



**Versuche: 26**

**Little Reviews  
[1999-2001]**



These are drafts of reviews I wrote for *Publishers Weekly* during the years stated. My editor allowed me to go long, so I posted some of these on the Buffalo Poetics listserv as “Little Reviews.” I haven’t reread these so can’t state whether or not I stand by these opinions today. I rarely panned a book given the venue and the small press status of a number of these publishers, but I tried to be honest and descriptive. Some of the writing is pretty shoddy, and the style a bit cloying. Merely for the nostalgia trip.

## 1997

### Thomas McGrath, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend: Parts I-IV* (Copper Canyon Press, 1997)

Thomas McGrath was a 36-year old Rhodes Scholar, World War II veteran, accomplished poet, and teacher at Los Angeles State College when he was blacklisted in 1953 for refusing to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. During the next several years, McGrath worked at menial jobs while writing the first part of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, an epic-scale autobiographical poem that would take 30 years to complete. While the poem could be considered “Proustian” in its heroic effort to recover a past from the distance of middle age, McGrath’s hard-earned political insights provide the work with a wrought philosophical frame. This separates it from the belle-lettrism that has marred many American middle-century long poems with their facile displays of learning, narcissistic reminiscences and trivial details culled from “daily living.” McGrath wasn’t unaware of his distance from mainstream literary culture. Posing as an outlaw, he writes that he “held to the hard road/ While Establishment Poets, like bats, in caves with color T.V. / Slept upside down in clusters.” (154) Written several years before the publication of Ginsberg’s Beat milestone *Howl*, *Letter* already recorded, with prophetic tones but through un-Puritanical eyes, “the junky medics, night walking, their ears full of barbs / And the loony preachers, their ears ringing with gunshots / From the suicide farms...” (113) The poem is imbued, however, with an ethical earnestness — not to mention a pure love of family, wives, and friends — that has been long absent from the postmodern equation, providing the missing link between the right wing dogma and politics of a poem like the *Cantos* and the aforementioned chaotic *Howl*. His capacity for evoking images, whether describing vegetables or labor strikes, is often amazing, compacting the wealth of an entire poem in a few lines. He describes, sadistically but lovingly, the appearance of a young girl: “And the daughter, big as all three, with a backside for a face, / With a mouth of guttapercha, with a cast, with a fine / High shining lunacy crossing her horsy eyes.” (81) An atheist since thirteen, he hyperbolically confesses to the Christian flavor of his ethics in Book III, writing: “Yes, I do know sin, / For haven’t I felt the whole universe recoil at my touch?,” echoing at the same time the metaphysics of J. Alfred Prufrock. He then proceeds to parody the entire confessional act with a litany of sins fueled as much by Joycean wordplay as by a sincere belief that he (or someone else) has cheated his fellow man. *Letter* is one of the most readable long poems in the

Pound tradition of personal epics, and yet is complex enough to promise disclosure of many secrets upon rereading. This edition is a literary event that will help secure McGrath a place in the twentieth-century canon.

## 1998

### Wanda Coleman, *Bathwater Wine* (Black Sparrow Press, 1998)

Coleman's seventh book with Black Sparrow is an encyclopedic, moment-by-moment accounting of rage, witness and transcendence that moves agilely from a tragic but comedic resignation — a seductive blues or be-bop style — through fecund rambling hijinks that show off her verbal acuity, through postmodern collage and pastiche mimicking of traditional genres (such as the newspaper account), on to direct, sixties- and rap-inspired in-your-face declarations of resistance and anger. The strong opening sequence, "Dreamwalk," is a poignant, quasi-confessional, free associative account of the author's adolescence: "ugly and more ugly. you are a card carrying / member of the FBI (Fat Black Idiots) and you arrest and / jail them in your mind for crimes against your heart." Later in the sequence, the need to escape inspires a fecund, but suspicious, alternate reality for the young poet: "you become a shadow in pursuit of shadows. you / smoke imaginary imported German fags while sipping / imaginary English sherry barely clad in blood red / silken fantasies while straddling a rattan chair on / the balcony of a Cuban bordello." Primarily a collection of disparate shorter poems, the volume is punctuated by longer sequences. "The Ron Narrative Reconstructions" wavers between poetry and prose, and between modes of rhapsody, philosophical discourse, fiction and documentary, demonstrating in microcosm the range of Coleman's style. It opens with a pastoral couplet — "a half hour before the advance of sun / the red-winged sparrow begins its song" — that invokes an ideal "poetic" setting, but, as if to emphasize the absence of such an organic unity of nature in her native Los Angeles (and in the mode of the pastoral itself), it jarringly cuts to a haunting, very contemporary, set of images: "helicopters whirl around, claim this lesser heaven, wolf-eyed pilots with an infrared snoop, scope for / a collar. coal-colored mountains of thunderhead, gather. there's rumbling in the recesses of distant western / panorama." Matching, and hence countering, the power of the panoptic gaze of the police helicopter (and other forms of technological control, including that of normative syntax), "The Ron Narrative Reconstructions," with their vignettes ("in the midcity laundromat, we two-step to a piped-in salsa..."), wry theoretical musings (a digression on "poetoerotic rape": "the plundering and transmogrification of another's form... a physical release akin to sexual orgasm"), and reliance on the eternal powers of language and the basic need everyone has to be a part of another's life, succeeds in mapping the activity of a poet's mind where the less generous and attentive have failed. The poem is emblematic of the best qualities of this large, somewhat sprawling, formally diverse yet occasionally loose, book of poetry.

## Kenward Elmslie, *Routine Disruptions* (Coffee House Press, 1998)

A selection of poems, prose poems and songs from a writer who started in theatre — his musical “The Glass Harp” was headed for Broadway at the time his first book of poems, “Album,” was published in 1969 — *Routine Disruptions* is a various, campy, never-tiring display of verbal skyrocketers and sweet, soap opera dilemmas. Elmslie, the “baby poet” of the New York School of writers that included John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara, employs the all-embracing urbane surrealism of the former along with the spontaneity and wit and of the latter to create poems infused with the flux of bourgeois vacuity, social marginality, and merciless sexual ambitions: “Twister Bea’s asparagus wobble suffused the maw of August dusk, / rancid from wetsuits, yahoos in spa pools dunked. / [...] Formulaic, yeah, / but the promised porn classics got born again last Ozzie & Harriet day / as virgin surf foam, components a-swirl...” (from “Panopticon for Calamity Winifred”). Other poems attempt a meditative stance, like the title poem which ends “hole, plummet into it, / new universe / exiting freshness and strangeness / the strains don’t apply here / accidentally reborn / head home” suggesting the hurt depths beneath the play. However, Elmslie’s skill lies in his near-paranoic verbal inventiveness — intrusive in some of the “serious” poems — which he is able to let rip in the formally loose songs from his plays, as when he has the character Lavinia Clone sing (from “Schlock ‘n’ Sleaze R&B”): “I’m terrible at games, / Always lose at Parchesi. / Stupid at names. / Saint \_Who\_ of Assisi?” Few poets are able to deserve the attention they crave as Elmslie — he gives narcissism a good name — and few manage to sustain the excess, scale and abundance while remaining so thoroughly poised.

## Robert Fitterman, *Metropolis 1 — 15* (Sun & Moon Press, 1997)

Fitterman mates a certain classic “Objectivist” style (in the manner of George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky) with a hip, contemporary sensibility which borders on the techno-ambient, thus sacrificing some of the angstier concerns of his modernist predecessors for an interest in pure, accessible verbal pleasure. *Metropolis*, an on-going work which should reach 24 sections when completed, is very much a New York poem, filled with the chatter of that city’s highly social scene with the everyday weirdness of an often nomadic life lived deep in the shadows of skyscrapers. The first section, despite its cross-cutting collage style, nearly recalls Breton’s Surrealist masterpiece *Nadja* (itself an homage to a city, Paris) in its roving eye view and the heady, decentered feeling of its urban phantasmagoria: “But grander than that / L’Hotel actually happened / scaffolding in some circles / gone twilight & Lex essences / sipped down subdeveloper more (bestial, residual, / festive red clay livery / homespun depot some yellow western atmospheric glib hog / I was there / but there was no espresso bar / did you \_time\_ this? the connection / between us is sheerly residential / minus crossed our paths are

starred / in an awkward upper west side hey-day” (10). Part of the beauty of Fitterman’s style is that it lets him drop odd, potentially dull stock phrases that one remembers from somewhere (“we got / a situation here” from the police radio in a b-movie, or “lighting fixtures the last word in / chrome” from interior decorator parlance) and puts them in contact with more purely poetic ones (“a lay sky plurals dusk about us,” or the last lines of section 1: “the dead lose / their defenses” followed by the zinger: “that’s been my experience”) hence creating a strange floating sensation that elevates the individual units of the cliché — the chrome, the situation — while not letting the classically poetic moments get precious or sententious. Section 7 is a sort of fake dictionary utilizing many of the formal devices — quotes from literature, dates, abbreviations, etymologies — to create a difficult but familiar surface in which the humor of not quite knowing what a word means combines with a quasi-expose on the mystical nature of words that dictionaries, with their lexical depth psychology, suggest. Like a series of brief portraits of the dreamlife of spoonerisms (later in Metropolis he writes “My favorite opera is Il Trattoria”), section 7 pushes the limit between poetry and goulash syntax: “Fade -[~]^^^ I. droop, wither, a company of hunters, any sawed-off weapon that has lost taste to corrupt, weaken. 1303 \_Syn.\_ neuer gres, ne neuer sall, bot euermore be.. falow, and fade. 2. barber’s term, Life began to vade. 3. shrink. Lit. and \_Fig.\_ OE. \_fadian\_, Wger. ORG. \*\_fadia\_. 4. v.3. \_dial\_. to dance around from town to country. 5. \_Spec. Cornish. A passel of maidens... begin’d for... to fade so friskis.\_” (60) Section 8 is a “libretto” in which several landmark buildings — the World Trade Center, the Flatiron, Rockefeller Center — take part in an orderly but disjunctive choral crown: “FLATIRON: Open up / your heart / and see it / the other way. / What makes / a hat felt?” (70) Other sections use odd word breaks (“loo / ming sud / den a mall / all ang / el & la // ttice at aw / ning’s va / se & sparkl / es pill / ars lewd ac / cusa”) to shimmy grammar back and forth in a flotsam/jetsam manner, and reduced forms like the three word poem (“Life / long / fishcakes”) or other manners of verbal dislocation to create stucco-like surfaces over which the eye roves for meaning, getting hooked there and being let loose elsewhere. It is perhaps useful to compare Fitterman’s technique (which relies very much on arrangement on the page) to that of an abstract painter, like Robert Ryman or Cy Twombly, who deals with single colors (in this case, white) over long stretches of canvas to highlight sculptural surface play; in such works, the “white space” becomes more than a unit of composition and dominates the terms of engagement, such that attention is turned to the minor things — paint flecks, the chiaroscuro effects of small shadows — so that the art is both “busy” and calming, but in any case not making huge, impenetrable philosophical gestures. Fitterman’s sensual relationship to words — in both sound and color — and his light touch makes reading Metropolis a uniquely satisfying aesthetic experience.

## Barbara Jordan, *Trace Elements* (Penguin, 1998)

Barbara Jordan’s *Trace Elements* is an often beautiful, often frustrating book of poems. Winner of the Barnard Women Poets Prize with her first book of poems, *Channel*

(Beacon, 1990), Jordan constructs shimmering, translucent lyrics that proceed with an even pace through a rhetoric that is neither stentorian, nor entirely distant from the more grandiose tones of one of her predecessors, Wallace Stevens. Her affinities with Stevens are many — “two sparrows / in a lilac bush: my consciousness / a replica of what I see, / my silence, an usher’s,” she writes in “Common Ephemeral,” suggesting both the permutations of his famous mental aviary and the Barnum-esque, ringleader quality of his authorial self-positioning. However, Jordan keeps word-play at a minimum, choosing a more unproblematic relationship to language. Consequently, this renders her various theories of the self as “reflections” or “a replica” problematic, and her tours through the world of objects — she loves lists, but many of them seem the products of equations rather than the randomness she hopes to suggest — walks down well-known streets. In “Threshold,” an otherwise beautiful landscape poem that begins “How the day turns in the angular woods. / Not a gust. / A gold, fastidious light slides waist-deep / and ascends...” she loses the reader’s confidence with a rather clichéd (and Stevensian) philosophical maxim: “I think our minds hold nothing but this world / reflected.” In this way her transcendentalism seems ornamental, a feature added on to give spark to her gift for description. Her failure to appreciate her strengths as a writer mars a poem like “Urban Setting,” which contains strong lines (“Bacon’s portrait of Blake, / his features drawn like silk over pearskin, / the petulance of his death mask, composed / in a sea of black”), but generally lacks body, and ends with a sentimentalized anguish that is just strong enough to sink the ship: “and pain is far away, it is my satellite.” There are several poems in *Trace Elements* that are beyond reproach: an *ars poetica* called “This Poem,” the short lyric “Bud,” and the long final poem called “Ammonites,” in the third part of which both imagistic detail and historical consciousness attain a thematic unity like nowhere else in the book. Yet one wonders if Jordan’s hitch with the transcendental, both in theme and vocabulary (which includes a flirtation with semiotic jargon — language theory lite) is more trendiness than an overflow of mystical enlightenment.

## Myung Mi Kim, *Dura* (Chax, 1998)

Kim’s third collection — *Under Flag* (1992) and *The Bounty* (1996) are her previous two — continues her passionate, formally investigative cataloguing of the pervasive effects of colonialism, war, and rampant capital in the domestic and public spheres. While foregoing the genres of fiction and journalism to record this morally arid landscape, she engages the reader in the act of re-witnessing these chains of insights that render one without a narrative of rebellion, but which create a forum in which meaning, being reformed by the reader him- or herself, empowers and doesn’t — like television or the newspaper — distract. The long middle section, “Thirty and Five Books,” composed of short paragraphs of no longer than a few sentences each, is the most forceful in this engagement: gleanings of horror (“And the unremarkable become the stuff of dust.”), of theorized imaginings of the interconnectivity of politics and economy (“Deployments to the assigned parallel. Sheer volume of river traffic. Ascension, declination and distance

of the measured body”), of subverted pastoral lyricism (“When we stayed together working the fields and went home at dusk and ate together. Mangy birds sing ornate songs”), even extending its reach to a brief liturgy based on a death in the Los Angeles riots of 1993 (“Percussive / In the LA Times the picture was in color / Body moving in circle be fire / What looked like black in the Korean newspaper was my son’s blood / Body moving in circle be fire”). Each sentence resonates with a story: “Unrecognized she went about the city”, a complete paragraph, suggests the alienation themes of early modernism, and it is revised for postcolonial content in the later “\_\_\_\_\_ arrived in America. Bare to trouble and foresworn. Aliens aboard three ships off the coast. \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ clash. Police move in.” Like Whitman, Kim has a panoptic generosity, so that she finds a way to extend her very personal relationship to issues of immigration and cultural severing to include all who have correlative experiences. As she writes in a later section of the book, inspecting the canvas on which she works: “Call ancestry lost / Collapse and valence / Brevity and gesture / House with rooms cut of various sizes / An America as big it is.”

## Sianne Ngai, *Criteria* (O Books, 1998)

“An epigram delays / its form of destination” writes Ngai in “chrono/paradise,” and the poems of *Criteria*, most of which are linked sequences of elliptical, highly alluring philosophical junkets, maintain an aura of millennial catastrophe amidst the suspended silence of unnegotiated guilt. Through such fractured glances at both the totality of a world view and the totality of the sentence, Ngai creates something of a survival guide in the twentieth century’s panoptic technological gaze, and doesn’t fail to amuse with her dry-witted narrativizations of our need to be fragments amidst the observation: “Safety abounds here / blue cars are parked here / optimism still abounds / in chunks / of the globe [the first / year in a year / of testing // whiff then / waft // your mother’s maiden / name is the code.” Her plays on the commonplaces of literary discourse are emboldened by a sharp sense of enjambment: “Meaning collapses on the other side of the all / terrain vehicle...,” she writes, veering from the preciousness that such a linguistically investigative poetics can lead to. Sometimes she seems to turn the lens back on her role as writer attempting to subvert meanings while in the role of determining them, casting herself as the tyrant of dreams: “Lazy large world-compeller / whose prosperity was likely to develop a red crease / in imitation of the superseded / telling children of the dangers of being trapped in anything that closes.” If Ngai sees politics and society as largely a fractured spectacle of clanking existential comedies, the final prose section “My Novel,” with its looping recurring images from Wilkie Collins, turns the “epigrammatic” nature of the first parts into an interior experience, demonstrating by contrast the very meanings that are contained in the prose form even when the sentences are torqued beyond easy assimilation. Liberated discursivity gives her an almost Stevensian feel when describing the nuances of experience: “A flow can be the object of one or several axioms. To prove a poem: a trajectory of the bird’s flight through the yellow forest. Crumbs marking the coordinates

at which the name would descend from under a wing.” Criteria contains all the excitement of a first utopaic reading of theory and philosophy while maintaining a level of fun that gives it a youthful, almost pop edge despite the weight of its learning, and is extraordinary in its restraint, its subtle tonal shifts and its devotion to a fairly extreme mode of poetry.

## Claudia Rankine, *End of the Alphabet* (Grove Press, 1998)

Rankine’s second collection represents a shift from the transparent social concerns of many of the poems in her first award-winning volume *Nothing in Nature is Private*. While *Nothing* deftly explored a community on the outside of “America” through formally conservative modes (poems which, nonetheless, recorded in politicized ways the distinct speech patterns of her native Jamaica), *The End of the Alphabet* contains twelve poem sequences that are more open in construct and narratively indeterminate, and yet, in their detailed mingling of tones and observations, no less precise in their effects and meanings. Like many women poets of her generation, such as Ann Lauterbach and Jorie Graham (though far less hieratic in tone), Rankine has found that the most true form for a poetry of witness is one that questions the very genre of documentary, recognizing text as an untrustworthy window onto reality: “Door opening to green bowl of narcissus [...] she is dreaming the story of recurring commas, / the one that gossips of simple equations, complicated, / solution obstructed — / or hers is a wake claiming delay, piling blemish onto finery?” she writes in “Dirtied Up.” But in this poem the private — “Though you thought you heard, so sure you heard / \_sweetheart” — takes on the tone of the public in its winding down to the issues of choice and agency, translating the feminist concerns of a poet like Adrienne Rich to the level of the micropolitical: “(suspecting only illusion (some vindictive act of mind / even before voice / depressed the edge of the bed, pulling shadow / from beneath / memory spoke from its crushed / throat / corrupting neutrality...)” A radical self-detachment combined with narrative skill gives parts of “Hunger to the Table” a unique philosophic cogency (reminiscent of the early poems of Creeley): “A turned ankle is its own consequence. She hops about, / then caught on the sofa waiting for the swelling to go down / is reminded we move among others to fall from ourselves, / windswept, having a liking for laughter / but the / ridiculousness / of falling off one’s own heels. What / was being viewed from up there?” Yet even this poem ends on note of social urgency, though the play of words doesn’t cease: “Don’t ask to be told x to y in time or eternity. / Passage bleeds between the hammering / breath and flesh. Sweetness mumbled / is the voice nice. Just as the lips open open the eyes.” With a resonant ear and a light imagistic touch — “Faced with its staggering number of runny noses / the day begins...” — along with a rigorous concern for language’s material betrayals — “I arrived unprepared for the lobed, dark- / grayed matter of “wearisome” and cannot weep...” — *The End of the Alphabet* is sure to be as recognized as her first collection and to acquire this young poet a larger audience.



Ed Roberson, *Just In: Word of Navigational Challenges: New and Selected Work*  
(Talisman House, 1998)

Covering work from Roberson's first book, 1970's *When Thy King Is A Boy*, to the recent "work in progress," this volume, as its title suggests, progresses through several modes of poetic address, the early work containing such Prufrockian lines as "and in the countryside the circumstance / adds a spoon of dull explosion to the tea", the middle work spiritual in tone and centered around choruses and iconic drawings ("turn ambiguity / into separation / separation into repetition / repetition into chant / turn / turn" he writes in "Formula for the Poem Dance") and the later work narrative tracings of an chthonic world that lies just below standard, mostly urban, realities. What links Roberson's project together is a persistent belief in the reaches of the meditating mind coupled with a serious critique of political realities, qualities which link him to the main project of Talisman House, which is to uncover poets, like Roberson and previously Stephan Jonas and Gustaf Sobin, who write from an agonistic center that is aware of its social marginality, and who use poetics mostly derived from the Beats and Projective Verse. While Roberson can also be linked to poets like Nathaniel Mackey and Will Alexander in what is an important sub-tradition of African American literature — a sort of maximal, mythic turning-over of social binaries that forgoes an activist rhetoric for musically organized poems and sound-structures, often centered around considerations of art and music — his writing is often lacking in material for the reader to grasp on to, and longer sequences such as the "Aerialist Narrative" don't offer much in terms of ideation, especially when the sentences break into fragments that, in themselves, are ambiguous. The visionary quality is unmistakable and compelling in itself, but meaning remains vague, as the poet suggests it should: "All these voices come out to meet us in this / ancient seeing in the end of distances / this fearing: / the glow of the coming city / on the horizon / is it burning; is this music or screaming / all these voices cast out to talk us in?" The later poems are the most successful, and he returns to the careful sound play and full sentences, using a line suggesting Williams of "Asphodel" to pace his musings. "Flamenco Goyasques" is a perfect short poem: "We all have / women we were born of / We all were dragged out & / lined up against the sky / Know that / Somebody here stood beside you / You put up your hands and you die." "Atmosphere Conditions" anchors Roberson's millennial ramblings to concrete realities, such as the graffiti in subways which he reads as "the great prophecies... / grumbles written on great weakenings / crayon / on great endings / the earth / the rainbow's crash." Without question the epitome of the "outsider" poet, Roberson has much to offer but perhaps only to the reader that is predisposed to mysteries that he writes of, as he doesn't, until his work of the nineties, quite achieve the artistry necessary to evoke them.

Kit Robinson, *Democracy Boulevard*  
(Roof Books, 1998)

Synthesizing influences ranging from the Creeley-esque minimalist lyric (and minimalist art in general) to the experimental poetry of Robinson's main associates, the Language poets, and from the expansiveness of John Ashbery's skids through middle-class consciousness to the dance around the "void" of the French lyric, *Democracy Boulevard* powers through eight sections of poetical investigations into the paradoxes of a radically standard lifestyle ("My normal state / wide grin / mild chagrin / effervescent / way to go / keep it vanilla" he writes in "Stunned Silence") observed from the heights of a postmodern sensibility informed by "High Technology" and "Media Studies", not to mention "The Messianic Trees." The opening prose poem "The Person" introduces the empty vessel of the narrative consciousness that lurks behind the rest of the book: "The person is, as cliché-ridden isomorph, a creature of habit. One has certain convictions, obsessions, eccentricities, stylistic features, indications that set one apart. All this is begging the question, a delay tactic..." This is followed by the meditative poems of "Sense Data", with such playful pieces as "Distribution", a fugal poem lassoed back to its title word once in each line creating a surfaces that critiques as it acquires the depth it is structured to elude. The final poem attains an impressive scale with its collage of humanist terminology with subversions of individual "agency." "The alternating blind alleys of tooting your own horn / and lapsing into dark humors may be avoided by going / straight to the light available in escalating syntax / pronounceable only through sound..." Robinson's skill lies, however, not in the Wagnerian sense overload so much in the water-clear resonance of words in sustained relationship to each other, a skill which comes clear in the later, center-justified poems of the rest of the book. "Nothing gets lost / but stays with us like the fingerprint of a world view" he writes in "Win/ Loss Report" and the extended clashing surface of "You have a flair for / crystal gazing / insufferable / three sheets to the wind / mid-Victorian taco junket / rank lyricism / weasel word at the read..." ("The Messianic Trees"). It is Robinson's ability to put these highly complex syntactical surfaces in contrast to the simplest phrases that distinguishes this book from the writing of his contemporaries, and by this technique he illustrates the shell of capital as it revolves around the suburban life. Though the book suffers from a dulling ticker-tape like rhythm at times, even this rhythm, in the defter moments, substantiates a stable field for *Democracy Boulevard's* troubled meanings. "Baked society / the interstitials / apprehension of the world / bound / in the loose confederation / sweating love beads / of the poem."

Lewis Ellingham, Kevin Killian, Authors, *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance*  
(Wesleyan, 1998)

*Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance* presents the story of one of the most important American poets of the twentieth century, a poet who has

yet to achieve the attention due to him. As this readable and detailed biography makes clear, this obscurity was due to many prominent idiosyncrasies of Spicer's character. He didn't permit his books to be sold outside of San Francisco, for example — especially not in New York, where the poets Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery (author of "Thumb Twees" in Spicer's mocking tongue) reigned. He violently alienated any of his peers who even thought of corrupting their art for fame — which could be achieved in the era of the Beats — and once picketed the premiere of a friend's play when it was turned into a popular musical. Robert Duncan, whom Spicer considered "better" than himself but who had, in his mind, compromised his art for the thrill of power, was a constant source of agony, not least because of Duncan's own psychic — the Berkeley poets would have termed it "magic" — manipulations. Like much of his circle, Spicer was homosexual, and in time his alcoholism, anxieties about his sexuality, blunt criticisms of life and politics, not to mention certain acts like refusing to sign the Loyalty Oath in 1955, got him fired from the sinecures that he needed to provide him stability. Once describing himself as a "dancing ape" (in a poem many consider his most beautiful) Spicer was involved in many love affairs, and the book is enriched with biographical details of these men — the hooligan Tony Aste, the crazed painter Russell Mackenzie, the talented but unfortunately straight Ron Primack. His death came suddenly, but dramatically. Just weeks before leaving California to live in Vancouver, where he had a job as a teacher and an adoring poetry community, he participated in the famous Berkeley Poetry Conference of 1965, giving readings and, as was standard with him, getting very drunk while doing so to ease the tension. Ten day after the conference, he collapsed in the elevator of his apartment building, and died three weeks later. Poet Be Like God is also the portrait of a community, including detailed accounts of the lives of many poets who are not household names — Helen Adams, George Stanley, Larry Fagin — but all of whom led colorful, deep lives that were overshadowed by the well-publicized exploits of their Beat peers and, later, the influx of the "flower power" movement into Berkeley. The book's only fault is its scanty analysis of the development of Spicer from a writer of sophisticated, nearly formal lyrics to the innovator of the book-length "serial poem" — Billy The Kid, The Holy Grail — for which is best known. But this lack of "critical" writing is probably what gives this book its realness, never stopping to engage in the sort of disembodied, academic textual analysis that Spicer himself thought superfluous to the understanding of the life of poetry.

