERE'S HOW IT BEGINS:

My senior year of college, 1973, at the University of Colorado. I've finally gotten up the gumption to take a creative writing course after trying for years to write stories on my own. The "good" teacher, the one everybody wants, has no room in his class (I wait until the last minute to enroll, scared scared). The other class with a professor named Art Kistner remains wide open. I soon find out why. Our first and only day of class—there are four of us enrolled—he informs us that we won't meet as a group ever again. He'll hold four individual conferences with us during the semester for an hour each time. We're to write four stories. Don't be late handing them in. Goodbye.

No discussions? Exercises? Teaching? It's supposed to be a *class* not an independent study! Any sensible person would go straight to the department chair and demand to be put in another class, the "good" teacher's course. But it doesn't occur to me to do so. Perhaps I'm just relieved that no one besides the teacher will find out I'm a fraud. In any case, I throw myself into the task with a hunger I've never shown another college subject. I've actually been a mediocre writer in my other classes, getting a C in freshman composition from Mr. Rosenberg at Miami of Ohio where I first start off at college. He writes brief

comments such as "Keep trying!" and "Watch out for fragments!" Soon, by spring—it's 1970—we're no longer attending classes because of antiwar protests. We're on strike. No one goes to class anymore, especially after the shootings at Kent State. The first two years of my college career are spent smoking grass, taking LSD, trying to find a steady girlfriend, protesting the war, listening to Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" through large padded earphones and, in my somber moods, wallowing in Simon and Garfunkel's "I Am a Rock." I have little to show for my time and indeed, even after I transfer to the University of Colorado, via a short semester stay at George Washington University trying to "go home again" to the East Coast, I lack direction, have scant investment in school, and fear I will amount to nothing. The war is winding down. I've escaped the draft through a procedural maneuver by putting my low lottery number in during a three-month period when the newspaper says there is a strong chance of no call-ups. The gamble pays off, and I drop down to a much lower priority group. At Colorado, I dutifully complete the course work to fulfill the requirements for a BA in psychology. My chemistry teacher allows me to do a paper on of all things "Compatibility Cycles in Menstruation" to get a C in a course that I am flunking—bless you, sir, bless you wherever you are, I am still grateful—but nothing really catches my interest. Until Arthur Kistner's pathetic excuse for a writing course.

IN RETROSPECT I SEE THAT HAD I TAKEN a different class, with the "good" teacher perhaps, the one everybody begged to get into, I might have given up early—or never gotten started. Though I would like to think I would have persevered through any discouragement, any criticism from teacher or students, any faint praise, I wonder. I wonder if I would have gone on to become a writer if Arthur Kistner hadn't imprinted on me, accurately or not, the words, "You're one of the most talented students I've ever had" (although how many could you have at four students a semester?). The fact of his dour personality, his disregard

Aged by Culture

MARGARET MORGANROTH GULLETTE

"You can't read this ground-breaking book without realizing that 'age could be different.' It will be a more mature country that takes note of so important a voice, giving hope that our culture may yet value wrinkles—the face's road map of experience—accumulated from smiles, tears, and the hard-won wisdom of the body."

Bill Moyers

"Gullette . . . challenges the belief that decline is the truth of aging. . . . Her central ideas and her solutions deserve attention—and the urgency she calls for. Suggest[s] nothing less than a revolution and a resistance movement to defy aging."

Marilyn Gardner,
Christian Science Monitor

"The word 'age' in contemporary parlance often means nothing more than the evaporation of youth and the onset of inevitable, ghastly decay. Gullette . . . is disturbed not just by the reductiveness of this idea, but the 'anomalies in our celebratory age ideology' as well. Her ambitious examination of the forces behind various age norms calls for profound changes in the way we think about age, both socially and culturally."

Publishers Weekly

PAPER \$18.50

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
www.press.uchicago.edu

Johns Hopkins: Poetry and Fiction
John T. Irwin, General Editor

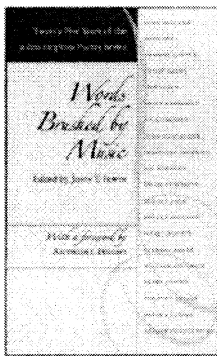
Words Brushed by Music

Twenty-Five Years of the Johns Hopkins Poetry Series
edited by John T. Irwin
with a foreword by Anthony Hecht

Sometimes comic, always moving, these poems reflect the talent of twenty distinctive voices: John Bricuth, John Burt, Thomas Carper, Philip Dacey, Tom Disch, Emily Grosholz,

Vicki Hearne, John Hollander, Josephine Jacobsen, X. J. Kennedy, Charles Martin, Robert Pack, Robert Phillips, Wyatt Prunty, Gibbons Ruark, William Jay Smith, Barry Spacks, Timothy Steele, David St. John, and Adrien Stoutenburg. In this anniversary volume, award-winning poet and critic Anthony Hecht reflects on the state of American poetry today.

