

no man could swim in air, no man could breathe  
 but—this much you can do—give in as if  
 you're a beatup Mercedes  
 maybe it's my age, prime of life, you know  
 no, no, I am not mentioned  
 with the print of a million moving feet  
 fear would deface & topple  
 finish up as a jackal's lunch  
 a butterfly through the window  
 walking back up the street, momentarily  
 mother's voice now full of irritation  
 I mean I would sort of appear

**BARBARA HENNING**  
**MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY**  
 UNITED ARTISTS BOOKS / 2007  
 REVIEW BY BILL KUSHNER

As she explains in her foreword, Barbara Henning's *My Autobiography* began as a collaboration with the artist Miranda Maher. "Miranda clipped off the corner of 999 of my books, for an installation, entitled 999. Then I constructed the poem by taking a word, a phrase, or passage or two from each of these books." So, from out of her 999 books, ranging from Henning's vast collection of poetry to writings on art, yoga, philosophy, psychiatry, and then into her kitchen for her cookbooks, Henning has produced 72 excellent and adventurous sonnets. These sonnets are truly Objectivist creatures (Henning dedicates her book to Louis Zukofsky). What's most interesting about these poems to me? Woven, as they are, with the raw material of language I think they are often funny, and they give a picture of our times and poetics in a weird way. Take her sonnet "28" (the only titles to these poems are numbers) with 14 lines credited to such poets as Charles Olson, Maureen Owen, Ovid, Gary Pacernick, Grace Paley, Patchen, Perce, Pessoa, Pettet, Wang Ping, and Jayne Anne Phillips (Henning obviously working from those of her books arranged alphabetically):

This poem, with its traditional themes of life, death, and sheer accidental existence, immediately reminded me of Ted Berrigan's sonnet "LIX," which touches movingly on the lives and deaths of Marilyn Monroe, William Carlos Williams, and Joe Brainard. But where Berrigan becomes a very powerful poetical presence in his by now historical and masterful sonnets, Henning herself only appears in person once, in her sonnet "44," in lines taken from, of all exotic places, the *East Detroit High School Yearbook 1966*:

Barbara Henning: "east Detroiter" staff 2; pit and balcony drama

Nostalgic, fitting, yet funny, eh? It's our poet at quite a remove. I also like very much these three bumpy transitions she takes from various biographies of Ezra Pound, in her sonnet titled "31":

they both became pupils of Buddha  
 I don't care a fried\_\_\_\_\_about nationality  
 what's normal, makes him ab-normal

A too brief but perhaps apropos history of the man. It's stuff like this that refreshes the language. It's language giving back to language the beauty of the unexpected. I like how sonnet "35" begins with Shakespeare and yet ends with a delicious line from Gertrude Stein:

little sales ladies little sales ladies little saddles

or, how another line of Stein's in "36" makes you want to rush back to the source herself:

five and no more five and four four and four

It is the sonnets taken from Henning's books on yoga that have an interesting existence on their own. How sonnet "50" ends:

nothing you wish is impossible  
 in the avenue leading to the water

Or, the very real, very weird beauty of how "51" ends with this couplet:

a pain in my back becomes—  
 corpses of large birds, corpses of small birds

Poetry Project Newsletter  
 DECEMBER 2007 / JANUARY 2008 23

I strongly urge more readers to take *My Autobiography* in hand, and find your own favorite passages in this most challenging and adventurous book.

Bill Kushner's latest book is *In Sunsetland With You (Straw Gate Books, 2007)*.