## Susan Wheeler, *Smokes* (Four Way, 1998)

Wheeler's second book signifies an important, if not entirely unanticipated, rapprochement of the indeterminate, militantly ironic stance of the postmodern with the comforting, bourgeois closures of the sentimental lyric. *\_Smoke\_* is infused not only with the play of signifiers — often a dance of malapropism, jarring surrealist and pop imagery, violent (and violating) pastiches and merciless non-sequiturs — but also with the play of sound, placing her somewhere between Ashbery/Bernstein axis of hoch-

schtick appropriation and the baroque strains of a 17th century English metaphysical. It opens with a cheeky homage to Robert Frost in the form of an overture to the reader, but as is the case with her poems, the invitation is to the text, not to the nurturing interiors of the poet: “The girls are drifting in their ponytails / and their pig iron boat. So much for Sunday. / The dodo birds are making a racket / to beat the band. You could have come too.” Arbitrary word-replacement, often for the sake of clunky, but tempered, alliteration, often seems to be a tactic of hers, and at times it strikes with alarming presence, as when she writes in “Fractured Fairy Tale”: “Beforehand the birds / settle in for a roost, and the shiny clock hands / start to rattle. The frog prince bewails / his casaba schnozz.” Wheeler’s work often places somewhere within the realm of po-mo fiction, as in “The View from There” which seems to tell the story of an employee’s desperate (X-Kafkian) leap from vacuity at the office — “The old boss was surprised when you ran into her / on the street. Behind her eyelashes a model TV / hummed a sports coach and a car. The old boss / said...” However, the poem, while remaining within the scale of reference (boss, car, work) soon appears more concerned with the “e” sound in the first verse — “lazy”, “invisbly”, “trees”, and “library” all make their appearance at metrically foregrounded moments — and the “o” sound in the second verse. The poem ends: “Herr Arbeit showed me the desk by / appliances: eleven more forms to blot with dry / snow, seven mock beavers to stuff. Then show. / My work cut out to a tee.” Such obsessive repetitions suggest a subtext of hysteria, strangely linking the poem to Plath’s “Daddy” with its pounding “oo”s (“Daddy, you bastard, I’m through”), but Wheeler, while not offering a humanist vision of a adjusted psyche, is far from the expressionist heroine of adolescent angst — her confessions are, in anything at all, halls of errors. While the poems are occasionally marred by a sort of tunnel-vision — some of the poems seem based more on the academic argument for a postmodern poetry rather than the mundane, but felt, need for poetry, the play more a statement of intent rather than the attention to play — the book’s desire to astound, contort, pervert and yet sing at all turns makes it a singular delight.

## Wang Ping, Leonard Schwartz, Editors, *New Chinese Poetry* (Talisman, 1998)

This very readable, important new anthology presents poems by twenty-four poets writing in the wake of the Tiannammen Square massacre, an event which doesn’t so much cloud the poetry as much as provide a deep, nostalgic tone that makes these poems, even in translation, distinctively resonant. This is the generation of poets directly following the “Misty School,” best represented by Bei Dao in the States, and most of these writers were born in the early sixties, hence yet in mid-career. While the introduction by John Yau tends to foreground the negativity of their writing, mentioning how some of these writers are both critical of a Chinese tradition while attempting a connection between their poetics and that of writers like Williams and Spicer, the preface by editor Wang Ping — herself a poet of this generation, represented accordingly — delves into the nexus of the spiritual and political, noting how the Communist Party, in an attempt to revalorize itself in the minds of the citizens,



“undertook a strategy that has more or less continued until today, launching one ‘socialist spiritual civilization’ movement after another to stave off ‘bourgeois liberalization’.” The paradoxes of such a plan are well documented by these poets, most all of whom express a yearning for a new day while emitting signs of the exhaustion of being at the head of a centuries-old civilization. “Oh humans, why are you so greedy? / Give me a day,” writes Liu Manliu, getting at the timeless nature of his demands, the crux being that he has fallen out of time: “One day is enough / Give me one day of eternity. / No need to get excited about middle or end: / Measure does not exist.” (78) The opening poem by Che Qianzi, “Hand-Copied Paperback,” is a beautiful examination on the theme of writing amidst the flux of memory and politics, passing imagistically through several Asian countries such as Burma and Vietnam and attempting a reconciliation of text and the ephemerality of vision: “Burmese child / shy Burma / 9-year old adult / strict monastery rules / [...] truth / lies / [...] take photos to keep the image, record words to keep the sound, read books to keep the mind.” (39) Perhaps the most successfully translated poem here is Yan Li’s “Serial Poetic,” each line of which intrigues with a imperative philosophical conundrum: “The artist often leans out, stretched / between two extremes / shouting for help with exquisite slogans.” He can strike hard at the open wound of his country’s stagnation: “I love freedom / but the cage is always too big for me.” (And later, suggesting the emphasis often placed on technology by Western journalists writing of Tiannamen: “Ever since freedom got the fax number for my soul, / a piece of white paper has been arriving every day.” (163) There is a strong feminist voice in this anthology, with Zhai Yongming’s flaneur-esque “Café Song” and the powerful poems of Jia Wei, which takes the word “father” to mean both parent and State (indeed, her irony and fatalism in a male-dominated world is not unlike Plath’s): “My education / has made me what I am [...] / I must open all the bedroom windows, / must either become mean / or torture myself. / I hope my education / will lead me beyond this dangerous edge.” (63) All of the translations were done by poets such as David Shapiro, Ron Padgett, and Anne Waldman (and many more less well-known) in collaboration with Ping, and while they are uneven, the breadth of the work is impressive, and the essential humanity of the writing — in what is an increasingly cynical Western literature — is both smart and attractive, and feels necessary.

## John Kinsella, *Collected Poems and The Hunt* (Bloodaxe Books, 1998)

John Kinsella is the celebrated wunderkind of postmodern Australia, having published numerous distinctive award-winning volumes by his mid-thirties, an opus that has garnered him praise from the critic Harold Bloom to avant-garde American poets such as Lyn Hejinian even before his first stateside book publication. *Poems 1980-1994* collects much of Kinsella’s work since the start of his career — notable exceptions are the long poem *The Silo*: a pastoral symphony and most of the experimental *Erratum / Frame(d)*, but also shorter sequences such as *Graphology* — and it displays the formally various, yet tonally consistent writing that has become his trademark. The

volume is divided into their separate books (the first part being “Uncollected Verse”), the common thread among their varied thematic concerns the classic, eternally staged battle of mankind with fate, nature and the human condition. The book “Zimmerman”, for example, involves the account by Heinrich Zimmerman of Captain Cook’s final voyage in the Pacific — “Disease-thick, these islands / drink adamantine fires / the hot god under the mountain, / the fear written into the face / of every sailor...”. This poem ends with a contradictory hook, however: “... though if Zimmerman / thought the god Cook / cruel & ruthless / he also held him / a model to all.” Even in art poems, such one about a sculpture of Giacometti’s, Kinsella is able to attain an impressive tone of the emptiness of historical time: “...holding itself well, / a stretched body / standing up / to the decay / of a damask rose / in miniature vase — / a Giacometti / on the mantelpiece — / an earthbound figurehead, / a vessel without sails.” Even the most ingenious acts of man don’t have a chance against nature: “The science / we have learnt to mistrust / lurks smugly behind steel-plated doors, / our safety resting surreally / in its neo-classical arms, / while a bomber with a swollen stomach / approaches at low altitude...” (“The Dam Busters”), a misgiving about technology and futurity that lends the experimental work “Syzygy” a particular tension that is lacking in much avant-garde writing. The short poem “Fume” for instance, is not able to sacrifice this theme to its linguistic play: “Soil tactless infuses / dust-cradles \* objectifies / black frost on breathing land / fuming. anger military / pro fuse lon deficient / upper upper flight / developing a dislike / for ‘us’: the bulldozers / have sweet tooths & fume.” The Hunt, Kinsella’s newest collection, continues this exploration while moving his focus to the “surreal” Australian countryside and its community, including everything from stories about children drowning in grain silos and dogs being attacked by kangaroos to a beautiful, strange sestina about a group of Jehovah’s Witnesses working the outbacks — “High overhead / A flock of cockatoos rolled ramshackle towards the fence, / Their pink underbellies counterpointing the Bible’s dark lights...” While Kinsella’s poems sometimes seem a little loose and occasionally too slight for inclusion in a book, the cumulative effect is that one is witnessing an Australian epic in the making, albeit piece by piece.

Jerome Rothenberg, Pierre Joris, Editors, *Poems from the Millennium, Vol. 2*  
(University of California Press, 1998)

Like its predecessor, “From Fin-de-Siecle to Negritude,” this volume presents a truly astonishing amount of poetry, freely crossing national and aesthetic boundaries to include work ranging from the Scottish concrete poet and garden designer Ian Hamilton Finlay to poems by the famed African novelist Chinua Achebe, and from William Burroughs to excerpts from *\_Dictee\_*, the only major writing project by the Korean American filmmaker Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. While the book appears, initially, to be a democratic celebration of the fecundity of avant-garde production of the last half of the century, its contents and structure, not to mention the introduction, betray other agendas. As the editors write, the period began in a “mid-century of molten cities

and scorched earth,” and the brief biographies appended to each poet’s selection suggest that it is through poetry that 20th century humanity can achieve its liberation from global suffering, often outlining a shamanistic, or mythopoetic role for the writer — a carry-over from classic modernism that many of the poets of the volume might shun. The contents also heavily lean toward English language poets, and begins with a selection of mostly American Modernists — Williams, Stein, Pound, H.D. Zukofsky — who, along with Breton, Neruda and others, are offered as “continuities” with the present volume. However, no one could complain that the volume does not, in some way, cover the world: there are sections devoted to the “The Vienna Group” (Friederike Mayrocker, Ernst Jandl), the Arabic “Tammuzi Poets,” another German group called “Cobra,” the international Concrete Poetry movement (Finlay, Eugene Gomringer, Seiichi Nikuni), the American Beat Poets and the later “Language Poets,” and a number of other movements that either occurred within national boundaries (the Chinese “Misty Poets”) or are presently occurring internationally — “Toward a Cyberpoetics” reads the final sub-section. The author list is daunting: [ ... ]No single poet is very well represented — the volume is also a celebration of the fragment, and the art of literary juxtaposition — and yet the value of Poems from the Millenium: Volume II as both an introduction to the many avant-gardes of the second half of the century, and as a revision of current thinking about canonization — the “what’s in” and “what’s out” of the mainstream anthologies — cannot be underestimated.

Lisa Jarnot, Leonard Schwartz, Chris Stroffolino, Editors, *New (American) Poets*  
(Talisman House, 1998)

An Anthology of New (American) Poets, edited by Lisa Jarnot, Leonard Schwartz, and Chris Stroffolino, offers selections from 35 younger poets working in the various alternative or “experimental” traditions. Yet another anthology that seeks to shape a future for a generation of poets still reeling after the significant linguistic investigations and problematic over-production of the “Language” school, its contents fail to make an argument for a succeeding “experimental” poetics. This is because most of the poets included have tended to write in the most acceptable mode of alternative poetry, that being the Ashberian/New York school of sophisticated wit, mellifluous line, coy use of abstractions and ambiguous politics. Nonetheless, the need for such an anthology is apparent, given the wide range of talents presented, many of whom, though very young, are well on their way toward establishing distinct literary voices. Jennifer Moxley’s passionate, yet humorous, thwartings and revisionings of the lyric “I” amidst the currents of a destabilized identity have already won her a cult audience. “While we’ve been talking / they’ve lined up along the border towns / heavy with wistfulness, so if ever lip service / might save the planet let’s hope it’s now,” she writes in “Fin De Siecle Go-Betweens.” Yuri (Riq) Hospodar, Lisa Jarnot, Judith Goldman, Peter Gizzi and Chris Stroffolino all make strong contributions along this line, the latter writing: “I hold my tongue until sanity goes on strike / and stinks up the place with saints / that threaten to dub you satan.” Goldman’s “proprioceptive commands” is a tour de force

of icy perceptions amidst an airy rhythmic sense and informed levity: “still / attend me, / I doff counsel sotto / voce, but sustained / I only mutilate what has already been repressed.” Significant departures from this central mode of stand-up autobiography is the poetry of Rod Smith, Thomas Sayers Ellis, and Juliana Spahr, all of whom come nearest to writing (formally) dangerously while at the same time convincing the reader of the efficacy of their projects. The least successful writers tend to be those working along line of orphic/ ontological investigation, creating poems that are hopelessly mired in abstractions, elliptical phrasing, grandiose allusions and static rhythms, though Beth Anderson and Elizabeth Willis, each in their own way, create vibrant work out of elements of this tendency. *New (American) Poets* will be a treat for any young reader trying to find an alternative to the mainstream poetries that are often the only option when entering a university creative writing program. Otherwise — unlike Donald Allen’s landmark 1960 anthology *New American Poetry* — it won’t signal any major subversive shifts in the general understanding of poetry today, though it casts an audible vote for one direction it can take.

### George Bradley, Editor, *Yale Younger Poets Anthology* (Yale University Press, 1998)

In its 78-year history, the Yale Younger Poets series has gone through as many permutations as there have been literary fashions, though it has only periodically been able to reflect the tendencies of the times while maintaining high standards of quality. Started in 1919 as a way to exhibit the poetic talents of Yale students, the series remained a venue for late-nineteenth century neoclassicism until 1933, when the able Stephen Vincent Benet took the helm as judge. James Agee, Muriel Rukeyser and Margeret Walker were all published by Yale during his tenure, the latter having won the year she decided not to submit, when Benet, dissatisfied with his choices, personally requested her manuscript. As the informative, highly readable introduction by the anthology’s editor George Bradley describes, each of the judges carried out their duties with their own styles, from the distant and difficult Archibald MacLeish (44-46), the eccentric classicist Dudley Fitts (60-69, who selected James Tate and George Starbuck), to its most famous and successful, though no less idiosyncratic, judge, W.H. Auden (47-59). Auden, who had the series skip years when he could find no submission he liked, also requested work from poets whom he knew had book-length manuscripts, the most famous of these being John Ashbery. The Yale Younger Poets Anthology is bolstered in quality mostly by the poems included by Ashbery (“The Instruction Manual” from *Some Trees*), early formal work by Adrienne Rich, W.S. Merwin (*A Mask for Janus*), John Hollander and James Wright (*The Green Wall*), all of whom were picked by Auden. Stanley Kunitz, Richard Hugo, and James Merrill were among Auden’s successors, and the anthology includes selections from well-known poets picked during their tenures such as Alan Dugan, Jean Valentine, Carolyn Forché (*A Gathering of Tribes*), Robert Hass (*Field Guide*), and Cathy Song (*Picture Bride*). There is some surprisingly good work from two little-known poets whose single volumes were from the series, Joan Murray (who died at twenty-five), and Robert



Horan, both chosen by Auden; there is also some embarrassing work that, ironically, is mostly taken from volumes that were among the series' bestsellers. Of course, part of the fun of this various but sometimes claustrophobic volume is to try to determine who will "make it" from the contest's last judge, the late James Dickey.

## 1999

### John Ashbery, *Girls on the Run: A Poem* (Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1999)

This beautiful long poem presents Ashbery at his most contradictory: it is both his most Homeric and "narrative" long poem, yet at the same time his most juvenile, collage-based work in years. Lovers of the range of this poet's work will revel in its flirtatious relationship with many of his best earlier poems. Like "Self Portrait of a Convex Mirror," the poem is ecphrastic in that it borrows from the imagery of the artist Henry Darger (1892-1972), an "outsider" — Ashbery has had a special interest in eccentric art dating back to his Art News editorship — who devoted decades to a mammoth illustrated novel about the plight of the fictional "Vivian" girls. As the poem involves the adventures of dozens of characters with names like Pliable, Talkative, Bunny, Uncle Margaret, and Fred, it harkens back to such poems as the sestina "Farm Implements and Rudabegas in a Landscape," in which the entire cast of the Popeye cartoon cavorted around according to some hidden, mystical system. The even earlier "The Instruction Manuel," which involved an imaginary trip to "dim Guadalahara / city I most wanted to see, and didn't see, in Mexico," is suggested in the role that imagination — with its abilities to see behind all corners — plays in torquing the role of the omnipresent narrator. His play with the epic tradition is most apparent in his pseudo-stentorian mode when laying down the most bland of similes: "Just as the good pianist will adjust the piano stool / before his recital, by turning the knobs on either side of it / until he feels he is at a proper distance from the keyboard, / so did our friends plan their day." As this poem is mostly a fiction, and perhaps "aimed" — like Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* — at "juvenile adults," the sentences are often short, somewhat "off" ("Trevor his dog came, half jumping."), and set up the most unusual narrative situations: "Hold it, I have an idea, Fred groaned. Now some of you, five at least, must go over in that little shack. / I'll follow with the tidal waves, and see what happens next." Classic Surrealism breaks through frequently in well-timed eruptions: "The tame suburban landscape excited him. / He had met his match. / Dimples replaced the mollusk with shoe-therapy." This is quite different from his rhapsodic, Proustian-autobiographical style as best seen in the recent *Can You Hear, Bird* or the long poem *Flow Chart*, yet at moments the calm, universal Ashberian persona breaks through with a note of apt sophistication and terrible relevance: "The oblique flute sounded its note of resin. / In time, he said, we call go under the fluted covers / of this great world, with its spiral dissonances, / and then we can see, on the other side, / what the rascals are up to." The poem is closer to memory than to dream — the memory of constant

companionship, of “fun,” in a land that was never boring and whose physical environment, while hinting danger, was as safe as the womb. All names were mythological then.

## Charles Bernstein, *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (University Of Chicago Press, 1999)

“What is a poet-critic, or critic-poet, or professor-poet-critic?; which comes first and how can you tell?” asks Bernstein early in *My Way*. Turning his always playful — but never less than informed and precise — poetical eye on the new elements of the constantly-shifting literary landscape, his collection is eclectic both in its forms of expression (scholarly essays, interviews, encomiums to poets like Charles Reznikoff, Larry Eigner, Hannah Weiner and Susan Howe, quirky poems, and forms that are hybrids of all of these) and in its range of interests. One of the key theorists of the now-adequately historicized Language poets, Bernstein’s purview has expanded greatly past the formal concerns of that group to take in issues of multiculturalism, “standard” vs. “non-standard” forms of language usage, the ossified conservative agenda of literary institutions in the United States, poetry in performance (both on the page and on “stage”), and graduate-level pedagogical practices (“Frame Lock”). Nonetheless, the many slips and holes permitted by the many forms in this book grant one peeks beneath the surface of Bernstein’s discourse — a long autobiographical interview with Loss Glazier, for instance, covers the poet’s attitudes toward Harvard where he was educated, his sense of being (in Isaac Deutscher’s phrase) a “non-Jewish Jew”, and his maturity during the sixties; while poems such as “A Test of Poetry” — deceptively “accessible” in its surface — uncover some of the traumas foreign-language poets have had translating Bernstein’s poetry, pulling the sheets from over that in-between language that Benjamin wrote is the space of translation, but which had never-before been so giddily problematized. “Water Images of The New Yorker” is a fine little investigative piece, discovering that 86% of the poems over a 16 week period contained images of water, while “Dear Mr. Fanelli,” a poem in skinny Schuyleresque lines, takes the language of a subway administrator’s “request for comments” literally, highlighting how even bureaucratic language is vexed with double-meanings. “Pound and the Poetry of Today” is an important follow-up to his essay “Pounding Fascism” in his last book of essays, *A Poetics*, investigating the contradiction of Pound’s overdetermined politics in the light of his collage poetics, while “Poetics of the Americas” creates an important bridge between the ethnically marginalized practices of poets like Claude McKay and Paul Lawrence Dunbar and more self-consciously “avant-garde” writers like Louis Zukofsky, Basil Bunting and the Language poets themselves. This book, for all of its centrifugal activity, is a singular yet globally relevant perspective on the literary arts and their institutions, an engagement that is both in good faith yet just cranky and poignant enough to not be easily ignored.

Edmund Berrigan, *Disarming Matter*  
(Owl Press, 1999)

“I have a desire to transcend conscious speech / not to the exclusion of words or letters, / it is not a scholarly wish, must be removed / from the present past future inclusive everything / beyond understanding,” writes Berrigan in “The Orbit Room” (76). While not always so heady, the underlining feature to this debut volume — ranging in tone from the beat goofiness of a Gregory Corso to the Symbolist-tinged collages of early Ashbery, from the rich dailiness of a Bernadette Mayer to the more heated “bohème” of Rimbaud — is a negotiation between the dream-like irrealities of daily life, a polyvalent sexuality that is not out of tune with much Gen X flirtation with extremes, and a figure called “God” who occasionally drops in as something like a placeholder for the channel to the “other world.” The beautiful long sonnet sequence “Cross House” is a mysterious affair, like a traipse through a virtual haunted mansion, with figures of love and desire teaming among the threat of limitless possibility: “The persons I have seen in patterns / were so torn as to be absolute traips / [...] She had never seen him trusted above all / earthly things. They were leaning on the / screen before the fire. ‘You bear your / wrongs more gently than I can bear / mine.’ He bent over the group / in a caressing way, with renewed violence.” (54) The quiet surety of Berrigan’s meters are perfect for the wavering between “violence” and the “caress,” and he resembles a 17th century methaphysical — Herbert the closest — in his decorous rhetoric, which he dons most strongly when asking the “big questions”: “I have something, a major contribution / to the record of life, in a world winter-obscene, that / works with fingers peel back a series of inventions / for mortality. Armchair comfortable for those who desire it. / Absence from the physical being as strong a security as any.” (34) These are big issues for such a poet in his mid-twenties, one who, consequently, doesn’t take him too seriously, and is as pop-sensible, funny and crazily improvisatory as any grunge lyricist: “I am a heartfelt bulging crotch / when I take on the swiss initiative / [...] I made love to Nico a lot, I dug her a lot / it was like hanging out with a guy except / she had girl pants.” (16) This combination of addresses to the higher powers with a mischievous running-with-the-disaffected-youths of the present makes Berrigan a true Hamet-like figure for the nineties, not the highbrow of Eliot, but a thoughtful, late-century rebel engaged in his deep, “irrational” discourse with Yorick while the world only dreams.

Charles Borkhuis, *Alpha Ruins*  
(Bucknell University Press, 1999)

Borkhuis’ poems pick up somewhere where the fifth section of the “Waste Land” left off, describing deserted contemporary landscapes in which the dead and living intermingle with a chilling ease: “details drain / little lights into people / now and at the hour of our recycling / rain grows upwards / in trails of transparent veins / that cool and cluster into floating cities / the earth shadowed by thoughts / thoughts shadowed by

people / people shadowed by machines” (“Close Up and Far Away,” 37) . With an even paced tone reminiscent of Robert Duncan or Michael Palmer, though without their formally variety, the poems of Alpha Ruins insinuate themselves into the breathy alleys of the city, the between moments of thinking, and the fissures of being: “(inside a sideways glance) / passage to the outside / as if this... / tunnel were a switch / drifting through matter / where the big thoughts roam” (“The Gaze,” 31). The poems are most effective when the surreal tone is anchored by recognizable imagery from life and an occasional sense of humor, as in the dark but playful “Slice of Life”: “to open the cover of a book to find / a miniature author inside / asleep in his coffin / dressed as a ghost / carries a rubber hatchet / [...] the cop teaches his club a new twist / the irate customer clicks his remote control / the doctor depresses your tongue with a stick / [...] you could have fooled / my camera” (60) Borkhuis seems outside any recognizable American tradition, but like Charles Henri Ford could be considered a standard bearer for a type of surreal style that is often dismissed for being overly earnest, too “Jungian” or archetypal in its imagery, and generally “mystical” & the blueprint for a permanent misfit. Times have changed, though, with poets like Will Alexander and, occasionally, Palmer to recall those heady modernist times; indeed, with the rise of neo-noir stylistics and cyber-culture, along with “schizo” proliferation of images that digital technology has brought to the movie screen, poetry like Borkhuis’ may have finally found its moment. At times, the poems move somewhat near William Gibson’s hallucinogenic (or “virtual”) melancholy style (“lost secrets live echoes / particle-currents in the veins / whispers while you write // moist earth buried in the body / of answers say circular ruins / peeling back the skin // or turning a page / landscape with friends standing / on a hill of yellow leaves”, 61); at others it actively recalls high surreal tradition & it is drenched in urban phantasmagoria a la Breton’s *Nadja*, not to mention a few direct references to “shooting into the crowd,” (21, 35) Breton’s infamous anarchistic trope for the cracking of the veils of reality & hence never becoming too slick or too antiquated. Though Alpha Ruins doesn’t often escape its closed cycle of images and preoccupations, indulging in words like “infinity” and “monads” a bit recklessly, when it hones in on a resonant chain of images and a less “dreamlike” tone & as in “Close Up and Far Away” and Francis Bacon-like “The Surgeon’s Glove” (“blaze of hair / SPLICED / into footage of a golden carp sliding / off the dissecting table”) & it is beautiful in a distinctive, contemporary way.