\$12.95 paperback



Last Encounter with the Enemy

stories by Greg Johnson

"He rings a hundred changes on the emotional issues with which he deals, keeping them always interesting, always mysterious, changing and evolving before our eyes."

—Pinckney Benedict, *Chicago Tribune Book World*, reviewing a previous volume
\$14.95 paperback



The Johns Hopkins University Press
1-800-537-5487 • www.press.jhu.edu

for ingratiating himself in any way—he impressed me as too indifferent about what anyone thought of him, including deans and the chair, to be falsely praising—made me believe him all the more and draw ridiculous vat-like quantities of motivation that I would live off like whale blubber in the lean times—oh! they were to come soon—filled with discouragement. He seemed so goddamn sure that I could amount to something as a writer, and I rushed straight into the high beams of a future stocked with prizes and fathomless recognition. Exactly what I had craved all my life. He was telling me I would be somebody *and that I had an original voice*. No, he didn't use that phrase. Voice was a term that would come into fashion among writers years later. But I heard my name and the word talent in the same sentence for the first time and every writer I idolized and dreamed of becoming, every hero with words who could make people *pay attention* suddenly seemed—ha ha!—my familiars. And, lest I make this all sound like some reductive psychological means to compensate for a damaged ego riddled with narcissistic wounds—I will get to this later—I thought I might, I just might, create something of beauty. For it was beauty limned by pain, not unlike what I could see at the heart of my family, that I wanted to create. I wanted to find the deepest unhappiness of my life and redeem it with breathless language.

If that wasn't too much to ask.

BUT WAIT. THERE IS SOMETHING ELSE—before Colorado: Woodstock 1969. You are there and you are sitting miserably in the mud surrounded by 450,000 stoned and tripping tribe members and all you can think about is how alone you feel and how alone you feel and how alone . . .

Did I mention I was working a bar mitzvah at the time? Yes, at the Esther Manor. Imagine this: while helicopters land on the hotel's lawn—we are the closest hotel to the concert—delivering medical supplies and equipment for the concert, I'm inside serving brisket to the head table. While Neil Sedaka (he was related to the people who owned the Esther Manor) sings "Calendar Girl" in

person at the bar mitzvah, throngs of bare-chested hippies, including some women, smoking pot and toting backpacks pass by the hotel's front yard on their way to Max Yasgur's farm. And here I am, nineteen years old, my third summer working in the Catskills living out its last years as a vacation destination until the jet-age seventies take over and well-to-do Jews fly off to Aruba and Southern France. I clap my hands when the music speeds up—I want a good tip!—as the bar mitzvah boy leads everyone in the hora on the dance floor.

Meanwhile, my generation, with peace-sign vents of fabric sewed into their elephant bells, coral beads around their necks, Indian cotton hems kissing their ankles, and leather headbands lashed across their flat hair, stop in the hotel to use the bathrooms. They glance queerly at me in my black-satin waiter's jacket and butterfly bow tie as I help Mr. Berkowitz into an adjoining stall. What a juxtaposition between youth and age, tradition and rebellion, and (does it always come back to this?) me and the rest of the world. Years later I will read a poem by David Ignatow that in essence asks why can't I (the speaker) see mountains for what they are rather than as a comment on my life? Yes, this is the making of a writer, the self-conscious observing of every exquisite piece of his non-belonging, witness to his own acutely felt absent presence, oh, hell, just say it: alienation; you will never get over it and that is why your heart thumps so hard it nearly drops out of your chest like a bowling ball when Larry, the waiter whom you know best, introduces you to his sister, who has come up with him because he too is working the bar mitzvah and she wants to go to Woodstock afterward with him. And you.

Let's make it quick. The girl, I'll call her Sharon, although I really don't have a clue if that's it, and you become fast friends. She attends SUNY at New Paltz and is majoring in psychology like you. She's your age and she's Jewish and she has hooded violet eyes that look like excitable planets, unstable with the mysterious promise of sex, and she's brought her own stash. You ask her question after

question—this is your strategy: it puts you at ease to be solicitous of others and increasingly probe until they will turn to you and exclaim, “You know, I *really* feel comfortable talking to you,” though you have hardly said anything about yourself and though you know there is a fine line between making a girl trust you and becoming her therapist, neutering yourself of all sex appeal.

