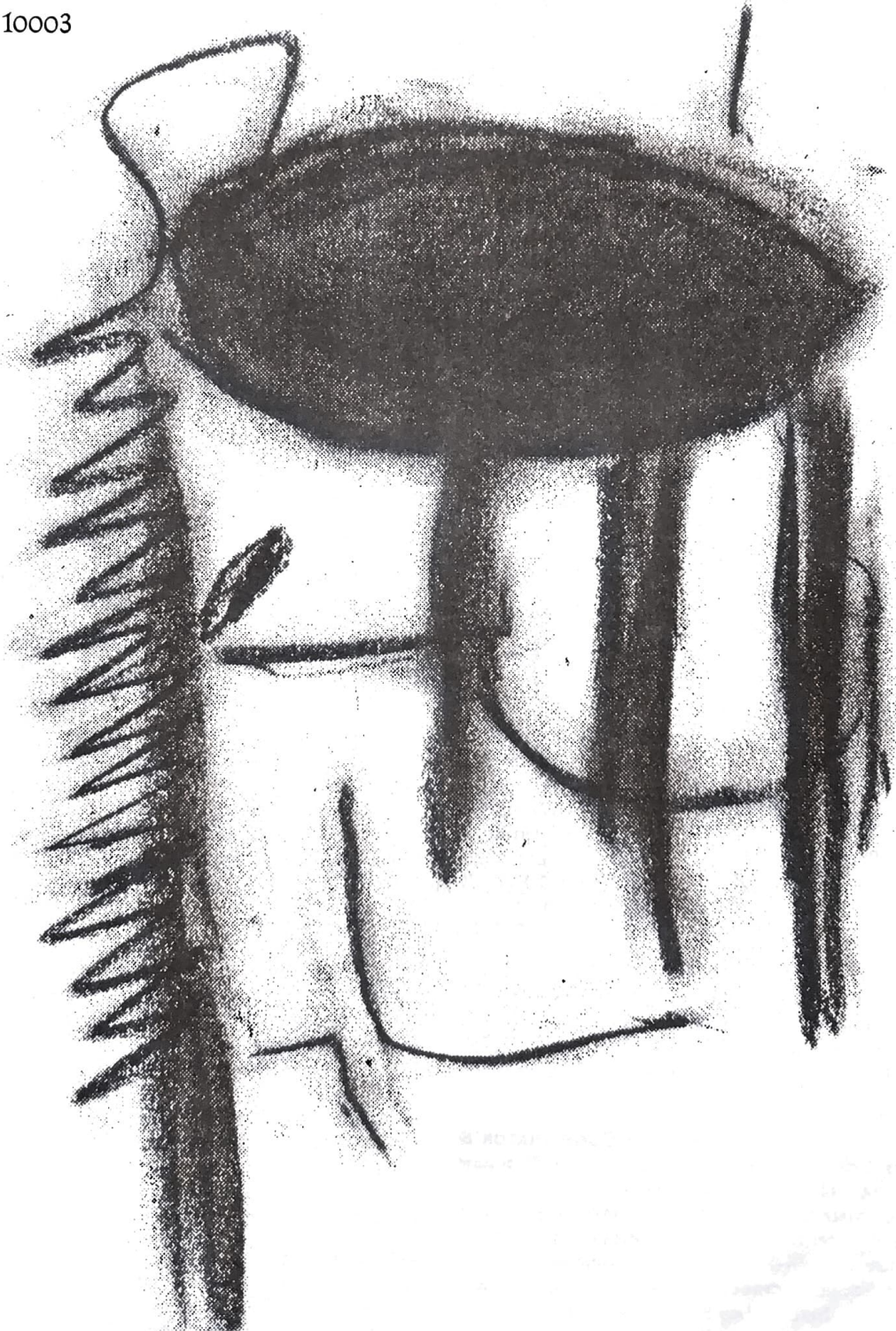


the poetry project newsletter

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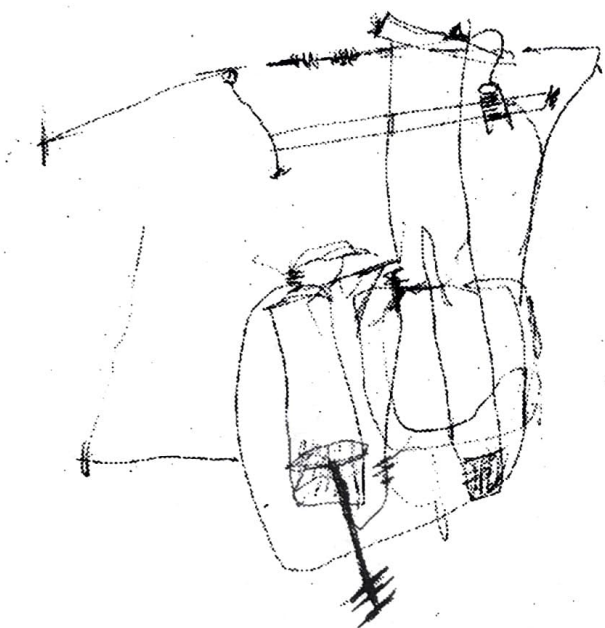
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WHAT'S INSIDE: Remembrances of Larry Eigner, Bob Flanagan & Patricia Landrum • Poetry by Brenda Coultas, Melanie Neilson, Cliff Fyman, Laynie Browne, Bruce Andrews, Donna Cartelli & Alan Davies • What You Are Reading • Reviews of Kenneth Koch, Harryette Mullen, Poems for the Millennium, Robert Kelly & others.

contents

CARBUCKLE



Richard O'Russa is a poet, painter, co-printer of **Monster Trucks**. He is putting together a book of drawings and text on baseball.

FEATURES...

Larry Eigner 1928-1996.....	3
Bob Flanagan 1953-1996.....	5
What You Are Reading.....	7
Patricia Landrum 1951-1996.....	8

POEMS...

from the Agency of Wind by Laynie Browne.....	4
Traveler by Donna Cartelli.....	4
The Human Museum by Brenda Coultas.....	6
from Cold Spring by Alan Davies.....	8
Vice, Advice & Eccentricities by Cliff Fyman.....	12
Three by Bruce Andrews.....	12
By Apples Moved Not Apples by Melanie Neilson.....	13

IN EVERY ISSUE...

Submit.....	15
Calendar.....	16
Reviews.....	19
<i>On the Great Atlantic Rainway</i> by Kenneth Koch, <i>Muse & Drudge</i> by Harryette Mullen, <i>Poems for the Millennium</i> , <i>Red Actions</i> by Robert Kelly, <i>Common Preludes</i> by Edward Barrett, <i>Mao & Matisse</i> by Ed Friedman, <i>Asia & Haiti</i> by Will Alexander, <i>Premonitions & The Little Magazine</i> , Vol. 21.	
Books/Magazines Received.....	29

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Persons, both male and female, are best seen out of doors.

Persons who complain about the pre-dominance of the lyric in contemporary poetry to the neglect of other forms have simply not read Koch. This volume contains narrative and epic (well, mock-epic) poetry, travelogue, and a poetic treatise on the art of love, a treatise which, like the **Kama Sutra**, would prove interesting and dangerous if practiced literally.