Michael Collier, Stanley Plumly, Editors, *The New Bread Loaf Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*  
(Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference, 1999)

This anthology represents the middle-ground of major American contemporary poetry, passing by such writers as John Ashbery, A.R. Ammons, or Jorie Graham who, in comparison, are just too “out there,” and going nowhere near New American Poets & such as Robert Creeley or Gary Snyder & the “Language” poets, performance poets, nor much that could be taken for “new Formalism” (Jacqueline Osherow is the exception) . For this reason, it is a convenient book, since it gives one a clear way to



assess what has happened to the academic/confessional line of Lowell, Plath, and Berryman, the group that replaced, for a certain type of literature, the expat dream of the 20's with that of angst-ridden domestic "responsibility", but which was too old for the Beats once they hit the scene (though some tried to latch on) . Initially, one could say that it has simply devolved: the narcissism is still there, with most of these poems being too long about anxieties, "deep sensibilities," distrust of the world, adultery, pleasant afternoons and vacations, etc., but the formal mastery of the Lowell generation & with its ties to Eliot's modernism, Auden's precocity, Williams' directness and prosody, along with Lowell's background in Latin and Berryman's syntactical experiments based on readings of Shakespeare, etc. & are gone. While most of this work is not "confessional" in the strict sense, it is disheartening how few poems rise above the basic frame of the unescapable self in the world, or how, when a different theme is adopted, it is still tied to basic formal tricks & the piling up of redundant detail as a baroque display of knowledge is one of them & which renders the work repetitive and mundane. Consequently, even when formal meters are adopted & as a way out of the too free, often just prosaic, verse meters & nothing like the sparkle of the Elizabethans (those to whom Eliot paid homage) breaks through. One hundred poets were invited to select from their own work, eighty-two of whom responded: include several well-known names, such as: Marvin Bell, Stephen Berg, Frank Bidart, Lucille Clifton, editors Michael Collier and Stanley Plumly, Alfred Corn, Deborah Digges, Stuart Dischell, Mark Doty, Rita Dove, Cornelius Eady, Tess Gallagher, Louise Gluck, Linda Gregerson, Maralyn Hacker, Michael S. Harper, Brenda Hillman, Mark Jarman, Galway Kinnell, Li-Young Lee, Philip Levine, the late William Matthews, W.S. Merwin, Robert Pinsky, Alberto Rios, David St. John, Gerald Stern, Mark Strand, James Tate, C. K. Williams and C.D. Wright. Most all of them are either university professors (most of those for whom job status is blank in the brief bios are also professors) or editors of such journals as the Virginia Quarterly or The American Poetry Review. The most interesting pages are probably provided by Louse Gluck & though not her best work, there is enough of her Rilkean purity of expression and her various lineation to satisfy –and Linda Gregerson, who's tight lines in irregular, Williams-esque tercets often achieve a microtonal variety that lifts them above the pedestrian: "It had almost nothing to do with sex. / The boy / in his corset and farthingale, his head- / voice and his smooth-for-the-duration chin / was not / and never had been simply in our pay. Or / was it some lost logic the regional accent / restores?" (95, "Eyes Like Leeks") Mark Strand's "I Will Love the Twenty-First Century" is quite masterful, with it's quiet, Prufrockian ending & after the narrator has a Cooleridgean wedding-guest type encounter with a man who foresees a ghostly double for himself in the next century, the poem finds a rich muteness in: "'Oh,'" I said, putting on my hat, 'Oh'." William Matthews has probably the two most easily dislikable lines in the book & "I've ended three marriages by divorce / as a man shoots a broken legged horse" (190) , a real derailing of whatever charm Berryman might have possessed & but triumphs with "Bit Tongue," with it's polyglot mish-mash of tonalities and languages, confined within a persona that is pathetic but mildly attractive. Several poets & like Tate and St. John & have written much better elsewhere, and look mediocre here; other bits and pieces, such as the first section of Yusef Komunyakaa's meditation on Whitman and slavery, "Kosmos" & are quite beautiful. In any case,

this is not a book that reflects a “commitment to the future of the nation’s poetry” as its editors profess, so much as a tombstone for its glorious past & or one of them, at least. It is the type of writing that the writing workshops are modeled after, which is why this type of poetry is on a downward spiral.

## Garrett Caples, *The Garrett Caples Reader* (Black Square Editions, 1999)

Caples is part of a younger generation of writers reinvigorating contemporary poetry by combining the expressionism of methods such as surrealism with the sheer enthusiasm and lustiness of adolescence, taking back from the formalist methods of, say, the Language poets the fun, sometimes pure shock value, of this French cadre of seeming anarchists (they were in fact mostly communists). If this sounds like a self-conscious “project”, and hence a betrayal of the “automatic” and pure lyric poetry, don’t worry: the performative is much alive in this work, as he can be as arrogant and “shock rock” as you would want any younger poet to be. The dedication to an alternative world, one in which love and eroticism mix in never inelegant dances with the “things” of a virtual dream-space & “A can opener found in Brooklyn meets the tailfins of Alabama,” he writes in *Resonant Cylinder* (73) & is stated quite frankly in the second poet of the collection, the “First National Anthem,” which begins: “an homage to places I’ve never been: / to the skies I haven’t seen unroll red saddle blankets / and tuck in for the evening / and the birches whose teeth I’ve never brushed / and the buildings whose looms have never woven shadows into nets” (4). Caples love poems, of which there are many, step out into the open from what might be a psychedelic core, straddling the line between Syd Barrett stream-of-sweet-nothings and bachelor-machine eroticism of Duchamp: “Mr. Baritone-Man, tell my love of me, and do it in a way she’ll be impressed. Paint me on her eyes in your dark, rich tones, and ignore the fact she’s not too crazy about the saxophone. There’s a tendency to take these things personally, believe me I know, but you’re my last resort, your deep craters of sound, the prod of your twisted horn. Gouge her with your bull-like strength, as you chop your meaty way through innuendo and crescendo like red Hungarian wine. Show her brochures made from glossy squalls, depicting the castle we’ll occupy on the banks of the Tigris...” (*Opera Buffa*, 38). A salient of this work is the turn toward an anthropomorphic center, or in other terms a “pop star” cult-de-moi, for the lyrical subject; i.e. though there are “process” poems (the words of one of which is entirely alphabetical: “A basic concern demands extreme finesse, generating hollow increments, jealously knocking low minds...” [81]), most of them are clearly celebrations of will and vigor in a somewhat demoralized, but not entirely hostile America. This is accentuated by the cover image, which is a full head-shot of the author though heavily tinted by an orange electric fog (the combination of the image and the title of the book suggests that this is a posthumous work, hence elevating the living poet to dead-poet cult status). That Caples is conscious of his stance toward the impersonality of contemporary poetics comes through most clearly in “Humped by Barrett Watten,” a quasi-essay that accuses the Language poets of being

“Victorian” in their attitudes toward sex (hence the over-the-top vulgarity of the title). Like in another poem considering Rene Char’s awe at a pair of lace panties (for which he receives no drubbing as, after all, he’s honestly enraptured), in which Caples is countered with imaginary statements from W. S. Merwin (“No!, it is his hushed awe in the face of women’s mystery!”), he rather deftly uses the dialogic technique of presenting counter-arguments regarding Watten’s work: “Don’t you get it? Watten’s text was an ironic, postmodern take on the erotic, which was not constrained by the illusionary and arbitrary requirement that it be erotic. And the erotic is an ideologic construction anyway, imposed on us by an oppressive society” (76). Caples says “Maybe so,” but provides, throughout this reader, what he clearly regards as an alternative to this irony which is itself oppressive: a “song of the self” that revels in the possibilities of dreams, of thought (many of these poems are discursive), of literature (homages abound) and, indeed, of language itself.

## Catalina Cariaga, *Cultural Evidence* (Subpress, 1999)

This is a vital first collection by California-native Cariaga, a deep consideration of issues of nation and self, belonging and exile, continuity and discontinuities. The epitaph to section one is quote from Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s seminal avant-garde visual/literary work *Dictee*, and Cariaga, like Cha, strikes the reader with a various salvo & polyglot prose, “Language” style fragmentation, disembodied dialogue (taken, it appears, from a real or imagined Ilocano / English primer), and quotation such as a sequence of passages from the Bible, or uncorrected transcriptions of her arthritic fathers commentary on her poems: “All along you had good humor, but your / last sentence is the real trough. That / makes an ending or conclusion.” (64) Her lyricism runs from the direct, formally uncomplicated & a short poem runs “Of course / They didn’t eat dogs. / They didn’t have dogs. / If they had dogs / they would have eaten them” (12) & to more sophisticated structures that suggest Projective-verse’s atonality, such as the charming, but haunting, poem about the mating of the strange fish the grunion, a delicacy for one culture but tourist show for another: “cold panic / sweet fear, / a proverb / of coming up ‘empty handed’ / the few morsels swimming well within the grasp of my two flat palms. / But that si how the grunion run. / They white people appear merely for the spectacle, but we / bend and stoop, enamored of ritual.” (38) Other passages strike with the authority of a survivor, such as this from “No Mercy”: “Post partem depression / of the military industrial complex / as anger unprecedented / wanting to say / wanting to ask / Father, conspicuously absent / now, the three women, attendant / as anger unmitigated / wanting to tell / wanting to explain.” (21) The long poem “No Tasaday” is a fascinating account of National Geographic’s story on the “Tasaday” people, who, in some accounts, are merely a hoax & “the easiest way to visit the Tasaday is not in the caves, but in the Saturday markets” states one epitaph & or a “joke, riddle, epic / (g)God(s) / what we call nation / indivisible.” The poem becomes, under the aegis of documentary filmmaker Trinh Mihn Ha, a deconstruction of myths about anthropology’s objectivity, and

“culture” as defined in different cultures are often incompatible: “on real people, the name of ‘the tribe’ invented, / imposed, then, disposed of / sibling teased the youngest child; little brown girl in the Magazine / looks a lot like me & could be cousins.” (51) This fear that an essentialism of self is reliant on an essentialist understanding of time, nation, place or language underlies the serious but approachable surfaces of Catalina’s passionate investigations.

## Steven Farmer, *Medieval* (Krupskaya, 1999)

Contrary to the middle ages, in which the sky was mistakenly thought of as a star-encrusted shell, Steve Farmer’s *Medieval* spreads across his native California sky sacrificing closure but not detail all the way: “town, a cold vantage / surprised by the heat / Narcotics is one / zoning board, theater another / evocative decomp / storefront treadmill / ideas touch all apparel, hours.” While many of the poems run into each other in terms of subject and method & the poems are like shorthand notes, but suspended in an air of historic phantasmagoria and friendly, oppositional critique & occasional bursts of rhetorical and lyrical certitude punctuate it, such as the final poem, a pantoum-like pretzel: “the people will neither read nor write / going onto one knee with a spoon / inheriting seemingly ghost-like qualities / going onto one knee with a spoon // going onto one knee by sedition / [...] a world lit only by fire / the destruction of letters by fire.” (127) Some of the individual two-line poems are very funny, in a manner that is peculiar to books that extend to the sparest uses of language (can the Language poets have invented a new form of humor?), such as: “the populism of Nashville / the exchange of tortured madrigals.” (98). Not a book for everyone & like ambient music, its pleasures are only gotten if a lotus-like nullity can be achieved while the braincap still hums (as Farmer himself suggests: “beautifully typewritten exegesis trance” [68]) & *Medieval* is nonetheless an interesting, thoughtful, hermetic contribution to the avant-garde ethics and aesthetics.

## Dan Farrell, *Last Instance* (Krupskaya, 1999)

Each of the twelve longish prose poems of *Last Instance*, by Canadian-born poet Dan Farrell, is an exploration into the dilemmas of agency amidst a world dominated by routine, the ubiquitous plays of technology and other narrowing systems (even the innocent one of the days of week), and the failure of memory to fully relive one’s past to create one’s present. While maintaining close ties to the linguistic explorations of the Language poets, Farrell’s work departs strongly in that his surfaces are backed by the cold drama of an existentially hindered subjectivity which bobs its head and breaks the pure play of syntax and grammar, such that even in its most heavily-reduced moments, the poetry creates an atmosphere reminiscent of Beckett in his novels, and Kafka in its ever-recursive replays of alienating social formulas. Indeed, the poem “K” resembles



fiction in that it centers around the narrator's "phone tag" relationship with the ever-ambiguous "K": "So K would call, begin to leave as though a message, then get me. Would K's roommate pass on this message, any? For the while, exchanging mail seemed a way. Letter, number, letter; number, letter, number. Letters add up to nothing." (15) Even the paratactic "Avail," composed entirely of sentences from questionnaire-answers with people about their health, builds by Oulipo-inspired excessive repetition into a deadpan, sometimes Stephen-Wrightish character that just can't determine what the hell he means: "My current level of physical fitness is very pleasing to me. I have positive feelings about the way I approach my own physical health. Whether I recover from an illness depends in large part on what I myself do. My feelings of anger do not interfere with my work. In order to have good health, I have to act in a pleasing way to other more powerful individuals." (27) "My Recognizance" is a wonderfully rich, possibly autobiographical (but most likely as constructed as "Avail") skitter through Joycean sentence constructs and surface play, a sort of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that never gets past the childhood stage to maturity "And around geared Tom Swift, grasping for switches to toggle, tactics to jettison. Somewhere sprawled. Then to flood with haggard drops the reminder of an awkward cough, syrup or sticky camphor, resin to excessive phlegm. While outside in crowded cards of skilled hockey players I saw my own reeling life clasped and slipped to clipping spokes." (33) This sort of neologistic wordplay & he later describes himself as "Pufferbluffing like a blowfish in a chowder" & seems as effortless as the excessive flatness of "Avail" and the last poem in the collection, "366, 1998," whose main *niodus operandi* is the linear recounting of the days of the week, such that the cumulative effect is one of a rich desperation among the passage of time. The sameness of "366, 1998" makes even minor linguistic and narrative events oases of suggestion: "[...] Saturday, floor sawing, Sunday, dust making, Monday, thrust frump and center, Tuesday, Wednesday, last and relived, Thursday, flutes on backward, try again, flukes on forward [...]" (59), it continues for five jammed pages. *Last Instance* is a confident trek into both language's capacity for creating boredom and anxiety & a parody of the most domestic version of late-capitalist life & and its potential for explosive, neologistic self-creation – approaching utopian drive of the most radical Modernists & whose cumulative effect is one of a careful essay on poetry, one that is fun as it is responsible, elegant and classical as it is & like punk rock or a slacker's stoicism & gleefully nihilistic.

## Elizabeth Fodaski, *Fracas* (Krupskaya, 1999)

"It's not the question of a different drummer, it's that I just don't march," (14) writes Liz Fodaski in her stunning first collection *fracas*. The long poem "Anatomy of Associative Thought" ranges from the pure, self-identifying defiance of this line to the aesthetic "glass / in a language of multitudes / the can't change but they / change" of a later section, wandering through other modes such as the epistolary (a series of letters to the mysterious dead-or-not-dead "B.") to the anthemic or elegiac: "like so many Lucky Pierres, we had had such a bouyant sense of life in our midst / and then our emotions

became something discrete from our culture, / the grief suddenly overwhelming us like a bad stench.” (9) The humor is never indulgent, tapering around the axis of the personal / political, the “reality of knowledge,” offering us “the cerebral advantage / not the thing itself but ideas about the thing.” (19). As if capitalism were something like a love affair with the world, requiring both decorum and the respect a partner demands, Fodaski is aware of how the emotions & particularly the testosterone-motivated male brand– can do double damage, both in and out of the home (“we join the superpowers when we exploit”), and she gives voice to these demands. The sequence “ETYMOLOGIES” moves through several pomo lyric registers in its irreverent, deep definition of terms, slyly taking in some recent poetical history as well: “They in the 80’s / liked the visual page / [...] everyone in / the nineties / adores the @ / reminds of a register / ringing.” (55) Like many poets of her generation, Fodaski is finding a unique voice for herself in what has become, suspiciously, an era of the “authorless” as hero, while not sacrificing the utopian pinings and agonic urgencies of the postmodern’s dalliance with social-meets-formal radicality.

## Barbara Guest, *Rocks on a Platter* (Wesleyan, 1999)

*Rocks on a Platter* is a book-length work by a poet who has, over the past decade or more, increasingly come to be seen as a major force in innovative poetics. Guest is often associated with the “New York School” of poets (Ashbery, O’Hara, Schuyler) but is traditionally overlooked by chauvanistic scholars preferring a homogenized version of the literary/art nexus of activity in Manhattan in the 50’s and 60’s & notably David Lehman in his recent history *The Last of the Avant Garde*. It appears that she may have the “last laugh,” as the yet-living poets of that group have retreated into blase irony and, occasionally, the poetic equivalent “pot-boilers,” while Guest has forged onward with her near-flawless ear and synaesthetic eye for word values, in the process breaking down her syle into a more spare, but never less than rich, idiom, for which she has come to be praised. As if echoing Ashbery, the poem starts: “Ideas. As they find themselves. In trees?” but nonetheless moves on to a declaration of intent peculiar to herself, finding “Dreams set by / typography. A companionship with crewlessness...” Though the figure of Rimbaud doesn’t appear in this work & Shelly, Byron, H.D., Ovid, and Eliot are among the figures inescapably alluded to & Guest displays a “taste only for stones, and rock, and air,” as her carved jewels of word-clusters illuminate the white space: “Pockets jingle highly responsive place in the shelter / of those rocks at last the jingle of your pockets / HEARD ON THE PAGE.” Time, presence, the ability of the eye to create time out of word patterns, are perhaps the central subjects here & though she writes blankly “suspicious / of fragmentation” this poem is highly “fragmented,” though joined symphonically in the play/space of the page as “score” & a concern that exhibits itself in what can be read as commentary on the poem itself, making this an essay in poetics as much as an epistemological cat-and-mouse. “Without shyness or formality /// ‘a gesture of allowing oneself time”” she writes (the immense white space between these spaces, where this gesture occurs,

cannot be reproduced here), and later: “flotsam of the world of appearances’ / drifting by and out of the picture,” pointing to a Heraclitean, but also defiantly feminine (i.e. non-determinate both rhetorically and ideologically) poetics. This is a very approachable book by a poet who is bound to show you something you didn’t know was possible in American poetry, though the French may have been trying to tell us this for some time: that the silence page can speak.

Carla Harryman, *The Words After Carl Sandburg’s Rootabaga Stories and Jean-Paul Sartre*  
(O Books, 1999)

Harryman’s *The Words* is a radical, perhaps even “bold” deconstruction of the novel or memoir forms, but while inspired by the nouveau roman of Wittig and Robbe-Grillet, it is more scattershot in its targets, and doesn’t appear to point to any secure set of themes. Moments of lucidity are interspersed with wrench-in-the-machinery doggerel that makes reading the book a task & an intellectually challenging one perhaps, but occasionally disheartening as the form is so clearly indebted to Modernist models that, more than a century old, seem to have outlived their usefulness (as models, that is). Somewhere between a Rimbaud decimating the snoring Verlaine and Lautreamont swimming with the sharks, Harryman screams the birth of a new female consciousness, one that, indeed, goes a long way in subverting the previous century’s conception of female passivity: “After childhood, for many days running I studied people’s asses with the slowness of one who has discovered the crucial element in a universal tragedy. I slept too long. I could reach over in bed and feel European history, its density, course through the bloodstream of my adolescent mate. While he slept and breathed equations of collective effort and heroic self-sacrifice, I spread myself across the bed and concentrated on this recurring fantasy: a particle of fog burnt off at midday by the north coast sun.” [12] Though Harryman is often considered part of the Language generation of writing, one thinks that she develops a line quite directly from English Futurist-inflected writers like Mina Loy and Wyndham Lewis, and like them shares a penchant for larger-than-life secular mythological, or Zarathustrean, figures; the lead in *The Words*, for example, is a character named “Woemess,” which seems a pun both on the word “woman” and the image of afterbirth (or perhaps the aborted fetus, tying her sense of subjectivity in with that of Baudelaire’s in “Benediction,” in which his mother asked to give birth to a brood of vapors rather than to a poet). Woemess fades in and out of the narrative like a figure in a house of mirrors & “Woemess baked in the sade plains. She was as unreal as a discovery made elsewhere” starts one chapter & but occasionally is given to excitable, oracular vaporings: “Woemess put the hat on her head and continued her speech as if she had played all the parts, ‘In the recess of the cryptic world, where my arm sings to transcendental wampum, there are emergency vocabularies waiting in the wings to take over when we are failed by categories. If I wanted to, right now, I could paint the picture of the picture, show you the cryptic world, the song, and the wampum. Or a dreary series of irregular rectangles, a repetitious dirge, and money. But if I take you

there, we will be gone.” [57] There is much philosophical terminology in here, as well as many plays towards fable-like forms and Steinian word-centered writing, but the most salient feature seems to be that of the a new voice of feminine power, albeit one centered around opacity, or moments of overwhelming presence, than master narrative: “Feminity can’t be narrated. A theory develops that only what can be ignored can be narrated. Cactus, can it be ignored?” [52] However, though the general texture of the writing is quite animated, at times it is repetitive and uncontrolled, and the content, ironically, fails because it is not self-centered enough &em; it’s the recreation of the struggles of the ego confined more than the hapless enactment of it. In this way it comes off as a bit academic, artsy, and not philosophical in that unmediated Nietzschean sense that it aspires to. Nonetheless, a pretty good read, and possibly an interesting anthem for feminism.

R. L. Rutsky, *High Techne: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman*  
(University Of Minnesota Press, 1999)

Rutsky provides a fairly comprehensive, though sometimes unnervingly fluid, overview of the development of the “aesthetic of technology” starting from the time of Baudelaire’s confrontation with the specter of art photography to the present age of mirror shades, Pentium-envy and ambient dance tracks. Stating early on that that “unlike modern technology, high tech can no longer be defined \_solely\_ in terms of its instrumentality or function &em; as simply a tool or means to an end,” (4) Rutsky proceeds on a quasi-mystical cultural studies track of showing how technology, once a clearly defined “other” in the material world, has found habitation in the very minds of the present day, perhaps replacing religion and psychology for sources of metaphors on how the mind (and soul) works. He cites, in an often interesting if not entirely unexpected fashion, a range of modern philosophers and thinkers ranging from Heidegger and Duchamp to the inevitable William Gibson and the doyen of cyber-aesthetics, Donna Haraway, though unfortunately seems to give only passing notice to some of their ideas &em; such as Haraway’s &em; which may have rendered his argument more cogent. The German founder of “theory” Walter Benjamin, whose conception of the art object as having an “aura” &em; that the object of art “looks back at you” as you look at it &em; is most taken to task by the advance of immaterial information-based aesthetics. Rutsky’s finds that high tech art and aesthetics, being founded on the the idea of infinite reproduction &em; a Borgesian cathedral of ever-evolving content &em; acquires, conversely, an “aura” as it becomes embodied in a system of “partiality, contingency, hybridity, mixture” (149), for “through the emergence of this aesthetic complexity that high tech has increasingly come to be seen as having &em; like the artistic or fetish ‘object’ &em; an autonomy, a life, of its own.” (142) He even suggests that the entire field of the aesthetic superhighway creates a double of the Freudian subconscious, for “Freud’s unconscious is itself a complex, unsettling process that, although repressed, goes on largely autonomous of the conscious will.” (153) A detailed section on Fritz Lang’s film *Metropolis* elaborates a

series of metaphors concerning the dichotomy of the Freudian “uncanny” imagination which resurfaces after the oppression of “rational” technological thinking, defined by such binaries (Rutsky & not a post-structuralist and opting for a lucid prose style & loves binaries as rhetorical strategies) as the organic and the mechanic international style architecture in that film, or the play of gender (the feminine heart versus the masculine rationality). After a detour into a theory of Nazism and the Hitler fascination as a fetishism of the androgynous leader & the one who collapses gender binaries between the masculine/rational and the feminine/irrational & he reaches the conclusion that the aesthetics, or cyborgian quality, of high techne accomplishes a similar collapsing, though doesn’t enter deeply into the political implications of this. The book covers a lot of ground & Shelley’s Frankenstein, the constructivist films of Vertov, a reading of William Gibson via Frederic Jameson, etc. & but falters when it comes to contemporary art and cultural practices, where some field work would have been most helpful (a new novelist would have been welcome), or, again, in scratching the surface of the themes that he introduces from other writers. Like George Landow’s paeon to cyber-cultur, Hypertext, it seems most excited about how \_thinking\_ about technology helps resolve certain Western philosophical issues that have plagued the West, indeed providing the ground for a total unified field theory. The fact that the final chapter starts with allusions to Mondo and Wired magazines & the two glossy portals that have provided numerous outsiders with a sense of knowledge about the subject of techno-culture & and yet never scratches the surface of what is, in fact, a culture that retains a strong, partly ideological attachment to its “grass-roots” beginnings, marks this book as something of an academic exercise. As Rutsky is taking the “cultural studies” stance by discussing, it is a little disappointing that most of the book is concerned with modernist themes and acknowledged classics in the field, rather than getting its history soiled by dipping into the inchoate activities & that street-level technology have created for a wide range of people, as his peers Andrew Ross and others have already done. Perhaps it’s not Rutsky’s fault that culture moves faster than the publishing industry, but then again the industry has caught up with some of the information sifted through here years ago.

## David Ignatow, *Living Is What I Wanted: Last Poems* (BOA Editions, 1999)

Ignatow, who died in 1997 at the age of 83, led a distinguished if not particularly meteoric career as a man of letters, having been poet-in-residence at the University of Kentucky and Vassar, a professor at Columbia University and poetry editor for *The Nation*, not to mention having won several awards including the Bollingen and two Guggenheims, fine work for a man who started in his father’s bookbinding business in depression-era Brooklyn. As the title to this posthumous volume suggests, Ignatow was engaged in a philosophical search in his last years for the meaning of “living” in a time when death was immanent, and the reader discovers some curious answers in these often understated, at times sparsely elegant, but always accessible poems. The tone is almost from beyond the grave itself, as the surety of death & these are no

vague paranoias, presentiments, or vain strivings for immortality & give voice to the poems with a startling confidence: “Patient we wait / so that / once dead / we’ll know perhaps just who we were, / with others thinking back on us.” (“All Living is Lying”, 12) The first poem, “Along with our illusion,” states the theme even more bluntly: “The irony is that without death / there could be no life.” (10) Sometimes the poems risk indulgence, as if the poet & perhaps with an ear to the simplicity of William Carlos Williams, whose tone he occasionally adopts, or Robert Creeley, whom he suggests with his Elizabethan overtones & didn’t have the time to give the poems the craft one would think they deserved, and as a result, reading the poems straight through creates a fair monotony of tone and a dissatisfaction with their individual forms. As he didn’t make this selection himself & written in 1996, the year before his death, the poems were edited by Virginia Terris, Jeanette Hopkins and Yaedi Ignatow [his wife or daughter?] & and as he was no doubt depressed more than elated by his rendezvous with history, this is not surprising. The thought of death seems to have subtracted from him any sense that life itself was what defined one, as if life and death traded places and it was the distinctive moment of death, which was raging with substance, that contained elements of the “positive” & the bright side of the yin and yang, not the dark. As he asks himself: “Was I born and raised / without a life of my own?” (44) and, later, more violently: “Ways to die: by slashing your throat, cutting your wrists / hanging the body by the neck, stabbing, shooting, choking, car / crashing, drowning yourself. There are many more, but don’t bother, being busy otherwise. // One more is to be a poet.” (70) It seemed the bookends of birth and death were subsuming the book, and yet the poet is still capable of praise, and finds pleasure in knowing more about his place in the universe, as the short but perfect “Make of me its purpose,” with its subtle internal rhyme providing a baroque lilt, states: “Let the sun be the creative one / and make of me its purpose / of which I know nothing / except its aging me / as if I knew that being creative / is its aim, that is, / if the sun knows, if at all.” (48) Ignatow finds the “creative” lacking in both death and life, but gives it some exercise in what was, for him in the closing poem “Circling the silence”, the paradox of poetry: “I write to awaken silence, / to acknowledge I have nothing to say, / and it is satisfying / as if having written the poem.” (76)

## P. Inman, *At. Least.* (Krupskaya, 1999)

P. Inman’s *at. least.* continues this poet’s investigations into the word-centered/lyric nexus, replete with streams of meditations which, while fragmentary & his signature style involves the use of periods or commas in between each word, and often breaking a word in half for unique enjambments & are literary equivalents to serialist sound-clusters: “properties, into, / expressions, / ness, tatter, of, / one, unbroken // smallness, polks.” The poem “Mel;nick’s.”, inspired by David Melnick’s book *Pcoet*, is the extreme of this form & “mesa. comma. / ermines. / i’d. pages. ticking. / mape/ glimpse,” & but the suggestiveness of the words is heightened by the occasional break into ideological and historical particularity, such as “Maoism. insofar. / as. a. sender. / st.

least. animist.”, suggesting the poet as alien in world which, for all the fogs of capital, can only be seen in glimpses, but hard-coded with referentiality at that. “lieu / instead.” sacrifices the commas and periods for a fluid idiom, and is the most approachable work in the book: “temperature / vanillas. / to think w.out / statistician upon hills / how / a synonym to more land.” For his attention to the resonances of the single-letter, the syllable in isolation, and Mallarméan “white space,” Inman is an important, but underrecognized, writer of the Language group, bringing a unique, human-scaled tone to the entire project.