But the strategy is working with Sharon, and at one point (as you’re still riding on the back of a car bumper in the god-knows-where dark of upstate New York headed for this now free event) she puts her head on your shoulder and says how great it is to know you. Larry, sitting on her other side, has rolled the fattest, most preposterous, gozungo-looking joint you have ever seen and passes it to you. And although you know that when you smoke too much of really strong weed you become EXTREMELY self conscious and believe you turn into a turnip with a periscope jutting out of your top and cannot keep track of the conversation and feel OUT OF CONTROL because the causal relationship of words and their contextual sentences become—to mix stoned metaphors—Scrabble pieces in a game of jacks and you grin (or think you are grinning, which is worse) like a large snail davening in a shoebox, you still take a huge hit and agree it is indeed “good shit.”

Somewhere between that moment and when you get to Woodstock and catch Sly and the Family Stone and Janis on stage, Sharon or whomever you have made her in memory, disappears when she runs into friends from New York and so does Larry, your good friend; they vanish forever. You are left alone. Someone passes you a joint. You can barely see the stage. Many years later, after Woodstock has become mythic in its standing as the all-time counter culture happening, and people, younger people, some not even born at the time, including your son, say with awe, “You were at *Woodstock?*” you will tell them, I certainly was—and you will stop saying the movie was better because nobody wants to believe you.

YOU WONDER IF LONELINESS IS A prerequisite to be a writer; maybe it is

a good thing, though you don’t think so since all you can do is pine for a girlfriend. You think it is necessary to suffer, but you cannot settle down long enough to turn your suffering into meaningful experience on the page. You pace and try drinking, but you don’t like liquor, and smoking cigarettes gives you a headache; you have already surrendered two of the greatest consolations to writers in their solitude and you cannot commit suicide until you have published something important enough to make anyone care. You write about characters close to yourself, “from your own experience” and they are all alone too and eventually you admit you are too lonely a person to endure the isolation of writing.

You give up. You switch colleges. You drop out. You switch colleges again. You move to the West. You meet Sally from Iowa your first summer in Colorado. She’s as Midwestern and pleasant as you are East Coast and neurotic. You make a perfect pair. She introduces you to camping. “Be ready at six tomorrow morning,” she tells you. She will swing by your dorm (you have enrolled at the University of Colorado for the summer session) and a group of you will go up to the mountains above Boulder for your first camping trip. You are ready when she comes by. You have packed your bags: two suitcases that your parents took on their honeymoon to Mexico back in 1946. The hard-shell cases, nearly bullet proof, still have their stickers from Acapulco, their gold plated latches worn to a smudged coal color. You look at your fellow campers. They have aluminum-frame backpacks, down sleeping bags, and canteens. “Oh,” you say, laughing, (but not as hard as they are), “it’s *that* kind of camping.” You look at your two Samsonite suitcases containing dress slacks, a travel clock, hardback books, and your toiletries. You see your father stuffing the station wagon for a trip to Canada.

Sally repacks your things in her backpack, your clothes commingling with hers. She is still laughing on the drive up (as are the others) but you feel waves of affection coming from her, not ridicule. She likes you in spite of yourself. Your foibles and intensity

New literature from

Red Hen Press



Dog Woman

poetry by

CHRIS ABANI

“These poems reveal a prodigious imagination, which is enlivened by sardonic wit and an inexhaustible capacity for irony and empathy.”

—Kwame Dawes

112 PAGES • ISBN: 1-888996-82-X • \$14.95

Doors:

A Fiction for Jazz Horn

a novel by

DEENA METZGER

“... the result is a story that will shake the boundaries of what we call reality, what we call fiction, what we call death.”

—Ariel Dorfman



296 PAGES • ISBN: 1-888996-99-4 • \$18.95



Glacier Lily

poetry by

CHUNGMI KIM

“Chungmi Kim’s passion, empathy, and lyric voice bring us diverse communities: from Hollywood to South Central L.A.; from Korea to America.”

—Russell C. Leong

154 PAGES • ISBN: 1-888996-85-4 • \$15.95

Rupture

poetry by

PATRICIA GRAY

“Passion, memory, fancy, desire, loss—all the notes of poetry are clearly audible in the poetry of Patricia Gray.”