A surprise to those who, like me, thought of Koch as someone who substitutes wit for emotional depths will be *To Marina*, a ten-page memoir in middle age of an affair of Koch's late 20s. I was surprised to find that Koch can be as "confessional" as Lowell or Berryman:

I wasn't ready

For you.

I understood nothing

Seemingly except my feelings

You were whirling

In your life

I was keeping

Everything in my head

An artist friend's apartment

Five flights up the

Lower East Side nineteen

Fifty-something I don't know

What we made love the first time I

Almost died I had never felt

That way it was like being stamped on in Hell

It was roses of Heaven

My friends seemed turned to me to empty shell

To Marina, however, is as naked as Koch gets. The last poems in **On the Great Atlantic Rainway** show him bemused, quieter, though still able to spit puns and split logic with the best of them. On the whole, I think it gives ample evidence that Koch has lived up to the strictures he set for poets in *The Art of Poetry*:

Remember your obligation is to write

And, in writing, to be serious without being solemn,

fresh without being cold,

To be inclusive without being asinine, particular

Without being picky, feminine without being effeminate,

Masculine without being brutish, human while keeping all the animal graces

You had inside the womb, and beast-like without being inhuman.

Let your language be delectable always, and fresh and true.

— Reagan Upshaw

Muse & Drudge by Harryette Mullen
Singing Horse Press (Philadelphia, 1995); 80 pages, \$12.50.

*you've had my thrills
a reefer a tub of gin
don't mess with me I'm evil
I'm in your sin*

*clipped bird eclipsed moon
soon no memory of you
no drive or desire survives
you flutter invisible still*

Harryette Mullen's first book **Trimnings** is a celebration and exploration of femininity as something extra. In her new book length poem, **Muse & Drudge**, a sequence of eighty, four quatrains each, the speaker calls on poetic wordplay and improvisation to rhythmically stave off an aching lack and heal a wound.