Andrew Klobucar, Michael Barnholden, Editors, *Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology* (New Star Books, 1999)

The KSW was, and continues to be, a grassroots organization in all senses of the word; shunning any sort of professionalism and codification of attitudes, and opting instead for an “anarcho-syndicalist” model of community, this group of experimental & highly political & poets has formed something of the the underskin to Vancouver aesthetic radicalism since the mid-1980s. As the informative introduction by the editors states, the school surfaced as a response to the closing by British Columbia’s right-wing Social Credit government of the David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, a small city that had, since the 19th-century (when the Doukhobors, a Russian radical spiritualist sect, settled there) a reputation for progressive, even utopian, attitudes. Started by writers such as Gary Whitehead, Calvin Wharton and Jeff Derksen (who has since become an important Canadian critic as well as poet), the school forged early, however troubled, ties with radical labor movements in Vancouver, most notably with the Wobblies. The writers themselves found inspiration in the New American poetics of the sixties (channeled through the Tish school of Canadian poets), but later made a turn toward “Language writing” techniques, though always maintaining a distinctive refusal to assimilate into any sort of literary or academic culture. Indeed, the “class” of this book’s title leans more toward this forging of identity against the mainstream & as a self-conscious “class” of writers & than anything to do with “workshops” and preparations to fame. Such fruitful, long-term community radicalism is rare; indeed, testament to the anti-authoritarian nature of the group is the sub-group, “The Giantesses,” formed by women writers & such as Lisa Robertson and Catriana Strang & who were troubled by the KSW’s male hegemony. This anthology doesn’t include theoretical or descriptive statements by the poets, which is unfortunate, though little theory, in fact, was produced; the members felt that published “discourse,” even manifestos, played into the norms of class rule. The poetry, however, by relative unknowns such as Gerald Greene (a intricate, long poem called “Resume” [i.e. the document with your work history on it, not the verb]), Peter Culley (elegant social-pastorals such as “Winterreise”), Kevin Davies (the bracket-within-brackets section of his book *Pause Button*), Kathryn Mcleod (technically hardcore and dazzling work, like “The Infatuation”), Dan Farrell’s entire “Thinking of You” (long out of print) and Dorothy Trujillo Lusk’s sand-blasting “Oral Tragedy,” along with excellent work by Robertson



and Derksen, are bound to pique interest in this distinctly West Coast phenomenon. The question, of course, is if the language of an activist, radical, at times abrasive, group is taken out of the contingencies of its immediate situation, can the poems achieve the effects intended, that of rearticulating and rendering visible the toxicities of class relations, or will they retreat into the history of literature, as the secret hobbies of a learned social strata? *Writing Class* doesn't answer this question, but nonetheless it is a call-to-arms in the wilds of contemporary times in which commerce has superceded community as our main "moral" interest, both on this continent and abroad. This book, more than any anthology of "avant-garde" American poetry produced in the States recently, fulfills the promise of Donald Allen's seminal *New American Poetry*, bringing as it does a truly secret, unacknowledged and often masterful group of subversive works into the light.

### David Lee, *A Legacy of Shadows: Selected Poems and News From Down to the Cafe* (Copper Canyon Press, 1999)

Lee's first book, *The Porcine Legacy* (1974), delineated the themes and style that he would investigate for his poetic career, right up to his latest volume *News from Down to the Cafe*. The style is loose, not without formal elegance, and mostly derived from the spoken speech patterns of the rural townfolk of Utah, many of whom, as the title to his first book suggests, work in raising farm animals. The first poem of his selected edition, "Loading a Boar," is Lee's *ars poetica*, showing the young writer at a loss for themes until an all-important conversation with the ubiquitous "John," a figure who appears in several poems through the years (one wonders, also, if "John" is also an allusion to Robert Creeley's "John" in his poem "I Knew A Man," also the Virgil to his Dante). In the poem, beginning "We were loading a boar," John advises: "...young feller... if you wanna by god write pomes you gotta write pomes about what you know and not about the rest and you can write about pigs and that boar and Jan and me and the rest and there aint no way you're gonna quit." (5) Lee has stuck to this idea, perhaps too hard, though at the same time taking pains to give variety to his approach, such as the "Jubilate Agno, 1975", a play on Christopher Smart's madhouse poem about his cat Jeffrey. Lee, of course, writes of his "black sow Blackula," occasionally with invention: "For we feed her red beets to watch her smile. / For she is humble when well-fed. / For she makes her point well when she is hungry. / For there is nothing swifter than a sow breaking fence whne she desires." (9) Lee's irreverence is not as winning as, say, James Tate's, whom he sometimes resembles in his half-ironic, but never cynical, view of life, and he has none of Tate's formal ability. Quite often, he seems like a second-rate fiction writer who has hit on something that could identify him to the market & pigs, his cast of locals, the "flavor" of the rural & rarely seems bothered that the very long poems of his several volumes rarely have the content to justify them. Nonetheless, he has adopted some of the tones and mystery of Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, or Americans interested in small town vignettes such as Frost or Edgar Lee Masters, as in the short but effective "Idyll," about "Charley Baker's idiot girl / [...] picking dandelions/ [...] mind empty as sky," which ends: "No bother / wind rooting her

curls / she was happy in the flowers / waving half-acre handfuls / of gold coins / to the cars going by.” Not unlike James Wright, Lee has a fondness for long titles, and his poem “What Happened When Bobby Jack Cockrum Tried To Bring Home A Pit Bulldog, or, What His Daddy Said To Him That Day,” is worthy of Wright with the suddenness of its ending, writing that a grizzly bear had once given “a final exam / he couldn’t help / but pass.” (419) The poem “Phone Call” is an effective vignette of community politics, as the protagonist, Lee, attempts to tell a Mr. Williamson that her cow is about to give birth, having first to break through several layers of suspicion & “Is this about selling Amway?” & before finally breaking through, earning Williamson’s gratitude, a metaphor, one supposes, for the general suspicion of poetry as an art & a utile art, in this case & and an imagination of how it would be appreciated once it’s given an ear. Lee’s work is refreshingly unpretentious, open and generous to his surroundings, and the lineation and innovations in dialectic language is convincing and smart, but the poems often pile up detail and observation without any aura of great meaning & he’s no Faulkner or Joyce & not the worst crime, but finally belittling of the possibilities of poetry.

### Lisa Lubasch, *How Many More of Them Are You?* (Avec Books, 1999)

A poet in her mid-twenties, Lubasch writes with the intensity of a poet witnessing the “birth of consciousness” in the classic late-nineteenth century sense, and, indeed, of the echoes that resound in her debut volume, those of the most angsty, defiant and uber-menschlich Europeans –Rimbaud, Nietzsche, Lautreamont, or the ironist Laforgue & are the most apparent. The book is broken into six sections, each of which is a poem augmented by lengthier “Notes” and “Leprosarium,” these last of which comprise eighty or so percent of the work. The writing is about half “prose” & in paragraphs of one or so sentences, at times even less –and half prosily-metered, quieter meditative verse. The prose sections are mostly apostrophic, with direct addresses to the reader or the powers that be, addressing this issue of being and consciousness with the fury of a new Promethean: “O vile and sophisticated burglars of the night. These are all my incantations! / Of the sun that searches out its prey, then buries it, I say ‘Deceptive sunlight! Implacable sidewalk! (Barren amour) . “ Her use of the asterisk to separate these sentence paragraphs works to great effect, putting her at the crossroads of a valorization of the fragment and of accessing the continuities of lyrical declamation: “O primitive cattle. Turned inside your pimply hides. When will we come out and cry ‘God save us and the horses!’ \* No more. Throw heroic deeds into the dirty den of ‘progress.’ Empiricism goes to the \* prostitute of the decade! Mefie toi!” (74) There are many quotable lines, mostly centering around this theme of the identity shaken of its philosophical surety, hence collapsed into the mundane, a-spiritual materiality of existence which counters all easy idealism (“progress”) , the point at which true consciousness & certainly of the poet & begins. Thus, *How Many...* strikes one as a speaking-out-of-the-dark of singular being into the free connectivities of language, as when she describes herself as “a dried up prune in a Cartesian

universe” and that: “A beautiful error invents me. That of my own fist.” Echoing the Rimbaud’s “Season in Hell” directly, she asks, “Is I its own imperative?” and reaches that same point of world-weariness which drove the French poet to Africa: “No, love resembles all great forms of torpor, writing its one page endlessly.” More ethereal, less psychologically performative considerations, whether of the epistemological quandaries of seeing or of being-in-the-world, are provided, hence moving her into realms resembling contemporary French poetry or that of “Language” writers such as Lyn Hejinian: “You didn’t understand the terms. / The thin vamp of that fog, another / language which keeps on...” (39) But it is the bright irony and earnestness of the prose passages that gives this book its tone, finding predecessors in America perhaps only in Williams’ hysterical, existential yet domestic Kora in Hell (“So what of the redhead in the supermarket? Shouldn’t we put our carrots in the basket first?” she writes) or Frank O’Hara’s early “maudit” writing such as the prose sequence “Oranges” and the surrealist lava-gush “Easter”. It’s a fraught ride that Lubasch (oddly enough, a graduate of the Iowa Writer’s Workshop) provides, and one looks forward to what her future, already fore-warned as a mine-field of possibilities, holds.

## Jacqueline Osherow, *Dead Men’s Praise* (Grove Press, 1999)

Osherow is not afraid to show off her easy mastery of the terza rima — Dante’s line of choice in the *Divine Comedy* — nor her significant abilities in other forms such as the sonnet and villanelle, in this, her fourth collection. But while the ur-“new Formalist” poet, Anthony Hecht, would include self-consciously mundane “20th century” materials in his poems, he rarely sacrificed a aristocratic pace to accommodate the present day’s taste for kitch, democratic accessibility, or the dropped domestic fourth-wall. Osherow, however, with a fine ear attuned to the best qualities of Jewish humor — the mating of metaphysical concerns with those of daily living, the ability to spin off on seemingly endless tangents, the playful direct addresses to a *mensch*-like God — utilizes the meter brilliantly, at times suggesting Auden’s mastery of Byron’s *Don Juan* stanza in his own “Letter to Lord Byron”: “Besides, I’m not sure God much cares for piety; / my guess is & since David was his favorite & / That He’s partial to passion, sponteneity, // And likes a little genuine regret. / True, David lost his ill-begotten child & / But what did the pious ever get?” (“Views of La Leggenda della Vera Croce”, 11) The central themes of the book may, at first glance, not seem unusual: poems about looking at Renaissance art and desiring an equal verbal language, poems asking where is God in the world, and how could He have let the Holocaust happen and did faith survive in the camps, etc. However, the combination of working in these meters & she calls *terza rima* her “camouflage” in the last line of the book & while, at the same time, including such vignettes as her chancing upon the site of the oldest synagogue in Europe (recently been discovered near Rome), or considering the Yiddish language and the invisibility of Jewish poet Benjamin Peret in the footnotes of a diary of Anna Ahkmatova & make this a drama of the negotiation of cultures on a grand scale. None of the poems in this highly formal book are mere excercises, nor is

the content ever forced; each addresses, or gets around to addressing (after making sure you're listening), issues that are close to Osherow, and tied into her faith, such as the funny "Science Psalm" (one of her sequence of rewrites of the Psalms): "[...] And I like picturing myself among the ancients, / This English of mine a language safely dead, / And schoolchildren uncertain whether Xerxes, El Cid, / Or Jimmy Carter fought the Trojan Wars, / Giggling, no doubt, at the ridiculous lengths of time / It took our crude machines to get to Saturn... / Relativity, if not utterly forsaken / Evolved into a simple grade-school theorem." (85) It's hard to get over the feeling, when reading Osherow, that perhaps these meters are better suited to a more earnest tone, and that her ruminations, which are often brilliant, could be edged into more innovative philosophical realms if she sacrificed her need to be speech-like, chatty. Her sonnet and some of the "psalms," which lack the verbosity of her funnier material don't impress enough formally, seem unaccomplished, and seem from a book by a less-facile, less-interesting thinker &em; these are, often, her more purely devotional work. However, she is an attractive presence on the literary scene, and this book is tremendously enjoyable, and it would be hard to criticize such a good natured, obviously talented, poet.

## Jena Osman, *The Character* (Beacon Press, 1999)

Winner of the 1998 Barnard New Women Poets Prize, Osman presents a complete portrait of the interests of postmodern aesthetic theory, ranging from the rarified take on Brecht's alienation effect that keeps its metaphysics while discarding its directness, to such techniques as the "page-as-score," the legibility of non-linguistic signs, the use of disjunctive footnotes (some of which are footnotes to footnotes), collage texts (and its natural biproduct, surrealism), and the cancelling plays of multiple identities. She also engages popular themes such as the epistemology of vision ("What I thought was a sudden chop in / the metal was actually a drop of / water one foot in front of the / metal, my eye joining the two in a / simple surgery" from "The Agrarian" [p.50]) and actively blurs the genre differences between poetry, essay, fiction and drama, an old chestnut of the postmodern slant on the modernisms of everyone from Stein to Joyce. As Hejinian writes in her introduction, this is all combined in the term of the "character," which at times can mean the elements of the alphabet, the "moral fiber" of an individual, the unique figure as found in novels and plays ("Performance requires the person who is the actor (i.e., already a character) to be in character, and this, in turn, cannot occur without performance," Hejinian writes [p. xii]), and the mark of difference in identities: "she's such a character." At times the writing is very compelling, creating a range of interests that circulate around specific themes, as in the long poem "Authorities (A Lecture)", a rumination on power and evil which circles around the figure of Iago in Othello ("The presence of Iago questions the flawed system. He goes beyond the stance of necessary evil, a tool for ultimately attaining (through his discard) a cathartic utopian state for the spectator. He is, in fact, part of that 'utopian' state." [p. 65]) with a concurrent strand of discourse around experimental poetics, defending its

ties to methods of chance to the “nature of judgement itself” [p. 64] being grounded in chance. The poem ends with a re-editing of transcripts from a session of the Supreme Court which reads like a conversation among the gods of a dangerously enfeebled Parnassus, as Sandra Day O’Conner asks: “Does a reasonable person know how to read?” The excerpt from “The Periodic Table as Assembled by Dr. Zhivago, Oculist,” a hypertext poem that, once on-line, would allow the user to create new compounds from the poems provided, rewrites the abbreviations of this table according to subjective or aleatoric laws, such that “hydrogen” becomes “harness,” and is listed under the “elements that contribute to sight” [p. 27]. While in its static state on the page the poem is doesn’t add up to much more than often engaging juxtapositions of words, a section from “Rayguns to Radium” explicates how this scrambling of the foundational glyph of modern science expands to take on social mores: “Madame Curie discovered us in the pitchblende / and no subject since has so interested the mind / of the general public. Next in line was the discovery / of a radius of light, generic weaponry for all.” Osman can sink into a mannered academic auto-pilot mode with already conventional attempts at density that only throw the reader off in her prose poems, and the ones broken into lines often lack any rhythmal drive. Despite this, the poems thrive on the compelling promise of depth without ever sacrificing their complete contents, which is, one supposes, what a “character” in its many manifestations invariably does.

Richard Caddel, Peter Quartermain, Editors, *Other: British and Irish Poetry Since 1970*  
(Wesleyan, 1999)

Though England has seen a spate of recent anthologies of alternative U.K. poetry, this collection marks the first published in the States in over two decades. Editors Caddel, a noted poet, and Quartermain, a prominent critic of postmodern poetry, collect a diverse and exciting range of work that is evenly balanced between such trends as Caribbean dub poetry, the mellifluous, baroque lyric as it has been developed in Cambridge, London-based performance and concrete poetry, and “outsider” figures such as Bill Griffiths (an independent Anglo-Saxon scholar) and Tom Raworth, who first found appreciation in the States. The compelling introduction traces a nation’s literary history that has had to come to terms with a number of factors: the troubled importation of globally dominant American poetic theories, post-colonialism and the subversions of normative English by dialects or Caribbean “nation languages,” and — perhaps foremost — the fact of an experimental English tradition that pre-dated twentieth century modernism, and which “stretches back to Claire, Blake, Smart, and the two Vaughans, Henry and Thomas.” The result has been a “fair field of folk” in contemporary British culture, which the editors see as “packed with chaotic overlays of cultures” — certainly a different impression than conservative poets such as Larkin, Hughes, Hill or Heaney would ever have us believe. The selections from the 55 poets are brief yet excellent. Barry McSweeney, a self-styled Rimbaudian, is represented by a number of terse, direct poems that flaunt provocative language in a way that suggests

his model (“Small / crawling piety, you deserve / many bombs / & / guns. // I ate your Christian fish.”), while Denise Riley’s subtle, tradition-conscious ear helps surface lines that are unexpectedly comforting (“Rain lyrics. Yes, then the rain lyrics fall. / I don’t want absence to be this beautiful. / It shouldn’t be; in fact I know it wasn’t...”). Tom Raworth’s “That More Simple Natural Time Tone Distortion,” a sonic joy-ride of one-to-three word lines, is a contrast to his traditional lyric “Out of a Sudden”: “the alphabet wonders / what it should do / paper feels useless / colours lose hue // while all musical notes / perform only in blue”), while Tom Leonard’s Glasgow Scots, not unlike John Agard’s Guyanese-inflected idiom, brings to eye and ear a sweet, alien yet confident music that is unlike anything in the States. Leonard’s portrait of lower middle class apathy is vulnerable and concrete in a way suggesting Williams: “yi surta / keep trynti avoid it that’s / thi difficulty bitty it // jist / no keep findn yirsell / sitn / wotchn thi telly ur / lookn oot thi windy / [...] wiv nay / cookn oil nwi need / potatoes.” Veronica Forrest-Thomson, a poet and critic who died at 28, cheekily mixes the linguistic investigations of Wittgenstein, the stagey learning of Eliot and the languor of Keats, to create monologues that entertain as they dally with subversion: “Though my deserted frying pans lie around me / I do not want to make it cohere. / Hung up to dry for fishing lines on the side of grey wharf of Lethe. / Old, we love each other and know more.” Chris Cheek, Maggie O’Sullivan and concrete poet Bob Cobbing are all well represented, as well as important figures responsible for the influx of New American poetry to the islands, Eric Mottram, Roy Fisher and Andrew Crozier. This is an important sourcebook to a literature that is probably more marked by the postcolonial condition than that of the United States, with fewer heroes but with, perhaps, more fruitful divergences from the main modernist line.

## Bob Perelman, *Ten to One: Selected Poems* (Wesleyan, 1999)

Perelman has distinguished himself from his Language peers by moving recently into academic respectability, publishing two books of criticism, the second of which, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, was about the Language movement itself. Temperamentally more congenial than poets such as Bruce Andrews, Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten, who have often opted for theoretic density or outright opacity in both poetry and prose, Perelman is often considered the most “accessible” or even “lyrical” Language poet, but one can also say he is the most rational, as his poetry sacrifices common aspects of aesthetic affect & such as the angst-ridden dialectic between personal expression and the integrity of form & for a sort of plain-spoken irony in a tradition that can be traced back to the Enlightenment, or which can be linked to more recent concerns with the stasis of “entropy”. An early poem such as “An Autobiography” is a play on the type of minimal French novelette, and Perelman is quite apt at satirizing the more indulgent, but perhaps also un-American, aspects of this genre, such as the disclosure of repressed sensibility amidst the traumas of a confessional statement: “I wanted to cover my mother with kisses, and for her to have no clothes on. It was quite usual to feel one side of the face getting sunburned, while the other was being frozen.

A journey of this kind is no joke. [...] I always wanted to give them to her on her bosom. Be so good as to remember that I lost her, in childbed, when I was barely seven.” Of his “father,” he writes, with metaphysical, Catholic overtones (murder striking at the heart): “I abhorred my father. He brought with him memories of how it feels to be intensely, fiercely hungry. He came and interrupted our kisses.” [p. 2] Oddly, Perelman’s poetry is very atypical of Language writing in that its distrust in the referent is disclosed discursively rather than by example; that is, more like a Barthes than a Bernstein, he appears less concerned with deterritorializing language such as to the push its “presence” as the explain, casually, perhaps reductively, the links between syntax and other ontological phenomemon: “No place exists even once. Even before / Birth, earlier made up syntax / Could tell you apart / From a thing or two, nothing waiting / In the wind, spiritual placebo plus / The actual problem of dying.” [“Statement, p. 53] However, like Bernstein, he can be deathly funny, and uses bathos quite well, as in the poem “Oedipus Rex,” which could have been out of Mel Brooke’s *History of the World Part I*: “What news, ancient uncle, from the transcendental desktop? / KREON: The people, hemmed in by liberal playgrounds / and rightwing communicatons systems, are dead / or dying. No one’s complaining, mind you, but with the inauguration just hours away the sky seems to be crumbling, and the decibel level in some stadiums is below that of Mallarme’s tomb. / God thought you should know.” [p. 70] Included in the volume is the poem made famous by Frederic Jameson, “China,” which in hindsight is witty still, but nonetheless a toned down, less masterful version of something from Ashbery’s *The Tennis Coart Oath*. Perelman can be frequently faulted for not really achieving enough effects in his poems, as many of them &em; including the 6-word-to-a-line poems which intend, conceptually, to play on the arbitrariness of form &em; are rhythmically unvaried or unexciting, or at least lack the sort of decisions that, when made well, inspires the reader’s interest in the meter and sound patterning, and by extension the content. The poems work well as “assays” into topical issues &em; Chomsky would be happy with such poetry, as it offers no delusions, and yet is pleasant enough to read &em; but one asks “Is it art?” Perelman, with a nod to Duchamp’s subversions of the retina, would delight in the question.

## J. H. Prynne, *Poems* (Bloodaxe Books, 1999)

The publication of *Poems*, Prynne’s collected books from “Kitchen Poems” (1968) to “For the Monogram” (1997) is a literary event that will probably be unparalleled for some time. For several decades, Prynne has been the major figure of what has been dubbed, often inaccurately, the “Cambridge” group of poets, mostly because of the strong influence of his early books, such as “Kitchen Poems” and “White Stones,” on young English poets in the seventies, such as John Wilkinson and Denise Riley, who attended Cambridge University where he still taught and still teaches. That his influence would have a peculiarly local cast is not accidental: Prynne decided early on that his books &em; each of which would usually contain one twenty or so page sequence &em; would only be published in small editions, partly as a response to the



instant absorption of experimental poetics into academic parlance & a parallel to capitalism's instant absorption of all opposition and singularity & and partly to honor their quiet, hermetic quality. Hence, his poems rarely, if ever, had distribution in the States, or even far outside of Cambridge. Nonetheless, he has acquired a reputation, deservedly, as one of the major English poets of his time, a position drenched with ethical significance as he's never caved in to the calls of celebrity or other forms of "selling out" & his verse, if anything, has gotten less commodifiable over the years. For a first window on to the underside of the "Hill, Hughes, Heaney axis" of English poetry, look no further. Prynne's early work departed mostly, so history says, from his reading of Olson and an interest in science, particularly metallurgy, but have a heightened rhetoric that never strays into the indulgently eccentric manner of the American, and contain a political earnestness and subtle rationality (not to mention wit) that keeps them tethered to the matter at hand: "And don't let some / wise and quick-faced historical rat tell us about / the industrial north and its misery, since every / songbird since then (& with \_no\_ honorable / exception for D.H. Lawrence) has carolled [sic] about / that beautiful black colour as if / this were the great rot in the heart." ("Die a Millionaire," 15) The work in "Kitchen Poems" introduced what has since become a staple formal feature of Prynne's work, which is the use of contrasting meters & usually an iambic based line versus a two-beat, syncopated balladic line & within a single poem, the latter set off by indents and occurring in sets, giving the appearance of the poem a cascading effect. Given that, he also engages in a much freer line in other early work such as "Day Light Songs", a work that is steeped in praise for life and nature not unlike another English poet which whom Prynne shares qualities and contradictions, Gerard Manley Hopkins: "And so when it does / rain & will glide / down our necks like / glances into / the soul, drop / lets work their / way forward the sinus / is truly the scent / of the earth, upraised" (27). There is no way to reduce the over 400 pages of work presented here to simple phrases; the long view shows that the pattern of production seems to be from dense, large canvas exercises interspersed with lighter, lyrical sequences & overtly "political works" contrasted with spare "private" ones & but that says little. Many of the poems just strike one as "major" and demand attention, such as "The Bee Target on his Shoulder" (1971), which moves through several registers in its 3-pages (the model, perhaps, being William Carlos Williams' decidedly non-collage \_The Desert Music\_), a sort of Proustian ramble of recollection, but with mythological resonances, as if a paean to the lost anthropomorphism of the gods: "Gratefully they evade the halflight / rising for me [...] / Be gentle with his streamy locks until he gets the wrapper off. / Strip pieces of flesh from the animals lying dead in the streets. / Love him, in \_le silence des nuits, l'horreur des cimetières\_; / otherwise the trendy book will slide / into the bath and linger there." (152) Later sequences like "Not-You" (1993) seem to offer no basal metrical figure to use for guidance & the forms range from three-line stanzas to staggered, "fragmentary" lines that work like tone clusters whose aural figure isn't discernible until the sounding of the final lines: "Her pan click / elb / second fix / for them / pencil / breather park / over / talk at small to." (392) Another later sequence, "Her Wild Weasels Returning," (1994) is made of dense 24-line poems in which traces of a meditating persona are mostly erased, though linger still as the supporting narrative structure. It is as metrically consistent as "Not-You" appears not to be: "I saw / her wings in speedy

strip like a shadow in the sand / or in growth like natural reason, her heart so vast / as justly to make cause with the fiery fountain sealed / on track right across \_terra nullius\_ overhead” (416). Prynne seems at once the most “avant-garde” of later-century English poets & his word-play borders on the recursivity of Stein or the \_over\_-determinacy underlying the mosaic surfaces of Finnegans Wake, and seems to have resolved certain problems involving lyrical subjectivity that were glossed over by the Language poets & and yet the most convincingly traditional, in that his formal grace, his skill with “numbers” & he is as metrically competent and deliberate as his Cambridge precursor, Thomas Gray & is closest to a “classical” sensibility for these democratic times than the sickly ironies the “Movement” poets, who didn’t know their time.