—Billy Collins



88 PAGES • ISBN: 1-888996-94-3 • \$12.95



What the Heart Weighs

poetry by

RICHARD BEBAN

“A fresh eye to his cosmos, well tamed, his interior vision and pen are a lovely gift to the reader.”

—Willis Barnstone

112 PAGES • ISBN: 1-888996-48-X • \$14.95

Red Hen Press
P.O. Box 3537
Granada Hills, CA 91394
Phone: (818) 831-0649
orders@redhen.org
http://www.redhen.org



Red Hen titles are available from Small Press Distribution

HARVEST BOOKS

exploring and finding
connections between
environment and
natural spirituality!

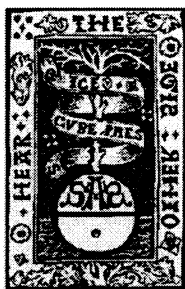


Living With Topsoil
Tending Spirits, Cherishing Land
1-888160-99-3, \$9.95

Living in Iowa reaps stories of our world famous, fabulously fertile topsoil. This book goes down deep, finds Eden, even quests for pears and cabbage. A truly sustaining book.

Featuring new writing by Mary Swander, Cornelia Mutel, Larry Stone, Timothy Fay, Patrick Irelan, Michael Carey and Thomas Dean.

Other Harvest Books include writings by Paul Engle, William Stafford, Robert Dana, Paul Gruchow, James Hearst and others check out our on-line catalog!



ICE CUBE PRESS
"hearing the other side"
since 1993
www.icecubepress.com

have the harmless charge of heat lightning around her. Your rapidity of speech doesn't strike her as coming from the Benihana school of conversation, as one ex-girlfriend has put it. You fire witticisms like tracer bullets above her head and her periwinkle blue eyes track them appreciatively. All is calm, happy, solidly bread basket—her parents own a farm in Iowa and Sally has semi-seductively confessed to you that at fifteen years old she liked to wander way out to the cornfield and strip herself naked.

The next morning, after hiking in five miles—boy, you could really make some headway with those x-ray-proof suitcases if you had them!—you wake up for the first time in your life under the stars. You have zipped your sleeping bags together and slept beside though not yet made love with Sally, and you are in the middle of an aspen grove where the sinuous trunks of the aspens assume the poses of modern dancers and the leaves jingle in the wind like commemorative coins. Sally sits up, pulls off her knit hat, and shakes out her golden hair. Waves of tresses cascade down her back as she turns and looks at you and smiles with such healthful come-hither goodness that you think you will die at the sight of her there in the aspen grove at dawn's light shaking her burgeoning hair loose, her unblemished face framed by endless blue sky.

Sally is only here for the summer session so she returns to Iowa while you stay in Boulder to continue at the university. You make no promises. You have slept with someone else that summer too, Mindy Behrens, a Jewish girl from Long Island who looks as if she could be your sister: dark with deeply set eyes and curly hair and a loose clever mouth. Sally knows about this, but it is 1971 and everybody is supposed to act communal and not be possessive, so she doesn't rag on you, as the saying goes. But you suspect she might be in love with you, the first girl you can say this about. You kiss and hug her goodbye and you cannot get over how much you like the idea of Sally more than the actual experience of Sally—that image of her shaking out her hair in the aspen grove, that au-naturel moment of purity and vice in the cornfield—and this is your first

real clue that for all your plaintive baying to God about wanting a girlfriend who loves you for your deepest parts you are in fact two people: the caring, affectionate, warm man capable of genuine feeling for others, and the withdrawn, critical, inaccessible, moody loner cringing at freely offered intimacy. You are what you hate: your aloneness and self-estrangement; the very love you have always longed for, the unconditional approval, the need to be desired, to touch and be touched, you push away. And when you see tears in Sally's eyes as she leaves to get on her plane, you are less moved than relieved that the relationship has a foreseeable end.

A month later Sally calls and tells you she is pregnant.

"Are you sure?" you ask.

"I had a test," she says, "at the doctor's. It was positive."

"What are you going to do?" You don't like the way this comes out, as if it's her problem—what are you going to do?—but on the other hand you know it's her decision.

"I'm going to have an abortion."

She says this with such decisiveness that you are initially taken aback. Of course it's what you want too, but some small part of you is hurt that one, you have no say, and two, she doesn't want your child.

"I think that's smart," you say.