Sapphire's lyre styles. In the first few lines, Mullen invokes the history of Sappho whose poems we know only through fragments. Like Sappho, Mullen focuses on details of everyday life and the agonies of love, while keeping close to speech. Unlike Sappho, she accentuates the many voices that make up the one. And while Sappho's poems have been mutilated with the passage of time, Mullen's poem comes into being only through purposefully gathering and transforming fragments. And Mullen's Sappho is instead a Sapphire. Clarence Major's dictionary describes, *Sapphire* as a derogatory term for an unpopular black female. Sapphire surely also alludes to the contemporary poet who *dives into the mutilation that society makes black women go through (Angry Women)*. A sapphire is also a beautiful blue stone.

Mullen's uncommon, uncertain and shifting subject is a woman who in the blues tradition has been forgotten, oppressed and betrayed. Sapphire becomes traveling Jane who merges with other mothers, the essence lady; self-made woman, off bottom woman, brown gals, women of honey, hens, the bird, handsome gal, tomboy girl, a wave goodbye a girl, big legged gal, sassy cook, outlaws, etc. By slinging insults and studying the world around her and before her, she transforms her loss into lines that unravel, re-form and trick the reader. Each riddle-like poem has a secret that opens into another and I too become uneven, unbalanced, aching with pain and revenge, like traveling Jane herself. What does one do with an impossible mourning? She writes beautiful *ruses of the lunatic muse*:

*dark-eyed flower
knuckling under
lift a finger for her
give the lady a hand*

*not her hard life
cramped hot stages
only her approach
ahead of the beat*

*live in easy virtue
where days behaving send
her dance and her body
forward to a new air dress*

*a pad for writing
where dreams hit el cielo
crack the plaster fool mood rising
it's snowing on the radio (20)*

The betrayed woman doesn't sit still and weep. She keeps on moving *rumba with the chains removed*; for her, there is *no time to settle down*; she's *going back native natural country wild briars*; *shake it down south to New Orleans*; the French quarter; the city streets, buses and subways of Philmeyerok; to *Virginia/where the green grass grows*; coastal Georgia and South Carolina; the slave ships; *bamboula back to/the motherland*; Dahomey; Nigeria; Ashanti; Ethiopia; Cuba. She travels through social bedlam, a history of slavery and drudgery and looks into these places and times for wisdom and *freedom to study her story*.

*sister mystery listens
helps souls in misery
get to the square root
of evil and render it moot (28)*

The sun may be shining but what does one do to take away the hurt. She *sings scat logic*, dances with her words, twisting up her tongue; she recasts, ridicules and rethinks the language of technology, advertising and religion. *Jesus is my airplane/I shall feel no turbulence/though I fly in a squall thorough the spleen of Satan*. She has a sexy celebration, but the body's raw and real: *copulation from scratch/kisses go down hard*. Ravaged by love's loss and the sense that *something must need fixin*, she finds a *women's shelter under a sweater*; she talks to herself, tells stories of others; speaks to the betrayer who now resides within and hurls insults and threats. She lets the *Mississippi rip, just exercising/her right to bare attitude: mister arty martyr/a jackass to water; his penis flightier than his word; kiss my black bottom; and then she begs someone to please come in/tell me what's good/think up something*.

*if I can't have love
I'll take sunshine
if I'm too plain for champagne
I'll go float on red wine*

*what you can do
is what women do
I know you know
what I mean, don't you*

Yes, I do. She tries to make excuses: *he couldn't help himself/he couldn't help it/he couldn't stop himself* but ends blessing stunned cattle, spavined horses, and gutted trout. She uses poetic language to move from one invisible flutter to another beginning. Some poems are thick and layered with double, triple, and quadruple meaning—the sounds of pain, anger, revenge and forgiveness. *When memory is unforgiving/mute eloquence/of taciturn ghosts/wreaks havoc on the living (71)*.

*feed the spirits or they'll
chew on your soul
you'll be swallowed and digested
by a riled-up crocodile (69)*

Muse & Drudge is a book length poem in which Harryette Mullen gathers together fragments of a life and a history. She *hums some blues in technicolor*. It is a sad, funny, intelligent and powerful work.

—Barbara Henning

POEMS FOR THE MILLENNIUM

The University of California Book of Modern and Postmodern Poetry Volume One: From Fin-de-Siècle to Negritude

Edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, University of California Press (Berkeley, 1995); 811 pages.