## Lytle Shaw, *Cable Factory 20* (Atelos, 1999)

Shaw’s book-length poem & part faux-documentary, part pastoral meditation on landscapes both mental and post-industrial, and something of a novel & spins centrifugally from an investigation of the conceptual artist Robert Smithson, best known for his “earthwork” Spiral Jetty which once extended into Utah’s Great Salt Lake. But this is not homage to the artist or his work, but rather an imaginative reconstruction of Smithson’s idiosyncratic topics and methods of research and the anti-humanist, near ascetic set of values he took into artistic creation. *Cable Factory 20*’s nearest literary analog (outside of Smithson’s writing itself) is the Surrealist novel-of-epiphanies, most particularly Breton’s *Nadja*, though in this case the flaneur is not within the obvious social centers of his chosen city & the coffee shops and hotels, parks and sidewalks & but on its peripheries, where the debris of industry forces one into a new chronological scale in which one greets self-estrangement in an sublime though microscopic set of non-anthropocentric values: “Each city is actually a twin / with the city of ‘Environs,’ where / motion propels into a phrase / universe whose quality of surrounding [...] / allows suffixes, abrasion. / And from here, the twin evils: / (disbelief in substance, / the body as final container) / appear as so many programmatic / whiffs.” (24) Developing upon the much “language-centered” writing’s concern with the “word/world” axis (the site of the self in constant exchange with the “things” of society’s dream), most particularly the careful rhythms of Barrett Watten and Lyn Hejinian, the book nonetheless occasionally takes on more familiar tones, as a “narrator” & more like a mischievous guide to the funhouse of the mind & will provide the pellucid facts and cryptic commentary: “In 1936 ferry service stopped / and the pier fell into disrepair. / One’s mind and the earth / are in a constant state of erosion. / I claim a drone about elements / as memory begins to assert, / to squat in: / organizing, now, a geography / of blimps, sailboats. / Mental rivers wear away / abstract banks, / brain waves / undermind cliffs of thought, / barely visible industry.” (71) Though sacrificing the named protagonists of a *Nadja* or Olson’s *Maximus*, Shaw nonetheless weaves a “story”: someone is investigating something specific, somewhere specific, needs knowledgable guides, finds things and discards them (according to what hierarchy of values?), there is time to spend and time to lose,

fortuitous incidents, unforeseen set-backs, and so on & the plays on the tropes of fiction are many. The cumulative effect is like all the essential essences of noir stripped of its cage of plot and narrative & like meeting Welles' "third man" over and over again: "Could he—then, could I?— / rush the approach, stroll into / a parking lot and find it // there, / ostentation in gumbo mud. To rush / took on a new enthusiasm— / the return to the city: cords trailing, zigzagged for / kneaded mounds & down to / scale and ascent, where / a dislocation point / widens." (25) Perhaps the double, in this instance, is Smithson himself, as the book ends on with a sequence derived from Smithson's writing in which he writes of seeing "Mud Salt Crystals Rock Water" from the twenty views possible from within the spiral jetty. Shaw's book never escapes that repetition either, as the very notion of "progress" is rendered inane in entropic teleology of his poetics. "So hagiography / deposits / yields in shallow water, / sinking to place / toward stalked markers. // This way / analog delay / grows digital, / lodging specimens / in fantasies / of collapse never ours..." (16). Perhaps Ashbery and his constant state of "in medias res," or, on another limb, Nathaniel Mackey's ghostly echoings of synchronic Africa culture come to mind here. But with Shaw, the page itself becomes the archeological site & not just a metaphor, but component of the same type of project & as each is bordered with images purposely decayed through photocopy reproduction, mostly of maps, dinosaurs, machines, and often repeating in patterns to create a sort of "filmic" experience, hence making the presence of words on the page one more example of the "trace" that corrupts as it transforms and decays. This is one of the most interesting books of the year, and certainly a terrific first book.

## Rod Smith, *Protective Immediacy* (Roof Books, 1999)

Smith is part of an exciting DC-based community of poets who, for all their devotion to formal experimentation and a critical social vision, are generally very amusing, coupling a knack for stand-up "slacker-comedy with sheer lyric elegance. This new book is a honed display in five sections of all the virtues of Smith's writing, including his complete mix-and-mastery of several strands of American poetics, ranging through Projective Verse, Berrigan-esque collage (more intellectual, but still with a Lower East Side "tune-in drop-out" dopiness), the clipped line of Williams, and the provocative opacities of the Language School. As the epitaph to the first section, "The Boy Poems," states, "Humor is a process. Depression / a useful first step," and this synthesis of comedy/melancholy is what distinguishes the often intellectual verse of Smith from the pack: "Speaker: Agon means / that ache you can / really see, right? / non-speaker: in some / x, the gross national / awkward. Oh hell, / Speaker: "Prove it" & " (14) . The page arrangement of "The Boy Poems" & each with titles like "Boris," "Bert," "The Buddha," and "John Fitzgerald" & are like word-sculptures, somehow beautiful to see in their stasis on the page despite the heady, fluid meanings of the poems themselves. "Simon" theorizes this condition: "The implicit is / Arrival, approach / impasse & a hand issuing from a grasp & / These

alternatives cannot be harmonized. /1 But harmony sucks anyway.” (17) Human liberation is to be at stake in these poems written from the country’s capitol, as the fixity of corporate systems upon the mushy human emotions is part of the drama inherent in Smith’s colliding discourses: “This is the heart of all living / systems & The workshop mode flows formatively / across the morphogenic light-born attractor / at the focal point of time and reemerges as / the Diet Coke stain on Bert’s disintegrating / mostly purple tie-dye.” (“Bert,” 22) . Because Smith is so comfortable living among grand thoughts & he he has a natural “visionary” bent suggestive of mild-mannered Blake or a human-scale Pynchon & his idiom has a worldliness which belies a mistrust in naive acceptance of political dialectics or theoretical superstructures. But it is when these two elements meet & the mistrust anchoring the “vision” & that the humor of human” bathos arises (he pokes fun at his theory-minded brethren, here, too) : “A Nestea before the sex show / & a full length sofa bed / to teach the Cantos from & / this represents the temporal / hidden within the temporal. / The grapes though expensive / need impaling.” (35) Smith’s ear is infallible & he can mix, in a single poem, verbatim quotes from Bob Dylan with polysyllabic science words, ballad-like strains, “plain speech” prose and weird word-lists, such as: “schiekase schmo / schmoose / schmooze / schmuck / Schnabel” (64) , sheer nonsense which tells, in the meantime, the whole story of the New York painter’s fall from avant-garde grace. Through all these dada-esque hijincks, however, he always keeps the question of basic freedom versus the (failed) social contract in focus: “the sum tottle seems to ink us out / sheepish science dealing & important / — neither Spain nor Plain & / a health-related basic thing that people matter more than money.” (71) “What’s that little plan / you live in?” the poem “John Fitzgerald” asks, and Smith offers no answers, but no plans, either.

## Anne Tardos, *Uxudo* (O Books, 1999)

The foreword by poet Caroline Bergvall states that *Uxudo* & written in spliced together bits of Hungarian, German, French, English and made-up languages, as well as pronunciation keys and other linguistic graphs & is a “multilingual text,” a form of first language itself which “throws up the xenophobic asymmetries of difference.” (8). Indeed, the writing begins to take on a life of its own, inviting the reader into a world of semantic and phonologic echoes, an effect furthered by the inclusion of several of Tardos’s video images, many of which themselves repeat with different digital effects. As an art piece, one thinks of a much-less elegant Christian Boltanski and his out-of-focus black and white portrait photos arranged as alters, shadows in silent deference to, and communication with, the lives lost in the Holocaust. As many of the texts of *Uxudo* are either Fluxus-inspired doggerel, sing-songy chants, or simply candid bits from everyday life, the wafts of Europe’s lost innocence are hard to ignore. As visual poems, they resemble the French Lettrism, which to American eyes tend to look ugly & most of the technology employed here is low end, and not very slick, the fonts clashing and the margins loose –but whose chaos becomes endearing once divined.

The first line, “Aller Sunden Katzen zusammengefasst,” finds its echo on the facing page: “All sins of cats rolled into one / Where do we come from and where do we go? / Images, mon ami, ich smoke nicht mehr. / Gem would I do.” (19) The contrast of the fairytale line with the most basic question of the cultural exile, followed by two mixed-language sentences that make sense despite their word replacement, leads one immediately into this interstitial area that could very well be the road from Kosovo, Bosnia, or other war-torn European nation state & a margin at the heart of the center. Later, a flurry of equal signs leads the reader on a heady joy-ride of mistranslation: “quake = tremblement = Beben = renges” (22) for example, or “uxudo uxudo = uxudo = uxudo = uxudo = uxudo” (42) as if parodying the mind’s inability to make sense out of the solipsistic word. After looking at this book for a fair amount of time, one is not sure if the Zaum-like neologisms are not, in fact, Hungarian, as Tardos’s unreliable witness has already acquired a reputation for slipping away when apparently most needed. In contrast to the recently-in-vogue multimedia Dictee by the late Korean American artist Theresa Cha & a text which relates, however obliquely, the story of Korea’s annexation by Japan- Uxudo (the title itself comes from a word that appeared in the text after a computer malfunction) exists no where more than in the mind, where words, in the act of improvisation, have to be created out of air as the linguistic environment: “multiplicatering = multiplikatern.” Page 30 playfully contains the pronunciation guide and definition of the foreign words on page 31, but even after that, meaning is quite elusive: Hochgeduld after nine from a fountain / Gekreuzung vielmehr, which is how it’s done / Neighboryly jolie bete / Give it time, haromvaros.” (31) The words following this bit, “Afterimage = Nachbild,” sums up the project of Uxudo: it is a collection of resonances, shadows, scraps and funky constructs, mixed with the fading light of the nihilistic, playful response to this disillusionment that characterized avant-garde art of the early century. It’s modernism and the nostalgia for modernism.

## Merv Taylor, *The Goat* (Junction Press, 1999)

This follow-up to his critically acclaimed *An Island of His Own* is a terse, dense collection of imagistic poems that ponder, without gloom nor intellectual dispassion, the chaos of a world in which nature and instinct have been corrupted by the movement of a colonizing, industrializing society. “On the Ave.”, the opening poem, sets the stage, taking place in “one of those nights / when the intersection is crazy / with cars,” moving swiftly through casual, but angst-tinged observation & “that guy spinning / in his wheelchair , the one / whom the paramedics / don gloves to handle” & finally landing on the overwhelming question: “There’s a red moon to go / with his craziness / and a gun salute from a rooftop. / Can we be seen with the lights on? / Are they firing at the moon?” (15) Most of the poems are portraits of people on society’s fringes, those who most suffer from culture’s incoherence, from the “Old Soldier in the Park” (“his white hair flying / against the green, / a bird out of formation”) to the pathetic (in the uncorrupted sense) story of “Sleepy,” about a mother who spots her son’s face on a wanted poster: “Imagine how she looks / like she’s not looking, / but

she knows that eye, / lazy like hers.” (18) The shared physiological trait binds mother and son in what the photographer Diane Arbus would call the “aristocracy of the freak,” and yet even the neighborhood’s society even operates against her, in that her friends know where he is, but “Not one will tell, / not even the one / who gave him the name / Sleepy.” (18) Sometimes Taylor’s touch is lighter and pastoral, as in the lines “the snow has no philosophy / but to fall for two days straight,” (23) but he can also stray into bathetic overstatement, as in his poem “A Witness,” dedicated to the then-United States poet laureate, Robert Hass: “He had undertaken the job as caretaker / to his country’s eloquence, in charge / of its rhymes, its superstitions / in the year of the most stars pitched.” (52) But these last are rare moments, and his careful attention to detail and sentences structure, pay off in minor masterpieces of concision such as the opening verse of “Sighting”: “Along the edge of the marsh / appears a body, making / the woman on her patio / scream so loudly / voices from a late picnic / rise next door” (77), which moves, with a butterfly’s agility, filmically from frame to frame, bringing the first frame closer into focus while never dispelling its aura, mystery, or sense of danger. Like Williams, with whom he shares the capacity to create art out of the minutest surprises, he can present deep contradiction that others may have missed & such as how the event of death is often an positive force, a funeral therapeutic & but with truthful understatement: “The man stretched out / in the parlor has brought / us together // [...] I never noticed before that / Verni has dark, pretty eyes / and Uncle Cassey’s hands / are as smooth as putty.” (78) Taylor’s New York poems are, not unlike like Lorca’s, a virtuosic series of apocalyptic yet domestic vignettes, finding the pain in all desire, the beauty in decay, as when the poet, who can’t write from wrist pain, observes: “Then the girl on the blue bike / rode between us, and a desire / to pluck the harpstrings // caused the tendonitis / to flare up again.” (28) Finding no easy answers, yet never letting his lyrical and painterly gift spiral off into irrelevance, Taylor remains true to his desire to get his world on paper, and because he feels himself “global” and of a class with the mentors he names, Allen Ginsberg and Joseph Brodsky, he renders his world with a moral authority that is true to the particular.

## Rodrigo Toscano, *Partisans* (O Books, 1999)

Toscano’s *Partisans* injects a startling new breath of urgency in contemporary poetics, one that skates awfully close to such politically activated texts as Bruce Andrews’ *I Don’t Have Any Paper So Shut Up* or Myung Mi Kim’s *Dura*, but which doesn’t lose its very specific questioning of political agency beneath its cross-cut surface. The twelve parts of this book-length work each consider a specific moment in thinking about progressive politics — “unveil[ing] the conjoined agency of human labor and grammatical component” in Barrett Watten’s phrase from the book jacket — with such titles as “Present Perfect Progressive” and “Simple Past” identifying the perspective taken amidst the historical flux, pointing to concepts of closed historical determinacies and never ironic ideas of utopias to-be. Its short, tight lines, which move through

several modes of rhetoric from the direct address, the declamatory, the lyric and the quasi-hermetic, never lose steam as Toscano plows through his manic considerations of aesthetics and society. The following is near-Poundian razzling of activist poetics, condemning as it is precise: “Flouting history, rambling spleen’d / <a sign of Banality> // Spouting ethics, shunning touch / <a sign of Celebrity> // Sorting concepts, draping needs / <a sign of Obscurity>” (9). Toscano’s “wordwork” — the poem is obsessed with the nature of poetry as “labor” in an poetic economy that is, even at its margins, compromised by the exigencies of the “market” — is always tempered by his quest for the “collective” revolutionary consciousness, such that even the short time it takes to bring the poem to the print drops it from its immediate social moment: “By the time this all gets sketched, typed / circulated, confiscated, allocated / celebrated, denigrated, reiterated / obfuscated, recuperated, activated / it will have lost its gain / so to speak / will have had to begin / again / between” (12) he writes, mourning, perhaps, the loss of his address to the confines of the white page and the bookshelf *Partisans* takes a stance against “beauty” & it is as pared and honed as Brecht’s later poetry — and certainly against the idea of a beautiful soul, but consequently avoids the pessimism and turn toward the ironic that much latter-day lyricism possesses in the face of disappointment with the revolutionary moment: “So back to irony-ville / petty bourgeois-ville // round and round / eclectic hectic and peptic” (20). His metaphysics of social “Agent(cy)” seems to center around the idea of a “social surplus” which can be engaged for social transformation for “Doing” — a surplus created in the margins of the bourgeois self and which, to this time, has been the static, inactive area from which most avant-garde American poetries have surfaced. “And why not / partisans // So so democratic / postmodern muzzling / 1 Having been fitted / having been summoned by it / In the present (but of the past) / the subject // We ‘ye, as a *has been* / or stand in — for // Now? A muffled yet pressing now” (41), he asks, bringing to light the necessity of a singular, staunch view amongst the calls for plurality and untranslatability that have become catchwords of late-progressive literary and political theory. However, even Toscano realizes that, in this case at least, his verbal essay may not be more than a tone mourning the loss of collective action and will in the later 20th century, an urge toward “the dazzling brightness / of realism,” the “tattered / fettered / committed.” Poetry may very well be the unsatisfactory vehicle, as he writes toward the end, imagining himself before a crowd: “So I’m facing faces / as I recite this / as I’m looked at // quizzically?” (47) But this line is followed by “*toward yourselves too*”, throwing the ball back in the court where he has, fairly and unpretentiously, returned it, into the minds and hearts of the readers who are being challenged by this extraordinary, difficult, but noble and ennobling text. “Readers / as agents” (49)

## Jose Garcia Villa, *The Anchored Angel: Selected Writings* (Kaya, 1999)

Kaya Production continues its innovative line of Asian American poetry with this selected edition of the writing of Filipino American Jose Garcia Villa. As the famous 1948 photograph from the Gotham Book Mart reception of Dame Edith Sitwell



suggests & in which he appeared with the likes of Elizabeth Bishop, Delmore Schwartz, Gore Vidal, W. H. Auden and other luminaries & Villa was something of an anomaly, in that he was a writer coming from a colonial property of the United States who was created a poetics that was as unquestioning of the premises of high modernism as he himself was unquestioning of his abilities and preternatural calling as a poet. The excellent essays appended to this collection by important writers such as Nick Joaquin, E. San Juan, Jr., and Luis H. Francia, along with the introduction by novelist/poet Jessica Hagedorn, present the man in a variety of guises, from the imposing, learned, often didactic, never passive literary mentor that he was to several Filipino writers in New York, to the provocateur in the Philippines who never failed to cause a scandal with his tart tongue and demanding aesthetic tastes (he was, nonetheless, put on the government's payroll, and had a troubled but intimate relationship to the Marcos). As if testament to his chosen tradition of late symbolist poetics, Villa & like Valery, Rilke and Rimbaud & reached a point in his life when he felt that he had "said all he had to say" and let silence reign & in fact, he gave up writing poems after the early sixties, though he often spoke of an enormous work on aesthetics which he had been preparing. The poems that he did leave behind foreground a set of values that might strike one today as antique, and yet they are surprisingly fresh, and when focused, very powerful. The echoes one hears are from writers as diverse as Hopkins, Dickinson, Blake and Cummings, and his various innovations & his idea of "Reverse Consonance" and the later idea of putting commas between every word (which he linked to "Seurat's architectonic and measured pointillism," and which, dismissed for many years as a laughable eccentricity, has resurfaced in practices by poets such as P. Inman) & seem minor in retrospect compared to those of Williams or Pound, but attest to the care for the small event in poems that only surfaces upon a very close reading of the language. The purity of his approach leaves one nostalgic for a time before deconstruction and the politics of the referent had converted the aporias of language into the ironizing of essences and the critique of public values (which is to say, "before Auschwitz"): "Silence is Thought converging / Unprecipitate, like / Dancer on tight wire balancing, / Transitive, budlike, / Till & her act finished & in / One lovely jump skips / She to the floor, bending / To make her bows, dips / Herself in bright applause & / Then silence is / No more. Not it is the rose / Called Speech." (15) The comma poems challenge the reader to break apart and reform meanings, as if to dissuade the imposition of final interpretation that eventually weigh on many poems: "As,much,as,I,perceive,the,Future, / Lo: the,Future,perceives,me: / A,Mutuality,of,Eyes." (45) (This suggests Karl Kraus's famous assertion, as cited in Benjamin: "The more you stare at language, the more it stares back.") His later syllabic approach to the stanza resembles, mostly, that of Marianne Moore's, but unlike Moore, he attempted poems that were not merely assemblages of "found texts" but which were based on a single sentence of a single text, hence testing the integrities of syntax. One based on a sentence from Andre Gide, for instance, permits him to escape the more fiery, messianic tones of his earlier poems and yet access the integrity of his personality which he cherished so much: "Night and sleep alone / Permit metamorphoses. Without / Oblivion in the / Chrysalis the caterpillar / Could not / Become a butterfly: The / Hope of awaking someone else / Urges me to let / The man I am to sink in- / to sleep." (83) As some of the essays in the end argue,

Villa stands at the crossroads of many discourses, specifically those of postcolonialism and the transition from modernism to a postmodernism informed by the West's imposition of values on non-Western peoples. But Villa seems an unlikely candidate for this position & he seems to ignore these issues all together. However, by his unflinching devotion to his notions of craft and calling, he becomes a diamond in the rough & the diamond he hoped his syntax would find in language & and it is this diamond that serves, by its aspirations to integrity and wholeness, to aggravate and permit growth to a number of concepts that swirl around the political/aesthetic nexus, each end of the axis threatening the other. Besides all that, this book, excellently edited by Eileen Tabios (who also edited the seminal *Black Lightning* published by the Asian American Writers Workshop), is a study in how a relatively small contribution to two nations' literatures could serve to transform an entire discourse, once the discourse is forced open by the contradictions of poetry, and a poet's life.

## John Wilkinson, *Oort's Cloud* (Subpress, 1999)

*Oort's Cloud* collects the early poetry of major British poet John Wilkinson, and it may very well be his first full-length books widely available in the United States. While Wilkinson's early work is clearly indebted to his teacher at Cambridge University, the poet J.H. Prynne & each shares a polyglot sense of reference and complex rhythms, creating a near-forbidding surface density, all in a "free" verse that spirals around and underlying formal structure & the younger poet departs in his occasional use of pop cultural references, a more directly emotive form of political commentary, and the occasional autobiographical poem. In this earlier work, he is also less of a lyricist than Prynne, or at least a colorist & some of these poems can only be understood as "sculptural" in the most brutal of British traditions. It's not surprising that one of the poems, "pneumatic drill," seems to make reference, via the phrase "rock drill," to the sculpture by that name by Jacob Epstein, one of the inspirations for the Vorticists. ("Rock Drill" was a piece that utilized an actual drill in it, and became the name of one of Ezra Pound's series of Cantos.) The material and rational word become a matter of hard physics, and hard lessons, in Wilkinson's harsh narrative gaze: "And it's mainly a business of nerve / Finding out the outline of the body / By an accident / By the fate of light / And skirting your frozen chamber / They are giants of indifference Ack! Ack! / Like an aching tooth." (Pneumatic Drill, 51) The influence of George Oppen is apparent, especially in some of the shorter poems in which the weight of an economic and moral code bears heavily, though not rendering pathos impossible: "At three-second intervals / air / disturbed his coiffure / too dense & / closely trimmed / to model the much-admired / ruffle effect // To sell his labor power / Find a willing employer // & the competent fan / empire made" (Mile End Road, 40) At times, as at the end of "Pneumatic Drill," Wilkinson seems to mourn the loss of the visionary capacity, or at least to ironize it; at others, he gives over to a sort of apocalyptic quality that he could be said to share with London poet Allen Fisher, with whom he is not often associated. The following lines, coming in at angles one after the other, seem to push the envelope

toward the “overwhelming question”: “Beyond the heated policy / Which scorches the earth / Wet wool stinks on a hearth // Excess in that package / Smokes out the affirmative mate / In a blonde rage // Striation of exacted space / Enflames the offered meteors / Like burs on the carapace // His feet slip on the landing pad / Burst the sandals / Whose awaited message was banal.” (notes to “About the Level I Start From,” (80). Poems like “Bullyboy Tears” take up nursery-rhyme-like rhythms, while others, especially the long poems (like “Aquamarine”), bury deep within them the traces of poetics structures that one wouldn’t expect in late-modernist writing. This book is not reading for everyone: because Wilkinson often sacrifices any notion of an “authorial voice,” or a protagonist even in apparently narrative poems, and because he is not interested in “play” in the form of either Language poetics or the poems of Ashbery, one is often at a loss as to how the images collect to form larger meaning structures, or how the music is to operate through the voice & the “voice” itself seems obviously unattractive. However, close attention pays off, and the effect and confidence of the rhythms can be something like a lighter Pound. *Flung Clear*, a book only available in England and which collects Wilkinson’s later books, shows how the poet was able to collect these many disparate, fragmentary impulses and create large-scale poems of great power and beauty.

## 2000

Stephen Berg

*Halo* (Sheep Meadow Press, 2000)

*Porno Diva Numero Uno* (Lingo Books, 2000)

In these two smallish books of prose poems, Berg strains for the visceral transcendence of the saints, a fairly anachronistic project considering how the Beats — by accessing such “cursed” moderns as Artaud and Rimbaud — have apparently exhausted the subject. He describes a sort of *ars poetica* in *Halo*, a series of short quasi-religious paragraphs: “Curtains she calls it ‘curtain of the world’ mercy behind it on the other side cruelty here in the God-world no-God, whenever I read to her — ‘I have to know that as a thinking, finite being I am God crucified’ — it shreds me, no-time which is God God everywhere everything we are, often in great heat I write to a friend say everything that shames batters inspires won’t send it burn it on stove papery ash God’s words, woke in the dark again clawed the unwall’d dark again.” (“Simone,” 19) Something seems either entirely naive or slightly forced about these poems, as their basic form — the run-on sentence that drops elements of normal syntax as it seems spoken in a “white heat” — is both not very beautiful to read, and not nearly as gregarious, image-laden or charming as his New American models — O’Hara in “Meditation In An Emergency” and Ginsberg in his major early works such as the confessional “Kaddish.” Nor do they seem to have anything contained within them that society is necessarily suppressing (Berg is not being “suicided by society,” and he has

no counter-culture to expose) nor philosophically resonant, and so one wonders whether a craft-obsessed poet — whether Basho or Williams — would have been able to find profundity in the pseudo-profundity of “Of”: “That death is what you cannot do that death is what you cannot be that death is not the opposite of nothing.” (24) *Porno Diva Numero Uno* is more successful, as it takes as its central theme an imaginary relationship between the author and Marcel Duchamp around the time he was constructing his final work *Etant donnés* [1946-66] (housed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, from which city Berg edits and publishes the *American Poetry Review*). But once again, Berg’s form stumbles, as even interesting speech seem compromised by the poet making excuses for the language by applying — even where a dialogic contrast seems necessary — elements of his “signature style,” the run-on: “...I could name anything just by touching it but it was only after a period of disgust with visual art with the quality of distance it depends on that I decided — and this was the only reason for my decision — to do some of my things so the idea was touch not art how would you like to eat an apple drink a glass of wine if you didn’t have hands anyhow put a bicycle wheel and a stool together black white and you’ve got the wildness of an impossible combination combined you almost don’t know what to do with it touch look spin sit eat what? so I’m like a blind artist I am a blind artist a man with no ideas only the memory of that early lesson!” (13) *Porno Diva* — as its flashy title suggests — seems framed as a deep, candid investigation of eroticism of the cheap suburban brand, but while Bataille is clearly the godfather, here, Berg doesn’t make many of his own investigations — very few images, digressions, infatuations, etc. seem particularly inspired by Berg’s sexual imagination. Though an interesting image may point one somewhere in that direction (“...in our age two removes from the viewer first the door then the wall then herholding the puny lamp of orgasm up there dream of faceless leather...” [66]), for the most part it seems Berg is undecided whether to be Duchamp’s Boswell (though much of Duchamp’s material seems taken from common sources), the hectic but image-dry visionary of Halo, or a collagist of art-related non-sequiturs. Berg seems to get focused when he introduces genuinely odd unliterary matter that intrigues him, such as the long section on the mating habits of Rhinoceri, in which the sentences become suddenly rather narrative, not to mention sickly titillating. Perhaps that is a lesson, for though Berg calls himself an “apostle of the ordinary” (27), one wonders why he opts for the ecstatic, fireworks mode in his writing when the material is so plain.