Everything you say, you realize, will come out stupid, patronizing, or unfeeling because she's mad at you—you hear it in her Midwestern reserve—and because you are offering no real comfort. Indeed, it soon becomes clear why she's even calling you:

"I'm wondering if you could help out." She has to go to New York to have the abortion. There are only three states in 1971 where abortion is legal and of course Iowa is not one of them. Her mother will take her to New York—

"You told your mother?"

"I had to."

"Is . . . is she okay about it?"

"She didn't even know I was having sex. It wasn't the best way to let her know."

"I'm sorry."

She switches back to business: she'll go to New York with her mother.

They have to stay there in a hotel for at least three days. Her parents will pay for the trip and for most of the expenses. Could you possibly pay half for the abortion?

"Of course. Absolutely."

"I'll call you from New York, okay?"

There is no accusation in her voice and you feel guilty, and confused too, because you suddenly want to see her again and have some idea you belong together and don't know whether it's out of remorse or genuine longing. And even as you continue to talk about the details—she's three months pregnant and has had two positive tests and the abortion will require she stay overnight in the hospital, standard procedure at the time—you want to sleep with her again, the male animal knowing no boundaries of respect.

Several weeks later, Sally calls from New York. She has something to tell you. Her voice is low, halting: "I didn't have an abortion."

"What?" You say it too sharply, but you're not prepared for this.

"It's not what you think . . . it turns out I wasn't pregnant, after all."

"Not pregnant?"

"The doctor here . . . he couldn't find any evidence of the baby."

You get stuck on the word "evidence," thinking proof, legal . . . "But you had two tests."

"I know," Sally says. "And they were both positive."

"Did you lose the baby before you got there?"

There's a pause. "I would know if I'd lost a baby," Sally says, with a hint of irritation.

"I'm sorry, Sally, really I am."

"I'm going to send you back your money," she says.

"No, you don't have to do that."

"I am," she says. "This whole thing, dragging my mother to New York, the doctors, calling you . . . it's so humiliating. I feel like a complete fool."

"Don't," you say, "you didn't know. It's something that could happen to anybody."

You leave it at that. You can't help her, you realize, can't give her the support that a lover would, can't offer her anything other than weak palliatives and you wonder how this happened: did she "make" herself

pregnant? Did she unconsciously want something from you by it? Or was it simply a mistake? Two false positives in a row and a missed period adding up to a logical diagnosis. But what you think most is that there was never a baby and that this is somehow more embarrassing than having one aborted. You will remember this over the years: put something out there and don't deliver and you pay the price in shame.

FREUD CLAIMS THAT NO MATTER WHAT we achieve we can never replicate and satisfy the original experience of loss, try as we might to substitute success after success for the lost object of our desire. Original sin, no; original emptiness, sure.

"To feel shame is to experience the self as weak, insignificant, powerless, defective," Sue Erikson Bloland, writes in an essay about her famous father, the psychoanalyst, Erik Erikson, whose own father abandoned him before he was born, and who struggled with lifelong feelings of inadequacy despite his celebrated accomplishments. "This is the narcissistic solution to shame: If I am not lovable for who I am, I will have to make people admire me for what I can do."

Of course, one winds up resenting those people whose love and approval you have to secure for fear of being rejected by them. You have to bargain away much to never be alone. But once you succeed wildly you will choose to be alone because you don't trust the self you are with other people: the contradiction of my life is that I crave what I distrust; I need what I scorn; I want what I can never get; I'm better than I think and never as good as I am; I'm afraid more of annihilation of my worth than I am of physical death.

Take Anne Frank, the most beloved, heroic, and spirited representative of goodness victimized by the holocaust. She records everything in her diary with exacting detail. She writes ceaselessly, not just in her diary but stories that she revises, while starting others as they occur to her, hoping to eventually smuggle them out to editors. She has the instinct of any good writer to fictionalize the names of some of

One of America's
"ten best magazines for
poetry."

Dictionary of Literary Biography
Yearbook 1994



Contributors:

Betty Adcock
A.R. Ammons
Neal Bowers
Joseph Bruchac
Sharon Bryan
Michael Bugeja
Henry Carille
Fred Chappell
David Citino
Philip Dacey
Peter Davidson
Debra Kang Dean
Brendan Galvin
Patricia Goedicke
William Hathaway
Samuel Hazo
Jonathan Holden
Susan Elizabeth Howe
Gray Jacobik
Mark Jarman
Joan La Bombard
Laurence Lieberman
Susan Ludvigson
William Matthews
Frederick Morgan
Michael Mott
Leslie Norris
Naomi Shihab Nye
Jay Parini
A. Poulín, Jr.
Thomas Reiter
Vern Rutsala
Natasha Sajé
Louis Simpson
Richard Simpson
William Stafford
Dabney Stuart
Henry Taylor
William Trowbridge
Ronald Wallace