In the past, Jerome Rothenberg has taught us the methodological importance of anthologies. The Classical age, and its later-day adherents, preserved poetry similarly, for pedagogical purposes (*The Greek Anthology* comes to mind), but never as an iconoclastic gesture or for the revelation of a secret that no one had the interest or courage to uncover, or the possibility of uncovering, before — in Rothenberg's latest collection, *Poems for the Millennium*, which he has co-edited with Pierre Joris, it is both this revelation, and much more seriously, a mutation in the natural dimension of Western culture: the end of history in the sense in which it is secretly implied by anthologies, but for which they are rarely capable of shouldering, because they come off as a means of preservation and retro-

spection. *Millennium* is that rare case, one which has no intention of preserving anything, because its impetus, announced clearly by its first poet, William Blake, is *To cast off the rotten rags of memory by Inspiration*. But it is also, according to Blake, a "Self-annihilation", despite the inevitable care-of-the-self that is exhibited in the pasture-like scan of such a centralizing text as *Millennium*. It is also, Whitman's "compost" and Dickinson's "loaded gun." Thus the die of postmodernism is cast, and with it, the jetty-like role of trying to define people as living beings whose crucial distinction from other species is language, uncovering a beginning only against the background of a life which itself began long before.

With succinct commentary after certain poems to position them in terms of both their influence on Twentieth Century literature and their relevancy in terms of this collection's vision of what precisely constitutes "the millennium," the text is user-friendly and far less unwieldy than it could be, and far more precise than any anthologies of recent memory that attempted anything similarly canonizing. Then again, *Millennium's* subject is so different, so vast, so oceanic, comparisons can only point to the hope that it will serve as a model for any future attempts. It is not just any translation of Lautrémont that appears, but the best one (Alexis Lykiard's). One gets a double dose of Mallarmé: an excerpt from *Le Livre* where those who thought "Language" poetry was merely a discontent of the late Twentieth century will find (circa 1890):

end
conscience
And sorrows +
+
street

+
childhood

double
their
crowd +
+ a crime sewer

as well as the entire text of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés*, a poem that works as every thought emits a throw of the dice — *Toute pensée émetin coup de dés* — an idea that both informs, inspires, and even undermines *Millennium*, in the sense that it makes every effort not to assert the authority that is usually associated with anthologies.

Literally and figuratively central to *Millennium* is its section on Dada. What is new to be learned about this movement is its anticipation of so much that was to follow. In this sense the book gets you to thinking about something as irrational as an inherent memory of language, and something less irrational, that Allen

Ginsberg and Bruce Andrews may have read Tristan Tzara:

howl howl howl howl howl howl howl
howl howl howl howl howl howl howl
howl howl howl howl howl howl howl
howl howl howl howl howl howl howl
howl howl howl howl howl howl howl
howl howl howl howl howl howl howl
howl howl howl howl howl howl howl
howl howl howl howl howl howl howl
howl howl howl howl howl howl howl

— from Tzara's *Dada Manifesto*
on *Feeble & Bitter Love*

Is poetry necessary? I know that those who shout loudest against it are actually preparing a comfortable perfection of it; they call it the Future Hygienic

People envisage the (ever-impending) annihilation of art. Here they are looking for a more art-like art. Hygiene becomes mygod mygod purity. Must we no longer believe in words? Since when do they express the contrary of what the organ that utters them thinks and wants?

Herein lies the great secret:

Thought is made in the mouth.

I still consider myself very likable.

— from Tzara's *Dada Manifesto*
on *Feeble & Bitter Love*

Are you tired of your dog ignoring you? Tired of your dog running away from you? Air Force obedience training makes the difference. Tits lock horns, Enola Gay mere asset management. No evil Shahs live on

— from Andrew's *I Don't have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)*

Clarifying the all important relationship between poets and painters that was crucial to Dada and its various legacies, *Millennium* includes facsimile reproductions of Dadaist collaborations, a marvelous excerpt from Max Ernst's *The Hundred Headless Woman*, and elsewhere, manuscripts of Dickinson and Blake. Such delights seem to appear where ever some additional elucidation would be useful. Thus is revealed the inspiring economy of this anthology and a clever and perhaps unconscious practice of what really made many the great poems of the Twentieth century so great — they were very well edited. Thus Pound's influence on the Twentieth Century via Imagism in cutting-out the inessential words, the fluff that still stagnates poetry to this day due to hopeless misunderstandings and ignorance of what language is. Similarly, no poet is included in *Millennium* whose work was not somehow revolutionary, that did not

poetry project newsletter 21

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