## Charles Bernstein, *Republics of Reality: 1975-1995* (Sun & Moon, 2000)

At once the most controversial and popular, most accessible and yet most difficult, of the “Language” poets, Bernstein is also the writer of that group who strove early on to experiment with both extremes of these newly discovered methods, whether it be in the use of the word in its isolated, utopian expressivity, or in the plain phrase at it operates in daily life to convey our most banal thoughts. This collection of long out-of-print chapbooks — none of these poems have appeared in any of Bernstein’s many breakthrough volumes, such as *Islets/Irritations* (1983) or *Dark City* (1994) — provides

a unique overview of his career, meanwhile adding to the range of his impressive canon of major and minor (sometimes upsettingly so) works. If one associates “Language” poetry with the non-referential, the unemotive, and fetishization of textual form and the language of theory over that of speech — in other words, opaque writing — one will be immediately surprised with the opening poem from the 1976 volume “Parsing”, titled “Sentences,” practically a litany of anxieties, attitudes and stuttering intensities, produced by the need to be social: “I feel too dependent. / I feel no sense of myself. / I continually need reassurance. / I feel she won’t really express her feelings. / I feel shut out. / I can project everything and be reassured of nothing. / I am constantly feeling left. / I see in her silence and distance the same fear and pain I have.” (20) If this poetry is defiantly “un-poetic” — the lyric subject, nor the lyric whoosh, is nowhere to be seen, and odd instances later in the poem (“He said, ‘Bring me the holy bible with all y’alls names in it.’”) seem lifted from other works entirely — Bernstein’s restraint and confidence with this method puts him at a distance from his more technically exhibitionistic peers. His interest, then, is in language and how it is used among people, not as its used buried away in some theoretical text; this basic understanding renders such dense works as “Poem” (from “Shade,” 1978) both welcoming and discomfiting, cinematic in an avant-garde way but not without its moments of satiric narrative: “a sound of some importance / diffuses / ‘as dark red circles’ / digress, reverberate / connect, unhook. / Your clothes, for example / face, style / radiate mediocrity / coyly, slipping / & in how many minutes / body & consciousness / deflect, ‘flame on flare’ / missed purpose.” (72-73) One figures Mallarmé’s proto-lettrist *Throw of the Dice* as a founding text for Bernstein’s poetics, as each poem illustrates a basic mechanism of language’s movement as caught on the page, and yet Bernstein is democratic mirror to the aristocratic French Symbolist, and in his later poems — the short poems collected in “The Absent Father in ‘Dumbo’” and “Residual Rubbernecking” — take the project far from the austere, dystopic fragments of the early works into near-totally banal, or oppressively purple and unbeautiful, lyricism: “Such mortal slurp to strain this sprawl went droopy / Gadzooks it seems would bend these slopes in girth / None trailing failed to hear the ship looks loopey / Who’s seen it nailed uptight right at its berth” (353) Only Bernstein takes the promise of materialist poetics, and the desire to make language visible, would attempt such a distance from the norms of good taste, and though one is not sure if these later poems are the best encore to the fabulous and ambitious early chapbooks (those poems that resemble the early works but don’t attain their power seem mere improvisations, inattentively included), the volume as a whole presents as many promises as it does problems, beauties as it does strange new things, all of which there are many.

Lee Ann Brown, *Polyverse*  
(Sun & Moon Press, 2000)

Chosen for the New American Poetry Series by Charles Bernstein, *Polyverse* is an exciting firsts collection by a poet who has been too long known only to the poetry communities of the Lower East Side and San Francisco. In this mammoth volume,

Brown explores — with an engaging, faux innocent but candidly libidinal energy — a wide variety of forms and subject matters, ranging from “Sestina Aylene,” a buoyant love poem that is also mediation on the writing of verse, through the “Two By Fours” written in collaboration with the poet Jack Collom (reminiscent of the famous “Pull My Daisy” of Kerouac and Ginsburg) to the long unpunctuated prose meditation “A Long Sentence Distance,” a tour-de-force of grammatical hijinks and tonal shifts which excessively catalogues Brown’s loves of life. “Write the most beautiful sentence in the world and fill the whole page with its sinuous references to longhand inquisitive beauty despite always remembering you girlfriend suicided and world may not give you everything you ever wanted asking yourself should I grow up...” starts “A Long Sentence,” and with at a pace and candor not seen since O’Hara continues for six pages in a breathless romp. Play is the order of the day, here, and even the shortest poems combine humor and thoughtful insight with a need to keep afloat, such as “Poetry”: “a condensed form / of food & time.” “Dreams Listing” is a light exploration into surrealist autonomy: “A small purple bird is on its androgynous animal shelf. I ask it to step out onto my wet finger. It does and turns into a tiny man dressed in a grey suit, ” while “To Jennifer M.” is a girl-power anthem, one of many quasi-erotic poems in the collection: “Let’s make out in the girl’s room / Let me write you a wild heart[...]/ But it couldn’t surpass yours / beating so multivariouly / in your left aligned margin.” Split into three parts which are sometimes divided into sub-sections, *Polyverse* is an encyclopedic argument for poetry at every interstitial moment of life, not to mention for “free love” with a sincerity and child-like greed that is addictive. The first part, “Her Hearsay Book,” has sections titled “a museme” — process poems that use their titles as the pools of letters from which its words are formed — and “CoLabs”, poems written in collaboration with other authors, ranging from the well-known (Bernadette Mayer) to the up-and-coming (Jennifer Moxley, Lisa Jarnot) — both “experimental” sections that don’t fail to invite the reader in for the fun. The second part “Velocity City,” contains poems written in homage to popular singers, capturing both the sexual energy and immediate satisfaction of rock music, and strongly contributes to the portrait of an ephemeral social scene that the book portrays. Like many of the most vital cultural products of its generation, *Polyverse* combines optimism, a collage “pop” sensibility, shameless narcissism and yet a tremendous Whitmanic generosity and gregarious social sensibility in a way rare in books of poetry today.

## Miles Champion, *Three Bell Zero* (Roof Books, 2000)

Each page of this young English poet’s first stateside collection (*Compositional Bonbons Placate* was published by Carcanet in 1996) is brimming with the conflicts of intentionality and chance, design and improvisation, or perhaps simply work and fun, but not in drawn-out meditations so much as by well-honed linguistic breaks, taking the project of the Surrealist explosion of the veils of reality to the level of the word. Champion takes his lead from the American Language poets, and his poems sometimes resemble, page for page, works by Bernstein, Di Palma, Andrews and

Coolidge, but his attention to this heritage — for him an overseas import rather than “native” — operates as an engaged criticism of the slumberingly conservative nature of English poetry in the century of modernism. But rather than take “innovation” as his guiding principle, Champion creates an entire culture or sensibility that, for all of its completeness and, at times, lyrical coherence (the metrical regularities of the quasi-narrative “Clovis,” for example, greet aesthetic closure at every step), strikes always in the other direction, or as many “other” directions as can be contained in these careful, spare poems: “Signs the ever / Water & wine to form an oblong cut-off / Or baffle at social what’s / That is, in Hegelian terms, the scarf cigar / A man is than made / I think ex-Parisian liver suit or difference / Perfumes the harder focus / Road or dog brains rise / Light is eat / You is in pellet-type pole / The clearing colour sort of adding the twig / & I found a kind of digital dried dill / Stick [...] (untitled, 15) Champion rigorousness, adeptness with staccato meters, and learnedness measure up against any in the Language camp, especially during their “heroic” phase, but because he doesn’t cling to the principle of author as originator, or even copyrighter, of his words or works — such that a Romantic or individualistic strain creeps in (this has affected a number of second-generation Language poets) — he is able to focus on the central, universal concern, which is to make readers see and hear words. His near-utopic faith in this project can bring on a Symbolistic, quasi-religious undercurrent: “The nod / dis- / members the / tactile / echo of / a solipsistic / gesture. Diffuse / summa-. I / mean, to / provide you / with layers. (Target / fit / mists.) I / was in / the twenty- / four-hour / metaphor, laundering / an intense / & crystalline / hush.” (“Finishing Touches,” 45) However, for all of his graceful maneuvering among the most difficult postmodern practices, the spirit of community always peeps through in the generous imagery and the sheer pleasure in performing language: “Candour disposes the lustre / tinctures for what chance / the person’s mount or invisible taipiece / free brochures impressing the indefinite fold [...]” (“Poem,” 66). Though a slender 68-pages long, the poems in *Three Bell Zero* will remind everyone of what it felt like to read poems for the first time, with excitement and a sense of belonging and purpose.

## Dominic Cheung, *Drifting* (Green Integer, 2000)

As Cheung writes in the Forward to his first American collection, these poems ring with notes of “a sense of the diaspora, a misplacement of time and space, and a feeling of helplessness regarding fleeting life and love.” (i) Living in the United States since 1967, the Taiwanese-born Cheung had already published two volumes of poetry and one volume of prose in his early twenties. He proves himself, in translating his own work into English (all from a 1986 collection called *Drifters*), to have a subtle and pleasant ear for off-rhymes and the effect of simple vocabulary and syntax, no doubt informed by the Western tradition of translations from Asian languages, but not anxious or ironic about it. The opening poem, “Fragrant Herbs by the Mountain Stream,” effectively builds up the mythological tone centered around the history of a Tibetan knife he received as a gift, a history resonant of death and, perhaps, of cultural revenge against



colonial China: “But the Han Chinese brought in liberation and suppression, / Modernization and pollution, / Recovery and hatred, / Tearing out the heart of the green, green plain. // Vaguely I hold this Tibetan knife in my palm, / No one knows of my martial skill.” (16-17) “Love Poem of Tea” — a short poem that flirts with ballad meters while never straying from the softer tones of “Oriental” free verse — begins a series of poems centered around the tea ritual: “Let your dryness inside me / Softly uncoil and stretch; / Let me dissolve / Imperceptibly, your tension,” (18) he writes, the masculine ending “stretch” and feminine “tension” creating a deft half-rhyme that suggests, as well, the subtle workings of gender in a poem in which the male protagonist imagines himself as a bowl of tea. Spring and autumn seem, for Cheung, the seasons of the melancholic wanderer, as his most resonant moments come in describing them: “In the fiction and reality of flower seasons / To search for a good friend / Transcending language and age / Remains an heroic quest, and an illusion.” (41) Cheung seems to resemble, in this way, the Eliot of “Journey of the Magi” more than the wintry, “Anglo-Saxon” Pound of Cathay, and at times Cheung’s taste in abstractions also suggest Eliot, though his subtle ear is sometimes unable to completely salvage a pile-up of loose sentiments: “Though the same season and weather prevail / The country never ceases changing / There are themes of passion, and of indifference; / Though the same person and personality remain / Stars and events keep mutating / There are plots of joy, and of sadness. / Since departure and reunion remain unpredictable / Loneliness is conspicuous.” (44) But Cheung is less a philosopher than a social and political exile, a wanderer on American shores who is unsure not only of his own identity but that of his home country, stuck in its own limbo. His melancholy, passion, and the complexity of his situation are finely expressed in this group of poems: “Endless drifting, wandering among time, / As it thickens with the midnight dew/ [...] Self, the self, to be identified! / Nation, the nation, to be recognized! / Life, a life to be realized! / Country, a country, to become strong!” (59)

## Frances Chung, *Crazy Melon* (Wesleyan, 2000)

Chung died in 1990 at the age of forty, leaving behind several different plans for collections of her work — manuscripts titled “Crazy Melon” and “Chinese Apple,” with several poems repeated between them — along with collections assembled for fellowship and book submissions and poems that were published but didn’t appear in either. In “Crazy Melon,” the earlier manuscript, Chung captures something of the crepuscular underside of Chinatown culture in the seventies and eighties; as Lew mentions in the Afterword, she is like the flaneur figure, composing poetic “miniatures” that at once participate in and conflict with the acquisitiveness of souvenirs shoppers and amateur Orientalists: “the gypsy men with pocket full of holes / count their slippery fistful of coins / five six times to pass the time / living day to day by the grace of god / walking nowhere seeing no one thing / but eliot images of youth forsaken in bar mirrors / watching boxing matches on glary black and white screen / deus ex machina” (“bread”, 16) At other times, these poems hone some of their anxiety and

alienation on the objectification of being “Chinese” in Chinatown, and those poems that convey this anger with complexity, the poems ring with rich, expressive, and in many ways communal, ironies: “Neon lights that warm no one. How long / ago have we stopped reading the words / and the colors? On Saturday night, / the streets are so crowded with people / that to walk freely I have to walk in / the gutter. The visitors do not hear / you when you say excuse me. They are / so busy taking in the wonders of Chinatown.” (untitled, 9) While Chung’s poems do not display a great virtuosity of technique, the carefulness she pays to rhythms and effects recalls some of the intensity of early Williams as he developed his own techniques from scratch. The first version of Chung’s poem beginning “do you remember when it seemed the whole world / was closed,” for example, is unlike any other in the book as it explores some counter-intuitive linebreaks and rhetorical juxtapositions, suggesting a deep engagement with the words that is parallel to the carefulness she takes in recording Chinatown life (including her own: “Where is the cockroach who left / its footprint on my bowl). In contrast, some of the later, more “accomplished” poems in “Chinese Apple” seem to succumb not only to some of the Orientalist tonalities the younger Chung would have dismissed or scolded, but to more normative poetics; consequently, as she was travelling in Mexico and elsewhere at the time, the poems are less documentarian than lyrical. Lew’s afterword is sure to set the tone for Chung scholarship in the future, with deep readings of the complexes of marketplace objectification of minority cultures and the intensity of being in the subject, or observer-observed, position; this is coupled with a description of the manuscripts and editing process that helps readers along as they enjoy the honest, generous and often very beautiful work of this under-recognized poet.

## Clark Coolidge, *Alien Tatters* (Atelos, 2000)

Coolidge’s latest collection of long poems — hot on the heels of his massive group of loopy lyrics from *The Figures*, *On The Nameways* — takes the reader to a delicately upsetting space which seems run by the evil twin of Descartes’s god, replacing every object in the room until, like in a swoon, one falls squarely into the lush language: “Just kind of a nice frying person. The rest was on the latch moved over. I could just see a foot or threat of one because my head was lying on my head. A bit. Then another weighted hand, sort of spoollike and in spots and dashes. Gaming room with a spread to it.” (72) “Puzzle Faces” is framed like a discovery narrative, an air of mystery being created by the author’s subjunctive sense of meaning and lack of agency as he/she, in a partly lotus-eater state, tries to avoid panic and indecision: “There is something heavy being lifted like a blot from the paper. Are you all prepared? There will be little fun in thin rooms. Might have to barter for favors. This is an uneven clime. I’ll have to eat when I can, there being no rooms for it here. Where purest night is considered a sort of vitamin not just anyone should ingest. I watch the lights popping out all the way down the cabin. There must be creatures here who would overlead the populace, just a feeling.” (140) However, like the other four long prose pieces in this book, it soon

breaks down into his idiosyncratic stand-up-parataxis comedy mode, and so rather than follow though, Beckett-like, on the implications of its shady premises, the work becomes a play of surfaces on which anything can strike from a number of angles (“I can’t believe the underwear that comes with America”), though always returning somehow to that discovering voice: “Lower on the block was half a chicken. There may be people here who roam, but they are not the semblables. They are mildly warm and senseless. I have to send away and enclose my vocabulary. I am small and that is my name, ‘Small’” (145) As Coolidge writes in the Afterword, he was very attentive to reportings in the papers of UFO sightings and alien abductions, and had a “huge desire to participate somehow. If I couldn’t go, then perhaps at least I might learn to speak the language, and use it to take myself further in, or out, to what?” (199) The long first poem, “Alien Tatters,” takes up this theme most strongly, seeming to describe what happens among these creatures, though they never seem to escape his head: “At first there was so much light in the room with me that I thought it must be the dog. But no. Okay, but I will explain that the grass was green. They gave me the kind of Jello where it still came in a set. Then I got launched somehow and let’s forget all about ceilings. When I couldn’t see what was below the eyes I always breathed heavily in short pants. But I’m not even sure about the eyes. I can’t even see the eats.” (63) But speaking this language — as challenging and seemingly whimsical as trying to learn dolphin mating calls — seems to have been Coolidge’s desire since his early minimal poems (in “Space” and “General Electric”) through his bee-bop Kerouac prosody (in “Sound as Thought”) and his other long prose works (“Book of During,” etc.). That he decides on a quasi-science fiction theme for his latest book — though one thoroughly absent of technological fetishism and/or the humanist reclamation of weirdness and otherness (cf. Kinsella’s *The Visitants*) — is not so unusual given the sheen of philosophical depth that popular culture and digital technology, not to mention the freakish alienation talk shows grant to panoptimized suburban life, have given the genre. While Coolidge may not be for everyone — one has to really be able to get over long works with no significant “themes,” linear narrative or apparent correlation with social realities to read him — this is a thoroughly enjoyable book and unlike anything else one will find on the shelves this year.

## Clark Coolidge, *On The Nameways* (The Figures, 2000)

Like Ashbery in his recent “Girls on the Run,” Coolidge indulges in fantasies of serious play among grownups, creating, in this long series of short poems (for which there will, presumably, be a Volume II), a landscape in which words themselves become characters, suggest psychological dimensions, and in the end depart having pleased, perverted or deceived: “In the Land of Oo Bla Dee / stooping distance from the Renal Tailpiece / wore the uniform to the very edge / clasping of the mudguard // Progress Hornblower was a liar [...] // But there’s a lowline limiter / and Jimmy Semester is lifting it / riffs and breaths all hauled away / a general snuffing a total rolling / just no end to these shifting witnesses [...]” (“A Roll of Candy Dueling,” 42) There is something that is

not so much anti-intellectual but defiantly slap-happy about the way Coolidge uses language, and it's not because he always quite sure what he's doing (as he freely admits): "The Pillgollick has soiled himself again / stop fishing for end rhymes / would you paint beer cans? / I laugh at myself in Backwardsland / is there a brain at the end of this line? / Tsathoggua!" ("Dashiell Gorky," 64). If the Americans could not be given credit for having invented Surrealism, Coolidge proves that the basic premises of automatism — separated from Freudian symbolism and card-carrying Marxism — still thrum as the undertone to our mutually scrambled, consumerized and even infantilized, consciousnesses, as he takes his digitized bee-bop prosody — there's a touch of Kerouac still here but the method is clearly paranoid — to the people in witty, electric doses: "The Indian on the penis / the sign of the only stable seating / in this country // BRAP / but it seemed like to me it wasn't / as hot as it had been / the porcelien fart had a flame embossed [...] / an umbilical wallet it was / the engine on my father's hands / (bent)." ("Kink," 13) The cumulative effect is of hearing a quirky, jazz-suffused, horny, literate, art-induced, troubled, lazy, friendly, rhythmically polyglot, Stein-bobbled, cranky and constantly energized mind-at-play, scribbling while watching an old video on the television. Fans of Coolidge might be disappointed that *On the Nameways* doesn't extend beyond the exciting, nearly hallucinogenic writing of his earlier collections of short poems, such as *Solution Passages* and *Sound as Thought*, and at times doesn't rack up its effects the way it could — the more minimal poems, for instance, suggest Creeley, but Coolidge fails to go for the kill with a stunning finish — but for newcomers to this important American poet, this is a great, mostly entertaining, place to start.

Kevin Davies, *Comp.*  
(Edge Books, 2000)

"What gets me is / the robots are doing / my job, but I don't get / the money, / some extrapolated node / of expansion-contraction gets / my money, which I need / for time travel." So Davies sets the tone in his long-awaited follow-up to *Pause Button* (Tsumani, 1990?), somewhere between the ridiculous of having aspirations, the sense of survivor's guilt in a world of indifferent social and economic commerce, the oddness of feeling one has a job and that it should be "fulfilling" — indeed, of having a value-system at all. Davies' poetics derive from the cross-roads of "projective" speech-based verse — his challenging, never imprecise cocktail of alternating line-lengths, swift-moving fragments and page-splattered stanzas are its noticeable marks — and language poetry, which unapologetically divorces the fragment from constraints of organic form, plunging each unit of the poem — rhythm, word, punctuation — into the realm of social critique. What strikes one is the elegance he brings to project; not a line is wasted, not a "white space" trampled on by some ego-driven drive to sully emptiness with authorial presence: "Yet / what if there is a perfectly natural / form, and god wants us to kiss it and talk dirty?" (49) The long central poem, "Karnal Bunt", is a sequence of single-page arrangements hanging on the presence of the dot, the period; like a Calder mobile, each one seems just tenuous and balanced enough to maintain it

tensions. But Davies isn't one to fetishize aesthetic moments, as each line is spurred on its incisive, cerebral comedy that would fail on HBO but cuts to the heart of the post-leftist, cerebral literary community from which he emerges. "An edited Scotch ambiance of translated Chinese reads to itself" would not bring down the house at Comedy Central. "Untitled Poem from the First Clinton Administration" takes the project one step further, adding the note of duende — a sort of heatedness that runs up against his constructivist leanings — as a stream of melancholic invective aimed at the NAFTA-flattened globe and its promise and pretensions: "They don't care about the details but fuck with the structure and they'll crush your spine / A shell of other people / Reflowered / Pressed into action / Figures of demented nostalgia / With diplomas, credit histories / Unbridgeable gaps where their eyes should be / The cramp as such / Because it is written / Veins in the forearms of Satan / Like unanswered mail in a bag of donuts / The entire earth / Trembles in the throes of its decision-making process" (85). Davies humor — like the best of the counter-culture sixties — aims from the darker corners of the room, shattering the false light of economic progress and globalization; nonetheless, he is not without light himself, bursting from the clashes of social contradiction and a not-defeated utopic urge: "Why be sad? / Kissinger will die / before they can upload him." (49) *Comp.* is one of the best books of poetry to have emerged from the alternative American poetry scene in years, and is sure to revive many a reader's faith in the possibilities of poetry to speak, construct, goad, amuse, teach and, incidentally, survive the absurd, valueless stasis of the present time.

## Stacy Doris, *Paramour* (Krupskaya, 2000)

A freewheeling manual on the intoxications of love may seem a poor career move in a day when Victorian mores and sexual disease have sent everyone willingly back to a public, post-60s sexual civility. Doris faces this challenge by going over the top, with an excessive, polymorphic romp through the many permutations love can inhabit, and in the meantime finds that off-stage, rarely-seen space where aesthetics and titillation meet in lascivious embrace. As she writes in her introduction, her task — influenced by the "current technological unconscious' restructuring of space... in which locations and identities shift with radical illogic" — was to explore, primarily through palindrome, the "demonstration and distortion of many kinds of lyric verse" and "human sexual response." What results is something both mythic (in the spirit of the *Satyricon*), medieval (with its gothic complexity) and somewhat late-Enlightenment (in the manner of Sade, exhausting all possibilities but that of God's existence). *Paramour* is a landscape strewn with figures — ballads, eclogues, prose poems — from the cultural tradition who meet again and again in a large box of mirrors to revisit their amours: "Pipe drives the kids wild, / Piping sprinkles bright goo, / In a cloud of chewy fluid, / And Pipe laughing sing to all: / 'Pipe a game about a toy!' / So kids pop with happy guns. / 'Pipey peek in fun again;' / So shoot too to tickle here." (4) Like Lee Ann Brown's *Polyverse* (Sun & Moon), *Paramour* skids through a variety of formal poses, transmitting its carnal logic through pun and prose, epigraph and song — no stone left

unturned in its quest for momentary satisfaction: “Get all fuzzy Gets all mixed / when your body feels so rich / and in me But in its / so fully seeps all destructs / may a new / a hand’s more than / in all, more in!” (7) “A Four-Tongued Version” from the chapter “How to Love” is a beautiful long sequence of shorter, quatrain poems that are like versified fortune-cookies, each one either a sharp, beguiling puzzle, some kernel of “wisdom”, or a telescoped narrative: “While she slept / he suffered her sister. / Whose weather / could be nicer?” (20) Included is a calendar of valentines — one poem for every day of February — , a manual of love and war based on the writings of Sun Tzu, several pages that seem like games (her last full-length book of poems, *Kildare*, took place inside a video game), all of which walks the cusp of this book’s question, which is: can form itself be the only content, or must it ever point to a “moral,” ideological stance, or philosophical pose to justify itself? Doris’s book is both refreshingly free of the sentimentality of love but, as well, free of much of psychology most of us — in less extreme moments — identify with it.