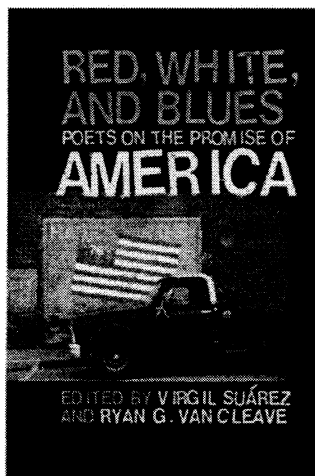
Subscriptions available at \$12 per year, \$20 for two years; individual issues \$6.50. Make checks payable to East Carolina University.

Tar River Poetry
Department of English
East Carolina University
Greenville, NC 27858-4353

RED, WHITE, AND BLUES

Poets on the Promise of America

edited by Virgil Suárez
and Ryan G. Van Cleave



“Once more Virgil Suárez and Ryan Van Cleave give us their astute and timely take on the state of affairs in contemporary America. *Red, White, and Blues* is a rich, readable, and wonderfully rewarding gathering of poetic voices—many of them new, all powerful—singing together in raucous harmony. It is never easy to be a countryman, a citizen, or a poet in this or any other nation; and these particularly vexed days bespeak the need for poets to sing the hard truths again and again, naming each beauty, each brutality, with equal measures of passion, conscience, and clarity.”—David Baker, author of *Changeable Thunder*

CONTRIBUTORS INCLUDE

Fred Chappell · Kelly Cherry
Beth Ann Fennelly · Albert Goldbarth
Lola Haskins · Walt McDonald
Paisley Rekdal · Donald Revell
Gary Soto · Nance Van Winckel
Miller Williams · and many more

246 PAGES · \$19.95 PAPERBACK

IOWA

where great writing begins

University of Iowa Press
www.uiowapress.org

the people she writes about in her diary to give her distance. She notes her own character-like antics with the self-deprecating aplomb of any smart first person narrator: “It’s good that somebody has finally cut me down to size, broken my pride, because I’ve been far too smug.” Her confinement, far from stifling her as a writer, accelerates her development. Everything becomes *material*. She observes without faltering the mundane and the odd, the dramatic and the trying, from the bathroom habits of her fellow inhabitants to the scary rattling one night of the bookcase that secures the opening of the annex to the emotional currents of her parents’ marriage to her own explicit sexual feelings. She shows all the signs and symptoms of being hooked on being a writer, *having* to write and declaring she will do so no matter what, no matter how many rejections she gets for her work. And yet, at the end of the definitive version of her diary, unlike the positive conclusion about humanity in the movie (“In spite of everything, I still believe people are really good at heart.”) her journal stops with the line, “if only there were no other people in the world.” The writer’s irreconcilable predicament: to wish out of existence the very audience whose love you crave.

One night I dream about Sally who loves me so deeply in the dream that I’m near weeping. *Suffused* is the word that comes to mind; I can actually feel another person’s love, a radiance that expands from within and without and stains the tip of every nerve with a pleasure colored deep as a claret. This dream is quickly followed by another of observing many people at tables in a library reading my first novel, but as I get closer I see it only looks like my book, a facsimile, very, very close but not exactly the same, not mine at all, not the real thing.

A CLOSE WRITER FRIEND, C., HAS COME to Denver for a daylong book event at the Tattered Cover. As one of four well-known authors giving presentations, he will talk to an audience of book-group members, ninety-nine percent of them women, about his latest novel, which was a finalist for the National Book Award and has

received almost unanimous critical acclaim (as the expression goes) along with record sales for him. It’s his “breakout” book. Known as a “writer’s writer,” he suddenly has a much larger following, a movie deal in the works, a trip to Paris for the launch of the French edition, a big advance for his next book, over a hundred reviews on Amazon.com, many of them filled with approbations such as “a remarkable book,” “the most luminous prose I’ve ever read,” and fan letters from famous writers.

Later, when asked during the Q&A part of his talk, he will say, yes, he’s working on something new but he finds it harder to write as he gets older. To me, he privately confesses that he’s afraid of “letting people down.” He has a long career of esteemed teaching, frequently quoted and referenced writings on craft, and much admired literary writing—his reputation among literary writers couldn’t be stronger—not to mention a solid and lasting marriage and a son he’s damn proud of. What’s to fear?

Well, everything, of course. “My father,” Erik Erickson’s daughter writes, “continued to feel anxious at the height of his success, uncertain that he could maintain the reputation he had won or that he could write again as well as he had written before. His success rested on gifts that he feared might abandon him. And eventually they did.” And Sinclair Lewis is reputed to have said upon winning the Nobel Prize: “This is the end of me. This is fatal. I cannot live up to it.” Freud in his essay “On Those Wrecked by Success” claims quaking at one’s own success is all due to unconscious fears of beating one’s chief Oedipal rival in order to win the opposite-sex parent. Victoriously arriving at the finish line means running smack into a catastrophic failure of nerve. The momentous guilt churned up by your repressed rage at your competitor parent overcomes your will to succeed resulting in an Oedipal endgame—and self-sabotage of your career, a sports record, etc.

More convincing is the straightforward idea that negative messages get through to keep you forever in place: you weren’t smart, pretty, talented,

polite, caring, motivated, fill-in-the-blank enough; your friends humiliated you; you failed to satisfy your parents' own unfulfilled ambitions; you couldn't make your mother less critical, your father not leave the family; you simply couldn't get off your case. Along comes the big day, the phone call you've been waiting for (Oprah!), the definitive national award, the front-page *Times* review. Even you can't dispute the final verdict as to the truth of your success—it's not a lie, you think! You momentarily feel whole, complete, *done*, and finally get to stop beating yourself up for a while until some inevitable little chink in the armor—the word “unfortunately” that you perhaps stumble across in some obscure mimeographed review of your work—lets in a microbe of doubt and you can start the whole cycle all over again: What We Talk About When We Talk About Negative Attachment.

Later, after the day's events are over, and C. and I wait at the cash register to buy some books, he says, “I could only tell you this, but I think A.'s autograph line was longer than mine.”

We laugh, hoot actually—what miserable ungrateful hopeless insecure jealous narcissists writers are. A., we have learned during the day's presentation, from the publicist who is traveling with her, has sold over four million copies of her books.

“I agree,” I tell him about his line. “It was shorter, much, much shorter,” and I hold two fingers apart, only inches long, dick jokes the lowest-common yardstick of male ambition.

“I adored your book,” a fan says to my friend after we pay for our books. There is near rapture on her face as she tells him in a breathless and close reading of the text how amazing was its structure.

“Thank you,” he says when she finishes, the self-doubt trained out of his voice after years of practice. Later, he tells me that when as a child he used to come home from school his mother would ask him how his day was and then raise the newspaper in front of her face before he could answer. What was the message? I'm not really interested in you? Or: I'm interested but don't tell me anything I can't handle.

Screen yourself, just like this newspaper is doing. Such are the greatest hits of memories in the making of successful narcissists.

IN THE *NEW YORK TIMES*, I READ A lacerating review by Daphne Merkin of a new book by Alice Miller, the guru of answers about the narcissistic wounds of artists. In referring to Miller's most well known book, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, a sort of field manual for those suffering the official DSM diagnosis of compensatory narcissistic personality disorder, Merkin remarks:

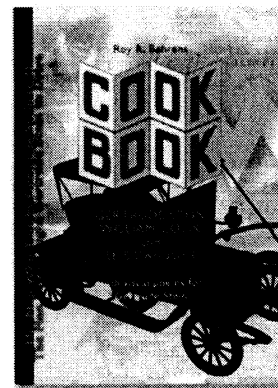
The book's audience in waiting—those desperate overachievers who compensated for early sorrow by fixating on the ‘intoxication of success,’ rather than facing up to their ‘unmet childhood needs’—didn't hurt [sales] either. What self-respecting narcissist of a reader wouldn't want to be a member of a club predicated on a rarefied sort of victim status, in which underlying depression was warded off by ‘increased displays of brilliance’?

One suspects Merkin belongs to this club too but hates herself, as do the rest of us, for having no choice about being “addicted to approval,” a phrase she would no doubt detest too. Nevertheless, I make a note not to let anyone catch me reducing my troubles to such a problem, not wanting a public spanking from the likes of Daphne Merkin: Dear Steve, *Get over it*. Daphne. Then I remember that I have no public judgment to fear (or anticipate), no work forthcoming anywhere, not the short story I recently wrote and that continues to get rejected, not the personal essays I've been sending out including one that received the following comment back from a student editor: “This just isn't very interesting or compelling or *something*.” Just a string of discouraging moments between my mailbox and me. A letter comes today that the writers' colony I applied to for the rest of my sabbatical has turned me down.