Lyn Hejinian, *Happily*  
(The Post-Apollo Press, 2000)

This small book by Hejinian presents a linked series of pleasures, pleasures that are not corrupted by over-arching theoretical significance imposing its will on the structure, though, indeed, a “theory” seems to be at its base. That is to say, there is an “ambient” quality to this work, an attempt to provide the “mental furniture” (it Satie’s phrase) to daily living and thinking which approaches as from a distance, but a distance that is neither exterior or interior, but is to be found in language. That it appear “far” is mostly a quality of the measured incompleteness of the phrasing, which can be contrasted to the overdetermined quality of the aphorism or rhymed couplet. The sentences have a self-containment — they can be read individually for their contents and aporias — but fall, when taken on a long-view, into a pragmatist’s discourse of viewing thought in its moment-by-moment self-creation: “\_Now\_ is a blinding instant one single explosion but somehow some part of it gets accentuated / And each time the moment falls the emphasis of the moment falls into time differently / No sooner noticed no sooner now that falls from something / Now is a noted conjunction / The happiness of knowing it appears” (27) The reader is guided along by a rhythmic certainty that doesn’t fall into a regularity suggesting “pace” or a normative meter; likewise, “conclusions” appear — “Now is a noted conjunction” for example — which can spiral off into an entire philosophical thesis (suggesting closure) but which, in obedience to the method of the poem, leads only to the next moment and the promise — the best promise of poetry — of further discoveries, of “possible futures”. (“Dailiness” seems to be some aspect of this, that one should not create thought or linguistic structures that could not, in fact, survive the contingencies of day, whether these be impositions on one’s reading time or the hierarchies created when values are too much analyzed, too much banished to the linearities of, say, academic discourse.) “There is no ‘correct path’ / No sure indication / It is hazy even to itself” she writes, echoing, in a sense, Dante, but subverting in some ways the entire mythos of the “bildungsroman” and the promise of

metaphysical certainty, in which humans are banished to the second-tier, “mundane” task of the approach to essence and the ideal. Some lines read like counter-arguments to the accusation of relativity; Hejinian opts for the approach that pragmatism relieves one not just of final vocabularies but also of any myth that contingent values fail in their relationship to the “eternal verities”: “From the second moment of life, one can test experience, be eager to please, have the mouth of a scholar, hands never at rest, there is no such thing as objectivity but that doesn’t mean everything is unclear and one doesn’t fail to choose the next moment for a long time.” (30) The poem ends beautifully, and it sounds like a beginning, subsuming within itself both Bergsonian notions of time as a tactile, immeasurable quantity but whose recognition is revelatory, and the Marcusean argument that uncontaminated “pleasure” is a quality worth fighting for in the economic/political nexus, though difficult to deduce freed of the needs of capital: “No, happily I’m feeling the wind in its own right rather than as of particular pertinence to us as a windy moment / I hear its lines leaving in a rumor the silence of which is to catch on quickly to arrange things in preparation for what will come next / That may be the thing and logically we go then it departs.” (39)

## Adeena Karasick, *Dyssemia Sleaze* (Talonbooks, 2000)

Canadian poet Karasick continues her pop-inflected, extroverted and libidinal investigations into a deconstructive, pun- and anagram-motivated poetics in her most visually compelling, if somewhat overdone, book. A high-end production — one of the few books of poetry to boast full color, glossy pages through most of its contents — Karasick uses photographs, drawings, multiple typefaces, the classic spatial accoutrements of “projective verse” and just about the kitchen sink to propel her words across, under and on top of the page. The sequence “Menaheh Yehuda” treats the syllable as an erotically charged node or synapse, as each word is jarred forward by the phonemic contours of the preceding, trashing any notions lyrical cleanliness and opting for the morally “obscene” literary enactment of flesh-against-flesh: “And, as normative tilts ooze in a choreography of tropic / blot clotters / a cotillion of many cullers, isolata eros swigs in / blunt pulses & skins the surface of / her dimpled limits / fermented in riggish gashings / grasped in spronged frottage ruffled fetchings / fraught with haute conduits.” (23) “Improbable Grammars V” takes the “wall” (or, at times, specifically Jerusalem’s Western Wall) as its theme, a center around which Karasick assembles, with a Benjaminian nod, tons of quotes and images involving historicity and reading. Though this seems the most labor-intensive section of the book, it is probably the least successful, as a series of what have become postmodern clichés — the language of fissures, simultaneity, non-linear and paratactic grammar, virtuality, multiple identities, puns using parenthetical le(tt)ers and s/lashes, dislocations, etc. — abound, and the cumulative effect of the clashing color images and attention-deficit typefaces — technicolor dreamcoats for the prose of the unadorned letter — begin to strike one as a good idea gone awry, or going nowhere in particular. Some of the most difficult passages to physically read don’t yield much news, though often the contrast of

theoretical language and the slap-happy graphemes conspire to create some intriguing hermeneutic whirlpools: “Exposing the fullness of speech, s/he mouths (muths) all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and becomes the writ(h)ing, the wound, the word. S/he swallows, devours and rends the world apart and at the same time (as a s/cite for ingesting, assimilating) becomes one with the wor(l)d thus, with a collapse of interiority, s/he transgresses herself and becomes an assemblage of surface disruptions.” (56) Perhaps, as an example of tossing everything against the “wall” of the page and seeing what comes back, “Grammars” is successful as an exhibitionistic, youthful, and near-hysterical display of ambition and desire, though a more thoughtful, specific experiment, with the goal of aesthetic solutions for the new technologies (in the manner of MacLuhan’s books, or the Coup de Des) might have been more satisfying, and perhaps monumental. However, Karasick’s energy can be infectious, and Dyssemia Sleaze is unlike any book of poetry published recently, turning its back on (and turning over) the more conventional, nearly sanctified values of both the lyric and the visual poem (mired in its own traditions), and in the meantime looking toward the future.

## John Kinsella, *Visitants* (Bloodaxe Books, 2000)

Loosely centered around the theme of space aliens invading our comfortable, however empty, environments — whether as cigar-shaped specks falling across the landscape, or in the form of dialogic “others” with whom we commune in awkward, somewhat “experimental,” tongues (“Visitant Eclogue”) — Kinsella’s 19th book of poetry fully demonstrates that this ambitious, talented young Australian poet shows no signs of letting up. The Kinsella oeuvre is becoming massive — in 1998, both a 350-page *Poems 1980-1994* appeared, along with a volume of new work, *The Hunt* and other poems, and he threatens to become both the Whitman and the Spenser (with his emphasis on the “new pastoral”) of his country in one fell swoop. Here, he takes full advantage of what has been dubbed the “natural surrealism” of the Australian landscape, writing of people who appear troubled by some itch, some voice they’ve heard in the backyard, or something that appeared only upon reflection, or maybe in an old snapshot, that upon closer analysis could only have been sign of a “visitant”:

“I’d swear it wasn’t there before I lifted / the camera — a Pentax Super — I looked / directly at what’s now the picture. / And I’m looking at it now — that 2001-like plinth / rising out of the field, defying / sky and fenceline and bales of leaden cloud.” (“The Plinth that Haunts the Photograph, 25) But these shadowy “others” are, it becomes clear, an alternate version of ourselves, or at least the creations of our minds in response to some lack, some need for meaning in the “postmodern” world: “Mother so wanted to believe / in the signifying craft, / the One to which all others / would call in time of need, / the warm singularity.” (“The Three Laws of Robotics, 29) While mating the dazzling language of science fiction with concurrent meditation on the need for this belief, Kinsella is not always lost in the stars, a certain knowing eyewink irony peeking through. “Skylab in the Theory of Forms,” for instance, is an autobiographical romp on how space flight and the awesome metaphors it created affected his young eyes,



while “The Bermuda Triangle,” a short riff on the vacation home of “Patrick Rafter, saviour of Australian Tennis,” takes pot-shots at questions of nation and colonialism in the world of Baudrillardian simulacra: “... as if Play- / Station IS living, as if a package holiday / has you hungering after the wealth / of the pyramids, concentrated to an echoing / point of ambiguity, like the limitations / of radar, and re-runs of The Day the Earth / Stood Still...” (49) Kinsella’s lines are very loose, his descriptions baroque, like middle-period Williams on speed, and though nearly prosey they are never flat or mannered. However, when he moderates his tendency for the charismatic run-on with a verse form, like the sestina or the sonnet garland, or attempts a play on a classical form, like the eclogue, or, in the other extreme, a pomo language-salad (“Dispossession”), he seems a bit out of place — he has little spirit of “play” that make these forms work at their best, and one feels he’s showing off. But, as poems like “nature morte, Oh Rhetoric!” — a long improvisation on Cicciolina, Joseph Brodsky, The Island of Doctor Moureau, the writing of one of his own earlier poems (which infects this one like a virus) and the “desensitized environment” of modern life in which the body “is not that frightening” — demonstrate, when the Kinsella word-machine is at full throttle, he’s able to amaze you like few poets today.

## Andrew Levy, *Paper Head Last Lyrics* (Roof Books, 2000)

Levy sets out upon his poetic project with an ethics of observation and agitation, setting out with no definable goals but with a quasi-Buddhist, quasi-materialist calling to be in the world, moment-by-moment, recording its contradictions and, when there is beauty, its necessity and how it is learned: “A surfer in methodological self-consciousness / forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting / to wipe clear this screen with / some cloth of disparity / What we will try to become, that labor / curious about each / Not curious about God, or sexual mores.” (69) The idiom in the long title poem which takes up most of this book is somewhere between Williams’ *Asphodel* and the fluid, polyglot and cross-spliced rhetorical strategies of Barrett Watten’s *Progress*; Levy never sounds entirely like he’s “speaking” to one singular figure, like a Flossie, but this poem-including-history seems poignant in a way that suggests the Modernist, never entirely submitting itself to the rigors of method or foregrounded structure. Indeed, Levy is willfully “transcendental,” not minding to point the eye up toward a “God” or an ideal otherness, even if it is one he doesn’t choose to name: “Did you write the great line to take everyone / to another earth,” (69) he writes, and later, as if turning directly on his Language poet heritage: “A philosophy of pissing off the other side / abandoning the secular car / making and unmaking time.” (74) Later, however, he takes shots at what might be called the subtone of transcendental philosophy in mainstream, class-defined American culture: “A memory of light / The turd of transcendence establishes a hillside estate: / Transcendence Hill Club / Croquet is the game of choice for its ladies / All the members are ladies at / Transcendence Hill” (52) The tone is primarily meditative, but occasionally the “news” breaks in (not to mention the occasional Andrews-esque obscenity-as-direct-address) to trouble the isolation of this mind. The

worst one can say about the poem is that its politics, when they take center-stage, seem undeveloped; one section riffs on potential lines of a Nixon biography (as if Nixon, and later Kissinger, were the figures most needing debunking in the world today), and some targets for a sort of name-calling include the GOP and the Democratic National Convention (“Troglodytes and Neanderthals”), the NRA, and the military, while passing up the contradiction inherent in some of the Protestant “good-works” philosophy of the poem — the Poundian “make it new” — and their linkages to the basic power structures of these institutions. But as a whole, “Paper Head Last Lyrics” along with the beautiful essay “An Indispensable Coefficient of Esthetic Order” — with their guerilla attacks on the problematic rise of “virtual realities,” and hence virtual moralities, in a de-spiritualized America — presents the image of a complex, invested mind at play among words, and with a poetic ability that is rare. Levy, with his very readable, honest and public new book, is one more proof of the continuing validity of writing in the modernist tradition today.

## Enrique Lihn, *Figures of Speech* (Host Publications, 2000)

*Figures of Speech* presents, in an all-too brief format, the life of an interesting, unsparing poet; indeed, the format of the posthumous “selected poems” often provides the illusion of a completeness to one’s life, but a reading of Lihn’s work demonstrates how this struggle with a sense of wholeness seemed not to be resolvable even by the prospect of death. Lihn was one of Chile’s foremost poets, yet, despite a collection published by New Directions in 1978 (*The Dark Room and Other Poems*) and an earlier translated volume from 1969, he has not acquired the reputation in the States of his countryman Pablo Neruda. This careful, liberal selection from the poet’s first pamphlet to his deathbed poems (but not including his political poems and long poems such as “Written in Cuba”) by Lihn’s friend and translator David Oliphant, goes far to redress this situation. The opening “Portrait” describes the poet at his most bitterly reduced but most youthful as well, a self-description that rivals such works as “The Waste Land” or Rimbaud’s “Seven Year Old Poets” (and, even earlier, Nerval’s writing ) as an image of the fractured sensibility taking on the ancient mission of the bard in the modern world: “Poet from head to toe / a man of bitten fingernails, convulsive, neurotic, / orphan of the eagles, father to his own increase, [...] / his soul rarely diminutive, / appeared on going away, / furious in his happiness, joyless in his grief, / abortion of his very chaste orgasm, / the gardener’s dog... [...] / his secret transparent not by choice, / obscure from convergent intents.” (3) It is these “convergent interests” that mark the site of the ambiguous self shoring its ruins against the request for identity, public or poetic (or, conversely, shoring its sense of identity against the request for plural universality. This image of the writer is revised in the later, more complex poem “Literature,” where he considers not just himself but his South American countryman in their quixotic mission, corrupted by it is not just by self-delusion but the mundane nature of social recognition (he is almost Artaudian in his iconoclastic reduction-to-absurdity, but humbled by his unheroic, bureaucratic muzzle):

“When I find myself around other writers / we do little more than speak like good or bad functionaries / of Literature [...] / When I run across such stars of the first order / and those peacocks shine with the necessary prudence / I’d like to invite them to puke, because writing as well as they / is to perform the blandest task. When I come upon myself / facing the empty page I think of peacocks / and try at least not to show off, but I write / to the extent of my hatred for literature, / and to young authors I would like to yell / cut it with the farce, you too will enter the business / because literature is the softest of jobs [...]” (41) His sonnets — which Oliphant translates in their exact rhyme scheme thought the original Spanish is en face (these can be awkward, as when he breaks the word “chorus” into “cho-/ rus” for the sake of rhyme) — states the case more poignantly, conjuring the image of a man just barely being kept afloat by words: “What would I be without my words / without my signs of impotence,” (55) and earlier, in which he imagines meeting his double, he concludes that he walks “in vain / behind his very self minus his literature.” (49) (Ironically, one of the poems Oliphant translated was lost in its original Spanish, and Linh had to reconstruct a Spanish “original,” included in this collection.) That the occupation of words, of naming, is growing ever more tenuous, and that syntax’s value is fading among the proliferation of the values inculcated by telecommunications, is conveyed in the effective title of one poem, “Age of Data,” which concludes “data is just the opposite of God.” (39) The section “Brooklyn Monster” contains poems Linh wrote in his travels in New York, Texas, Canada and Spain, and will, of course, evoke for American readers Lorca’s poems of “Poet in New York,” mostly through the vignette-like approach and empathy for the dispossessed they share, as in the poem “Brooklyn Monster” itself, in which he creates a frightening, expressionistic portrait of a lone rider: “The man / — if it is not a woman — dresses like a half-naked conscript, like a cadaver / they would have carried from concentration camp to the crematory oven / With feet much smaller than its destitute shoes / The woman — if it’s not a man — with white / plaster make-up running down its face / in the ritual expulsion of sex” (107). Linh’s Toronto is unlike any you will find elsewhere, but is worth reading as a contrast to the relative disinterest in mythologized “cities” in Canadian poetics. In “Europeans,” which is set in Paris, his mixed-feelings about the continent’s cultural legacy are most completely assayed; at one point he mocks a tenet of Godard’s semiotics while, later, he admits he is “wrong,” finding some value in the philosophy of surfaces, a philosophy much at odds with his Latin American (perhaps both Catholic and American Indian) need to read below the surfaces, to find correspondences. This is not to say he is unsophisticated or baffled in his outlook; in fact, he finds a way to read the paradoxes of what he experiences, such as his run-in with a European whose words contradict her own novelistic presence: “Those people that French lady those noses like / a lady’s antennas and stilettos or radars [...] / We’re all dead — she repeated — even though her / wonderful legs shouted to the contrary / and her nose flitted ecstatic over tropics / with a modesty occasionally exemplary among / her transatlantic kind / stripped of excesses of / intellectual curiosity / as ever happens / when a woman of fifty travels / universally alone be she French or not [...]” (97).” The several poems from his deathbed are, the translator notes, among the most moving written on the subject, but as they are often more abstract they don’t often carry over well as the earlier, satirical or expressionistic ones. The title “Pain Has Nothing To Do With Pain,” for example, hints at the difficulty of translating these poems

— it sounds a bit awkward, even if those words correspond directly with the original. Nonetheless, as Oliphant writes in his introduction, this is a scathing metaphysical critique of the roles doctors seem to play in prolonging the process of dying: “Perhaps doctors are nothing but experts and death — the apple / of their eyes — is a pet problem / science solves it with partial solutions, that is to say, it puts off / its undissolvable nodule sealing a pleura, to start with / It may be that I am one of those who pay anything for the procedure. (153)” The “Art and Life” section contains some of Lihn’s many poems on the visual arts, concerning such artists such as Turner and Kandinsky, but it also includes his most humble, and most affirmative, credo on art in society: “People who circle around the museum pieces / forgetful of their condition as museum pieces / and who seem, well, to ignore where they are / The Metropolitan Museum of Art is a work of art / accomplished by their artistic lavatories. // We are works of art momentarily alive.” (65) This poem, itself called “Art and Life,” envisions a unified field theory of art, speech and personhood that serves to override any neurosis about the fragmentary human self, and even death, suggesting, with a sort of nod to theories of ambience, that individuals, like art, are vessels of meaning, with the added bonus that we know something of what these meanings are.

## Laura Moriarty, *Nude Memoir* Krupskaya, 2000

Something of a spiritual autobiography, a pragmatist’s enunciation of feminist issues of the body and love, a screenplay for a never-to-be-made film, a sort of ambient wash (in the spirit of Stein), and a “poem including history”, Moriarty’s latest book is a mature exhibition of the powers of late modern, and perhaps early “new modern,” writing. The poem starts with what would appear to be the central theme, a reflection on the use of the nude in art and as metaphor, deriving from the privileged male gaze on the female body: “The nude is given / The nude is not a woman / Who displays a tendency to be naked / An artist keeps the whole game in mind / From her he learns / Replaced by physical presence / “With eyes shut like a bride...” (7) This relationship — often portrayed as one-sided in feminist writing, but here complicated by the fact of Moriarty’s power as an artist and creator, and hence not a spokesman for the “victim” — is torqued and turned throughout the early sections, as gender roles are troubled and estranged: “Diana puts together suspension systems beginning at 5 a.m. Energy. Apollo. The male nude. The female worker. Automobile. Moves and comes to rest. Potential movement. The machine. ‘Eyes shut like a bride..’ (Adorno) Stumbling into position. Precision. Accountability. Exhaustion is the steel of her eyes. She is a real woman. Paradise.” (11) Themes intermingle with no obvious regularity throughout the work, as it dips into reflections on Duchamp’s *The Box of 1914*, slavery in Haiti, Buster Keaton, Nietzsche (“Supposing truth is a woman,” from *Beyond Good and Evil*), Moriarty’s relationship to the late poet Jerry Estrin, and a figure called “Kim” who could be a stand-in for Theresa Cha or Myong Mi Kim (“Her name was Kim. She was named for the war.”), whose works — part history, part autobiography — *Nude Memoir* resembles. Like Pamela Lu’s *Pamela: A Novel*, *Nude Memoir* has a sort of fugal quality

in its relationship to names, with figures and ideas reappearing at later moments in the work, troubling the relationship to normative narrative though the urge for anecdotal telling is very strong. But unlike Lu's book, which more clearly narrative, Moriarty's writing is a sort of a quasi-paratactic shorthand which often breaks into "poetry," linebreaks and all, and is perhaps weakened by a sense of stasis that one senses after reading too many clipped, telegraphed sentences, though she offers occasional commentary on what is happening: "Terrible grammar. The spelling of the murderess. Portable like poetry. Her notebook of lies. A convoluted spirit invading itself like a false idea of the soul. She stole from her victims. They all became writers. To say about her. To restate the obvious. The disappointment. The injury comes after pain. Followed by long scrolls of fiction. Women move through it. Frantic hieroglyphs. Nothing moves fast enough. Was she a mother or a monster?" (45) Perhaps this disembodied, somewhat monotone cadence is the most honest way to create a poetics that avoids the masculinity or orientalism of a single, judging perspective and the Faustian urge to horde knowledge, and the low-intensity of Moriarty's writing, like ambient music, is pleasurable, textured and full of detail and insight such that one is pulled along in reading the book with trust and affection. It is an advancement on the modes of postmodern writing in that it is not troubled by a need to rise above it's reader with top-down channelings of superior knowledge and radical ideology (though knowledge and ideology are present), but rather engages the reader in a competent, compelling and intelligent play of meaning and language. As Moriarty writes: "Commentary is what she provides. In the form of an amused silence." (72)

## Tom Raworth, *Tottering State* (O Books, 2000)

Hot on the heels of the American publication of fellow Englishman J.H. Prynne's *Poems* is the expanded edition of Raworth's underground classic selected early poems, originally published by The Figures in 1984. Ranging from the author's debut volume, *The Relation Ship*, to his major long poem *Writing* (not included in the original selection), *Tottering State* is an colorful, resonantly sunlit window on the work of a writer considered by many American poets (such as Robert Creeley) as the best living writer in England. Indeed, the American affinities — along with echoes of French poets like Pierre Reverdy — are most visible in his earlier work. At times he seems like a more cerebral, dark version of Berrigan, or maybe a departure from Ashbery of *Some Trees* into more formally wilder territories, but this is never to the detriment of fun, a zen-like openness, and a English rapier's wit. His cerebral quality comes through in the precision in his choice of imagery, his modification of the moods of conversation, and the surrealist dive into absurdities arriving at just the right moment to both deepen his sentiment and render it more painterly: "now the pink stripes, the books, the clothes you wear / in the eaves of houses i ask whose land it is // an orange the size of a melon rolling slowly across the field / where i sit at the centre in an upright coffin of five panes of glass // there is no air the sun shines / and under me you've planted a quick growing cactus" (31, sic) The philosophical underpinnings — always that of a layman, never

venturing far into “theory” unless it’s to present it as *\_possible\_* in normal conversation — bubble to the surface of the work when least expected, as in an anecdote about a child that has eaten green crayons (which remains — like a solipsism — the same green upon reaching the other end), to the quick-stab poem “Univesity Days,” which runs in its entirety: “[this poem has been removed for further study]”. (76) Nowness, thisness, hereness, but also you-ness, I-ness and witness, are the axes around which such linked sequences as “The Conscience of a Conservative,” revolve, with such choice moments of telescoped, daily life as the following: “o / hand / make a circle // how / the wound / snaps shut.” (103) In such poems, Raworth seems as full of child-like amazement and blissful, paratactic perceptions as another New York poet, Joseph Ceravalo, though he surehandedly connects it to a private/public sense of responsibility and opinion. In the later work collected in *Tottering State*, he seems to have entered adolescence, as the long, slender word streams in poems such as “That More Simple Natural Time Tone Distortion,” push the once retreating poet into a more directly politicized, consequently more filmic than painterly, consideration of time. He almost illustrates Bergson’s once-radical request that we not divide time into weeks and days, but a slipstream of contingent moments: “slow / low / thump / long flame / dry / flash bur / just / move / tree browns / to south / our horse / white / no trace / of action / in memory / and fear / but this / is / clear / this area / this never / ending / song / to last / gasp / cold colours / enough / flashes / to leach him / out” (134). If such extreme forms suggest a relationship to the American Language poets, it is there, but that would be to miss the humanism in Raworth’s work, the persona he has unwittingly created for himself as benevolent, however mischeivous, tourguide to the hear and now in its many ambivalent (drag) disguises. Only he shows how interesting this this can be.

## Stephen Rodefer, *Mon Canard* (The Figures, 2000)

Author of books as diverse as a celebrated translation of Villon under the pseudonym of Jean Calais (1968) to the spellbinding *Four Lectures* (1982), recognized by many as a distinctive masterpiece of Language writing, Rodefer has never been one to fit easily into a method or recognized “voice” — indeed, into a stable reputation. His most typical form of writing, as exhibited in several small-press books, has been the quick, though elegant, improvisational poem — inspired by the examples of everyone from Olson to O’Hara, Baudelaire to Stein — which is why this new selection of long poems from the past seven years is especially welcome. In *Mon Canard*, Rodefer returns again to the large canvas of *Four Lectures*, each of the book’s six poems exploring a distinctive style: the short, linked prose poems (a la Rimbuad’s *Illuminations*) of “Daydreams of Frascati:; the Williamsesque three-step in “Erasers” (which even sounds like “Asphodel” at moments) and “Arabesque at Bar”; the projective, satiric apostrophe in “Answer to Dr. Agathon”; a high-flown language-salad pun-machine in “Mon Canard”; and — in a sort of wicked inversion, signifying his embattled relationship to Language poetry itself — the quasi-constructivist stanza of Barrett Watten in “Stewed

and Fraught with Birds.” This isn’t to say that Rodefer is derivative; on the contrary, he needs these forms to reign in the various tones of address exhibits and which, one senses, society will never be entirely pleased with: “The ligaments / of your phraseology / will eventually get / put to some truth test or other // and you’ll be lucky / if anyone reads / it with a big guffaw / or sneezes” (“Stewed,” 114). This poet, like the modernists he most admires, and as distinct from the determinations of postmodernist gesture, is railing for a concept of value when the old, stable ones have vanished; as a result, his use of reference resounds with the need to shore up history and knowledge against personal dissolution: “I am come to your cartop Ajax, waxing toward an invitation to an opening in some hedgerow. Our Leninist principles have toppled, to become fabulous and Sylvan once again. We are the last metaphysical activists in American nihilism. We demand a Pope from the Bronx.” (“Daydreams,” 10) In this way, he presents something of the classic “description of a struggle” (Kafka’s first short story) that is rarely seen anymore since the paranoid has overwhelmed avant-garde writing and deleted the agonistic persona entirely. While some of the poems, like “Mon Canard,” can be faulted for a metrical repetitiveness, the gesture of the effort can be appreciated for erecting particular reading challenges when least expected — i.e. in the course of libidinous play and rhetorical directness. In any case, the book offers depths to language and, most importantly, the range of human feeling — from the dark to the bright, the indulgent to the ascetic — that only a writer as dedicated to the poet’s “free radical” life as Rodefer can provide.

## Hung Tu, *Verisimilitude* (Atelos, 2000)

“Like omelets / nations fold” writes Tu at the opening of the series “Short Subject,” and in this spare and careful book not only nations but discourses of all sorts — the personal, the ideological, the lyrical, the global, the funny and the earnest — collapse into themselves revealing both their intercontextuality and competing degrees of relevance. The opening sequence, “It’s Just Your Basic CYA (The Streets of San Francisco)” demonstrates the many virtues of Tu’s style: his precise readings public symbols enmeshed in human interactions (“Mutual Taunt Theater / a squad car rolls by / the masses: “You got any donuts” / the cops: “You got any crack” [23]), his assured sense of place in California contrasted with global corporatism (“over the table — mergers / across the mesa — maquilas” [25]), and his always poignant, yet ironic, reading of history: “in 1855, Mt. Diablo served as the summit / from which northern California and Nevada / were surveyed by army engineers / 150 years later, pickets reinforce their imagination” (23). Each of the seven medium length sequences of this book display different facets of Tu’s project, such as in “Verisimilitude,” in which he matches the public spectacle of capital with the private, responsible, somewhat damaged spectacle of a disaffected misfit: “with the installation of cameras / epistemology is really moot / the patron saint of / the illuminated porch / vintage Balzac of nineteen / ’97 democratic straw men [...] / this push cart your kingdom / this counter your moat / the action-hero genre / and juice bar explosion / power is frost and tasty /

no one forgot 19 whatever / but everyone tried” (41) “Uneven Development, Uneven Poetics (Simon & Simon)” takes the local, class based concerns of “It’s Just Your Basic” to an international scale, wrapping several complex strands of thought in democratic, almost haiku-like simplicities: “China Embraces Liberalism! / consequences live in neighborhoods / but since this is literature / I’m interested in the term FOB” (50) “Dated” links several smaller fragments together into a stream of subversive aura (“There’s a little American / imperialist in every / Australian trying to / get out of its coral box” [67]), while “Short Subject” and the “Birth of Cool (Cash)” return to the fragment, and “Market Psychology” straddles both modes: “o the rally cap / Noah’s Ark school of diversity applied to Noah’s Bagel / two women a focal point over coffee and danish / her decision making process applied to tattoos” (105) Tu seems to have mastered the very short political poem, somewhat following in the line of writers like Bruce Andrews and Jeff Derksen who have made their poems lyrical channels of crushed and compressed social codes. But Tu has a facility with the lyric that these writers either lack or choose to ignore; as he takes the field of values as his subject over ideological manhandling, the tone is one of disaffection and responsibility, and of an imagination that is thoroughly disgusted with it all but able, however bitterly, to be amused. This is a remarkable book coming at a time when many younger writers are retreating to a humble, apolitical bohemianism in their effort to be conversational; Tu shows that you can have it both ways.