Of course there's no such thing as literary equity, no laurels to rest on, no former success you can bottle, no stopping the dialogue between fraudulent hobbyist or real writer, no

COOK BOOK: Gertrude Stein, William Cook and Le Corbusier

by Roy R. Behrens
author of *False Colors:
Art, Design and Modern Camouflage*



Paul Padgett—“This delightful little book is small in size, but very large in concept...It is a high point to me in recent scholarship on Gertrude Stein.”

Guy Davenport—“Cook Book is as good as top-notch Behrens gets.”

Ulla E. Dydo—“[Roy] Behrens' *Cook Book* jumps out at my eyes, my ears. It comes from everywhere, never drags those even blocks of print that dull the mind. Look at it, read it, let it tease you: it's researched with all the care that keeps its sense of humor and its visual and voice delights. Travel with it, leave home, go and explore the many ways for a book to be a house for living.”

ISBN 0-9713244-1-7 • paperbound with dust jacket • 5 x 7 inches • 96 pages • 40 illustrations, with bibliography and visual poems for Gertrude Stein • list price \$17.95 • signed first edition prepublication copies are available now for \$15.00 plus \$2.00 shipping by USPS First Class Mail

TO ORDER, send check or money order (no credit cards) to **Bobolink Books, 2022 X Avenue, Dysart, Iowa 52224**. Add appropriate sales tax if Iowa resident. For shipping rates outside of U.S. or other questions, please contact us by e-mail at <ballast@netins.net>.

ALSO AVAILABLE AT AMAZON.COM
search for book, then click on “new and used”

peace of mind about your slippery identity as a writer that you can never quite snatch hold of for good. Meditation, therapy, anti-depressants, nature, the love of your family, a wonderful cold melon soup, a dark theater with a razor-sharp film noir, a day of teaching when fingertip memory and lucidity help you hit all the high notes, the sight of a blue tang's translucent dorsal fin through your snorkel mask, your first run ever down a black diamond ski slope at the age of fifty . . . these are little canes to rest on along

the way, with no getting around the deathly wonder of what you do: you can't escape it: public, private, interior, exterior, you're a writer; your students think you are, your writer friends think you are, your colleagues, neighbors, and fellow soccer parents think you are, Far-out Frank thinks you are, your occasional fan who writes or calls thinks you are, and funny you are, because inside you can't give it up. You and C. agree that you both will never be happy. Not important. You don't want happiness.

You don't want bubbly optimism. You could be very happy actually in a predictable, upbeat sort of way if you never wrote again. But you want the opposite of unhappiness, which is not happiness at all with its whispered enticement of a final chapter on the Fall of Misery. You want alive and awake, alert and *here*; you want vitality: you choose not to abandon your writing because you must have what's still and what's quickened breathed into your aching being. □

BILLY COLLINS

One Answer to a Frequently Asked Question

I know when the poem is finished,
its goose thoroughly cooked,
when I suddenly feel like a long-term resident
in a small, very exclusive mental hospital
in some desirable place like Big Sur or Dorset, Vermont.

I have spent the morning
writing about fish that become birds
then swim all day from cloud to cloud
and about the arrival of my death in the shape of a triangle.
And now it is time for the attendant

to appear in the doorway and take me for my walk
through the formal gardens, time for him
to lead me past the lush flower beds,
patches of herbs among rocks,
and a sundial where the gravel paths converge.

"What did you do all morning?"
the attendant will ask in a soft voice.
"I finished writing a poem," I will answer
as we pause for a moment to watch a man
on a ladder trimming the tall hedges with a clippers.

KEVIN OBERLIN

Traverse City, July 1984

My father nurses the red crescent cut,
wipes my foot clean of sand, the slick,
organic lake silt a lubricant and balm.
Today I am displeased with sunken things:
ships, submarines, any iron vessel,
rusted-out shafts and sheets of metal
that carelessly litter my uncle's beach.
The other kids push gray sand into mounds,
with gentle palms and fingers smooth shapes
of dolphins and starfish. My cousin marks furrows
for eyes as the waning tide slims
his mermaid's flank, waves licking nearer
her wide nipples. Aunt Ethel sips a tall iced tea
and worries about her children.
At night we go out to fish from the boat
where my father insists I hold a fish by its gills,
the length of my arm, because it came in on my pole.
My mother juggles the camera and I swear
I can feel through the sticky feathers
the tentative outcropping of teeth.