Darren Wershler-Henry, *The Tapeworm Foundry: And or the Dangerous Prevalence of Imagination*  
(House of Anansi, 2000)

Taking up the call of a global poetics infused with the criss-crossing of information flow, a local poetics (centered around a Toronto as you’ve never known it) and a need to communicate beyond the surface intensity of radical form, Wershler-Henry muscles through a single-sentence poem of possibility whose only punctuation is the conjunction “and/or.” Any strand of this text — a DNA fiber for the new world chaos theory — propels the reader through a corridor exquisite options and micro-narratives, like a Borges short story compacted into the moment between breaths: “[...] and/or realize your imac is just a big tamagotchi and/or design a transformer to use up wasted ergs of energy from excessive pressure on electric buzzers and/or quit making art in order to play chinese checkers and/or tattooo your poems on the back of someone else but be sure to make no spelling mistakes anor prepare to correct them in a different colour of ink and/or do it all for the nookie and/or delete ambiguities and then convert to specificities [...]” Billed as a “list of book proposals,” Tapeworm is actually much more: a manifesto for significant and/or excessive action in a world increasingly circumscribed by middle-of-the-road politics, false notions of rationality and productivity, and the infinite hunger of a technologized economy for all the good bad (read: useless, fun, diabolic) ideas that the young, the disaffected and the inordinately talented can produce. Tapeworm’s various attacks on institutions, the bourgeois, the mainstream and closed ways of thinking are not to be ignored; this is a book that



revivifies the initial burst of excitement Dadaism and other modernist forms created, but unlike much “avant-garde” work today, it is not caught up in the self-satisfying, doxical terminology of the cultural institutions — schools, museums, even the cliques — but wants to reach out, to expand, to take no prisoners. If the work seems juvenile and “easy,” that’s because the author — who has conveniently escaped through the back door of exquisite process — has sacrificed the “difficulty” (often just confusion or a hapless shield against obviousness posing as hieratic) of much experimental poetry today. If there is an overriding metaphor to how this poem operates, it may be that of information itself; at times, even the simple construct (an advance over the conjunctivitis of much late “new sentence” work, including recent portions of *The Alphabet* itself) breaks down as a subset of phrases separated by “or” take over (here, in a rephrasing of Raymond Queneau’s project in [ ]: “[...] and/or find ninety-nine different ways to retell the story of one man accusing another man of jostling him deliberately on a crowded bus at midday but avoid all anagrams or antiphrases or alexandrines or back slang or blurbs or epentheses or gallicisms or haiku or hellenisms of litotes or logical analysis or negativities or permutations or proper names or prostheses or spoonerisms or synopes or surprise and/or [...].” Like all great literary works, *Tapeworm* presents some fundamental problems, one of which is: what is the use of all this discipline — since this is, if anything, a disciplined work (as his *tournequet* approach to his Oulipian cousin suggests) — in a world whose only avenues for progress — personal, social, and otherwise — seem to lead inexorably into melding into the corporate whole? This book raises suspicions about everything, not the least of which is where the “author” of such a work stands. Perhaps, like in the radical performative work of Beuys and Acconci, the author is the gesture itself.

## 2001

### John Godfrey, *Push the Mule* (*The Figures*, 2001)

In his first book of poetry since 1988’s *Midnight on Your Left*, Godfrey — normally associated with a later incarnation of the New York School, though he might just as easily be linked to a sort of “post-punk” poetry scene — shows himself to be one of the most observant and imaginative urban poets today. These poems are all in prose, and while the pacing of the writing is not much different than one would read in fiction — this is not the Williams of *Kora in Hell* or Gertrude Stein, or the ecstatic fables and apostrophes of Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* — the sentences combine to create swirls of meaning rather than stable narrative environments. “*Accede in Kind*” builds sentence by sentence into a troubled, at times darkly erotic portrait of a woman, known only as “she” throughout. The drama is in determining which participant — the perceived or the perceiver — should dominate the spotlight, such that the literary battle of formal perspective spills over into the content, which could very well be a battle among minor gods: “I have my hand over that part of her that readies for injury. It is stability that

suffers solo. Should she die dreaming of a night passage the silky weathered sail will have her. She will be carried along on waves of heat from roots burning underground. She is not lacking in hatred; why, then, isn't she the one to decide the fate of creatures?" (18) Like in the Arcimboldo effect (named after the Italian painter, 1527-1593), in which the artist utilized different types of fruit to compose his portraits, this sort of accretion, at its best, is carefully tempered so as to trouble the relationship of poet to subject; even at the end of this poem, when things seem to clear up a bit, the subject disappears into maze of unyielding grammatical hallways: "Ancient dry voices of men come at her and address her as 'Mother.' She exhales as deeply as possible and hugs herself in order to get both the original and the duplicates of her body out the door to the flatlands, where everything she will need for proof is ready." Other poems engage more freely with paratactic sentence structures, à la the "new sentence," or with classic surreal moments ("The whole hallway is ready to start rising, like an elevator under leaves," [21]) or with Beat-inspired word twists that point, simultaneously, at beauty of the sublime sort and the grounded, earthy resplendence of trash: "Windshield spit allover by streetside trees breaks out the tunnel into a blinding halo Queens didn't earn. By seven-thirty morn, the LIE shines golden white while factories either side rend their fumes awry." (46) A beautiful elegy for the poet Jim Brodey uses this talking-around-the-subject technique, along with Godfrey's strong penchant for mating opposing ideas by putting unexpected conclusions to his sentences, to marvelous effect: "He fancied meat of dragon swans, as if the gods were always on his lips. You know how wet they look from the foam and under ground soak. I will raise this pitcher to the skeleton man in case he needs to look up on the light through waters. A longing comes over me to tell the abodes of my heart the great nerve sharp has eloped from exile... Without question he was a being struggling in the net, drowning in a dry mouth, weakened by exile into blathering purity." (43) Poems like "The Big Wingspread" take clear aim at political demagoguery, especially when it borders on the messianic; other poems, like "Same Feet," are reminiscent of Jim Carroll in their lighter touch, placing just the right of surreal weirdness over the interior fires that burn in love relationships: "Try no matter how many times, I still can't describe what I feel to see your hair catch fire. I am fond of your anger and proof of your pain." (51) Like with many books of prose poetry, it's not easy to read *Push the Mule* all the way through — sometimes one wishes for more variety in the meters, more discreteness in the individual poems, more torquing of the paragraph form, and maybe some wilder sense of humor to make it a bit less bleak — but the precision of these sentences, taken one by one, are often interesting enough and satisfy careful attention. Godfrey is never less than noble in the care he takes with his work.

**Pierre Joris, *Poasis: Selected Poems 1986-1999*  
(Wesleyan, 2001)**

For decades, Joris has been an important translator of important avant-garde authors such as Paul Celan, Edmond Jabès, and Maurice Blanchot, and editor (with Jerome Rothenberg) of such important volumes as the *pppppp: The Selected Writings of Kurt*

*Schwitters* and the massive two volume anthology of international avant-garde poetry, *Poems for the Millennium*, from the University of California Press. Joris's first volume of selected poems, *Breccia*, appeared in 1987, and was jointly published in Luxembourg and by Station Hill Press (Barrytown, NY); *Poesis is*, outside of several chapbooks and magazine appearances, Joris's first major publication of his own writing in the United States. He has lived for several years in Great Britain, France, North Africa, and now the United States, and this "nomadic" existence — he has written a manifesto for a "nomadic community," part of which is included here — strongly informs the stylistics and content of his writing: "He decried the 'citoyen du / mond' as some Socratic / blunder — but it is not so, / Charley, the particular is / everywhere, is the cosmo- / politan exactly, the particular is / everywhere, the smallest / unit, the particle is / everything — & it moves, / it crosses bound- / aries, it moves / wherever [...]" (164). "Charley" in this quote is Charles Olson, one of the writers that hangs over his work strongly; another is Ezra Pound, and the sense of Europe's failing in the twentieth century, of the martyrdom and all-around shamanistic function of the artist as vortex of meaning, the globalizing breadth that takes in all facts of history (personal and social) and contemporaneity in one rhetorical swoop not to mention the condemnation of modern times — Pound's tone and method in the *Pisan Cantos* — runs through *Poesis*: "von Hollands Grachten bis tief ins Russische / Reich a Ganovenweise sung in Luxembourg anno domino 3 / post world war 2 all the way to Ancel in the Bukowina / & we still go at it turba scriptorum tralala trying / to wring something from this long night" (84) This gives the writing a bit of an old-fashioned feel, a sense of the "pure line" that one gets in poets like Robert Kelly and, earlier, Robert Duncan ("O that I had Duncan's eyes to see & hold both this America that Europe planisphere of my sense fine mercator mesh grid of this my prison earth" Joris writes), for whom the coherence of a strong European tradition was of ethical concern, and for whom a loose, speech-based epic lyrical style was the best "American" way to confront it. *Tel Quel* and the Language poets, not to mention the New York School, all of whom have a more mundane, anthropological and pragmatic appreciation of the poet's task, troubled the question of whether one can be both an intuitive medium of meaning and be a historical materialist, with its contract with objectivity, at the same time. Many of the poems struggle with this issue, and outside of a general teleological rush and longings for the visionary capacity, there isn't much touchdown, either into perfectly satisfying poetic form or a detailed, unique personal vision. The better parts of this book are when Joris is just writing in normal prose (or prose-ish poems), discussing why Americans can be so dogmatic in their religions, or in the selections from "h.j.r." describing his search for the "Nomad Hotel" somewhere in, one presumes, Africa: "Realizing that we were children of no Sheikh, wanderers from another direction that had no direction, they led us outside the city's perimeter to where the Japanese buses were waiting, drowning in dust and sun. A low building without a well offered itself to us. I overheard talk bout emigrate / immigrate, the different sides of the same coin. *Koiné*. Porous borders." (191) Here, one senses the complexities of being an interstitial writer, of existing somewhere on the edge of mediated, globalized culture, away from theories of being and economics, though all the pulp and paradoxes of these issues are delivered in the details. The super-national adventure of Joris' nomadic existence — through the walls of Europe and Africa and through the wilds of

all of Modernism, which he knows better than anyone — might have been better displayed had he sacrificed his commitment to the tone of Olson and Pound, and written more freely of the contradictions of his “particular,” therefore meaningful, life.

Nathaniel Mackey, *Whatsaid Serif*  
(City Lights Publishers, 2001)

Mackey’s third book of poems continues the exquisite “Song of the Andouboulou” cycle inaugurated in his first book, *Eroding Witness*, and occupying the entirety of his second, 1993’s *School of Udhra*, also published by City Lights. With a poetic line that is syncopated and improvisational, yet balanced in an elegant, nearly classical style — a sort of “cool jazz” meter — Mackey creates a terrifying, inspiring discourse of spiritual quest in the face of cultural displacement and the ruin of communal identity. Progression and stasis are intermingled in what becomes a suspenseful play of language, sound and sentiment: “Though / the dense woods mocked our / waking, rocked us, robed us / in flammable array... Groped our / way [...] flew / but for the weight of Ogun’s / iron shoe, shod ghost we / imagined we rode, running / in place,” he writes in Song 18. There hasn’t been a more pure elegist for a lost culture since Eliot — nor a more phantasmogoric one — but Mackey’s historical fracture is not an industrialized Europe, but the Middle Passage, taking the phenomenon of syncretism — the reemergence of African traditions in the New World after centuries of total suppression — to create a language that is provisionally indeterminate, yet channeling of the old grammar into the new. Puns play a heavy role, surrendering meanings that become re-rooted in an echo of the African past, creating a world of mythic, but rebus-like, ambience: “Notwithstanding we stood miragelike, / outless the world he’d have / given regardless, Ahtt were it / otherwise. ‘What does “Language / is a fruit of which the / skin / is called chatter” mean?’ he / asked as we / sat in Wrack Tavern, Inn / of Many Monikers, Long Night Lounge...” Mackey is also a novelist, often creating a dialogic interior for many of the poems, though the most recurring presence of figures is denoted by the pronoun “we” — the pronoun itself becoming part of the ceaseless, serious play: “He who’d have said / we so assured it / was a plain we / were on, flat for as / far as the eye / could see,” hence questioning — notice the lack of quotes — even this pronoun’s graphemic efficacy. Mackey’s writing synthesizes the non-referential aspect of post-structuralist poetics and the story-telling imperative of a post-colonial politics — “Sound / raveling sound calling itself eternity. No known locale / though names accrue.” — arguing for an artistic urgency that is both beautiful to read and worthy of understanding.

Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*  
(The MIT Press, 2001)

Kahn’s elegant and captivating “history of sound in the arts” ranges far back and widely through modernist and postmodern experimentation, providing first-glimpses on

the workings of some obscure artists (Richard Huelsenbaeck, Marcel Janco) and some relatively new ones (Michael McClure), as well as unique takes on some of the century's acknowledged masters. The ride gains momentum swiftly with considerations of the early experiments of the dadaist poets Huelsenbaeck, Janco and Tristan Tzara in the Cabaret Voltaire, whose performances, while pushing the envelope toward a Rimbaudian "alchemy of the word," ironically also served to unite the multi-ethnic audience in mutual bafflement. A consideration of Italian composer Luigi Russolo's "art of noises" moves into one of many considerations of how noise — in the form of screams and bomb blasts — operates in prose texts, such as Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, signaling early on that "sound" in Kahn's sense is the synaesthetic version, not only the recordable, exterior type. John Cage's monumental works with the most transparent and quietest of materials — water — provides the theme for the central portion of the book, and Kahn, a professor in the Media Arts at the University of Technology in Australia, convincingly argues that Cage's *Water Music* of 1952 was at least as revolutionary as his silent pieces. "Pollock's dripped and poured paintings and Cage's water sounds heralded a larger concurrence of fluidity, water, sound and performance — the dissolution of media at mid-century in New York, which continued across the arts for many years to come." (240), he writes. The writing on Cage moves into a lucid consideration of a range of postmodern American composers, such as LeMonte Young and Tony Conrad, who, ironically, chose extreme amplifications of noise to bring the auditors back to "silence" — at least once the ears stopped ringing. The "meat" of title comes from a detailed, "naked" consideration of William Burroughs idea of "schlugging," which is the "total osmotic ingestion or fusion of one body by another," (293) but which can also be the sound of "soft innards being sucked out of a body." (297) It is also, in Allen Ginsberg's words, "a very tender emotional direction, a desire to merge with a love," and Kahn deftly negotiates the many paradoxes of this position. Kahn's writing borders on the metaphysical and, perhaps, "flaky," but never crosses over, as his consideration of sound's habitation in the bones of the ear permits an adequate bridge into his less sound-central analyses of passages from prose writers such as Lautreaumont. The entire body is drafted into the art of bearing sound, as the body itself, in some of the most extreme examples in this book, becomes the bowel of an environmental instrument. Though the argument could be made that *Noise Water Meat*, in its meandering manner and obvious hero-worship of the 99% male artists considered, is just one more coffee-table epithet for the death of modernism, it's brio and enthusiasm, not to mention incredible range and skillful weaving of discourses, makes it a compelling read and argument for the continuation of this type of, well, music.

Mary Ann Caws, Editor, *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*  
(University of Nebraska Press, 2001)

As Caws states in her breathless introduction, the arts manifesto, which first made its appearance in the late 19th century (about forty years after the Communist Manifesto) relies on an arrogant, overblown stance that was a "deliberate manipulation of the

public view,” as unquestioning about the value of the “new art” and as it was about the bankruptcy of the old. During what Caws calls the “Manifesto Moment,” from about 1909 when the Futurists first broke out to 1919 when Lyubov Popova wrote her “statement” for non-objective Suprematist Art, the manifesto had a “madness about it,” but always, even when positing an “us” against a “them,” invited the reader to become one of the new breed, a whole new way of looking at things from just the other side of the paradigm-shift (a strategy and optimism that has since been taken over by the technology industry). The manifesto was not a symptom of a world “waiting to be born,” but was at once a diagnosis of its narcolepsy and the crashing of speeding trains that would cure it forever. In this anthology, Caws expands the definition of “Manifesto” to include milder statements of principles (from the Language Poets), poems (parts of Whitman’s “Song of Myself”), fragments from the writings of Cage, Duchamp and others that are more seminal moments than statements, Oscar Wilde’s Preface to *Dorian Gray*, Poe’s *The Philosophy of Furniture*, one of the few writings of Jacques VachÈ (one of Breton’s inspirations for Surrealism), Schwitters’ offbeat “Cow Manifesto” and more. Nitpickers, however, will note certain important exclusions: Rimbaud’s proto-Symbolist “Letter of the Seer,” in which many of the tenets of movements from Surrealism to Beat and Language poetry were to be first found; the Brazilian concrete poets’ “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry,” which was unique in mating a postcolonial agenda with an aesthetics program for “exportable” art and is probably the only South American manifesto that isn’t either Symbolist or Surrealist in origin; and Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl,” which if anything was the most concise, most ecstatic and yet most complete expression of the mores and methods of the Beat Generation. Since the book contains visual as well as literary manifestos — writings from Odilon Redon and James Ensor, not to mention Salvador Dalí’s “Yellow Manifesto” — an excerpt from Jan Tschichold’s *The New Typography*, which outlines the relationship of type and paper-size to social consciousness, would have helped tie several strands together, such as the included manifestos for new architecture and new music (relying on experimental scores), not to mention the valuable, if not entirely satisfying, Lettrist manifestos. The Vorticism section is adequate, though one misses Gautier-Brzeska’s fabulous letter from the front, in which he described carving a sculpture out of the butt of a gun, a more charismatic piece than the Vorticist manifestoes themselves authored by the noxious Richard Aldington (using Lewis and Pound’s language; several of Lewis’s “Blast” pages are included, typefaces intact). Readers of Language Poetry will wonder why none of Bruce Andrews’ famously propulsive essays are included (recently collected in *Andrews Paradise & Method* from the University of Alabama) nor “The New Sentence” by Ron Silliman, which more than the writing of Nick Piombino and Michael Palmer satisfied several of the classic aims of the manifesto and was very influential. Since poetry has been included, a short poem like Ashbery’s “And ‘Ut Pictora Poesis’ Is Her Name” would stand nicely beside O’Hara’s “Personism” (which is included) as a brief, provocative statement of the New York School’s aesthetic purposes that is both subverting of accepted literary values and — perhaps too warmly — inviting. Nonetheless, most of the classics are here, including Whistler’s “The Ten O’Clock,” several essays by Apollinaire and Marinetti, the Dada Manifestos by Tzara, the Russian Futurists’ “Slap in the Face of Public Taste,” Pound’s “A Few Don’ts by an Imagist,” South American manifestos by Borges and Huidobros, Olson’s “Projective Verse,” and

manifestoes of Negritude by Césaire and others (yes, it's quite male heavy). This enormous book is the great companion to the Rothenberg/Joris two volume Poems for the Millennium, and in some ways a less fragmented portrait of world (though not Asian) modernism. Though the scholarship seems often rather sketchy and quickly written — Caws is like the Harold Bloom of this material and doesn't often stop for reflection — it is a challenging, comprehensive read.

## Claudia Rankine, *Plot* (Grove Press, 2001)

Like much women's writing from the avant-garde, *Plot* is a book-length poem/fiction sequence concerned with the issues of meaning, writing and being, utilizing autobiography but also clearly bizarre naming-conventions (à la Zarathustra and De Chirico's Hebdomeros) — to create an atmosphere of moderate crisis, philosophical overdetermination and, in any case, super-real dimensions. It immediately appears at the nexus of several different avant-garde projects, from the nouveau roman of Monique Wittig to the scholarly mind-blasts of Christine Brooke-Rose, from the deconstructed spaces of Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino right on to last year's *The Words* by Carla Harryman (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* also lurks in the background). *Plot*, which more or less spirals around the story of Liv and Erland and their future child Ersatz, is embedded in the sensations and anxieties of child-birth and -rearing: "Long after she grows tired in the night she hears only the child's cries. His cries, already recalling, and silence, / the dumbness she wedges herself into. Cowardly, and additionally compromised, she hears each cry, punctuating every space of exception, running through her, meaning to break, to interrupt each moment attempted. She hears and calls it silence." (20) The main issue seems to be whether this birth is wanted for an escape from self, and whether this second-self is indeed an "other"; Rankine writes: "Liv, answer me this: Is the female anatomically in need of a child as a life preserver, a hand, a hand up? And now, pap smeared, do you want harder the family you fear in fear of all those answers?" This question of self-othering, of viewing the child as "ersatz" meaning, is tied in with Rankine's sense of herself, and one of the more striking moments is when the three main figures conjoin to render this situation clear: "That same night Erland pressed his ear to Liv's belly. / What do you hear? Liv asked. / Not you, Erland answered. Not you." (78) Unfortunately, unlike Rankine's last book *The End of Alphabet*, *Plot* is particularly prone to run-on, obfuscated formulations and indulgent — one presumes "experimental" and yet finally unnecessary — grammatical constructions: "the damaged image absorbed to appear, the exemplar seen and felt as one, having grown thick in the interior, opens on to surface and is the surface reflecting its source." (39) The Ashberian "taking out" — a mark, one supposes, of the "Ellipticist" school of writing — and the Steinian urge for recursive syntax, while occasionally quite beautiful and engaging, is often colorless and makes one self-conscious about wishing an end to all deconstructive tactics in poetry: "The interest is not with the dissolved, and yet dissolution surrounds, is a feeling in its duration. It observes its own density and is the constituted dissolved toward solidity. To

this refuse, / casting its shadow from flesh to canvas, she says, no. But see, the debris is the self within the trace, then the tide is the general condition implicated. She is afraid of herself.” (67) As opposed to the writing of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha in her *Dictee*, to which *Plot* seems most indebted, these moments do not seem linked to any real intensity of vision, any thwarted desire to reveal, but come off as stock stylistic devices of the Jorie Graham variety. *Plot* is interesting because it contains moments of normative fiction (such as the “Interlude”) and a series of odd graphically charted pages, an effort, perhaps, to anchor this mass of issues and language, but even these moments are unexciting — the dialogue is hackneyed, the graphics insincere. Rankine has tremendous talent as a poet, but one wonders if a better way of expressing the dilemmas of a fluid, ontologically flustered self would be a more concentrated, formally precise, poetry, one that presented the precious rocks that one grasps at for stability rather than simply the grasping.

## Noelle Kocot, 4 (Four Way Books, 2001)

A startling debut from this New York-based poet, 4 is a highly technical accomplishment — free-verse sestinas, rhyming quatrains and other verse forms seem to roll from her pen effortlessly — and yet it manages all of these pyrotechnics without the pastiche or irony-drunk qualities of other contemporary quasi-formal versifiers. Her knotty, provocative turn of mind — part Rimbaudian, part Kenneth Koch — mixes darker, often Biblical imagery with a quirky humor, as in these lines from “The Traffic Cop”: “I don’t know how to say what I’m becoming / But it seems that every time / I consider lolling on the banks of the lake / Of infernal fire, the ice-cream truck / Toddles along, hauling its song, / The only music I can bring to listen to these days. / The truth is I’m bored / And conversations about why don’t seem to help. / I’m getting older fast and none too carefully...” (16) Casting herself as the renegade, even the vagabond, but with benign intentions peeking through, this poem concludes on a defiant absurdist note: “Your brand of peace disgusts me, do you hear? / I am the fugitive who drives the stampede / Of aardvarks across your lawns. / I have come to tip your cows.” Swift, intense, image-laden poems like “Ontology Train” are, indeed, like modern versions of “The Drunken Boat”: “The night offers no apology / For its marvelous moody technique bathed in the venom / Of so many charged similes that conjure the hagiography / Of man as a vessel caught in a maelstrom / Which is its own blustery hubris pulsing / Through his homesick blood...” (22) But her poems are usually about relationships, about the heavy burden of love and poetic thought that she shares with her interlocutor, a nameless, mystical “you”: “Yet you are concrete / Somehow; I know, I’ve heard your bee-like buzzing / In all the tiny leaves bursting from their sacs to greet / A magical universe...” (43) Her sestinas offer a somewhat lighter view, if only because the necessary play of the form, as in this brief (fictional?) recounting of an affair: “But in all the San Franciscos / We could conjure in our souls, / Always there was the debris left perhaps by the quake of chiding souls / In the intermediate world, or by some ironic / Sandman reminding us that we were still asleep. San Francisco / Fantasy aside, you



have to admit we sucked / As a couple...” (48). “Le Marteau sans maitre,” dedicated to Boulez, has some of the qualities of Ashbery’s Prospero-like narrator revealing the codes that lie under reality’s deceptive surfaces: “In this way, our reactions to the written word / Open an angle of view increasingly peopled / By our club-shaped shadows, / And by our footprints on the road which lie / In an allegorically restrained / Framework of geometric shapes, as elegantly austere / As the simple arrangement of vessels on a table, ” and concludes: “So you see, the scene / Is quite human after all, a liquid legend / Passing through crystalline sunlight / And flooding our well-supported interiors / With an atmospheric clarity emblematic / Of the essential questions blowing here and there / Like remnants of a foreign language...” Kocot’s images flow freely, perhaps too rhapsodically for some people’s tastes; often she writes unrestrained, and almost approaches a “naive” quality except that her obvious spiritual maturity, not to mention her large vocabulary, deflects this impression. Like other young poets, such as Jennifer Moxley and Chris Stoffolino, Kocot has found a language for her emotions that pulls into her universe an abundance of memories, metaphors, and verbal twists. But she is unique in having found a way to mate an urban “post-punk” sensibility — images of youthful rebellion, cultural disgust, hyperreal love and visceral superworldly elements abound in passionate bursts — with a highly controlled, even learned form that makes reading her poems both an energizing yet cerebral experience.