

Antiwarism: Should poets make a claim to moral clarity?

George W. Bush and his lovely wife, Laura, have done more to raise the profile of American poetry than any presidential family since the Kennedys invited Robert Frost to read a poem at JFK's inauguration. Just as Frost was blinded by the glare off the January snow that icy afternoon in 1961, the first lady this past February was caught in a dazzling blizzard of "protest" poems after she'd invited a group of poets to the White House to celebrate the spirits of the safely dead Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson and Langston Hughes. Getting wind of the live poets' intention of presenting her with their objections to her husband's impending war against Iraq, Mrs. Bush canceled the planned salon, proving, in the words of *The New York Times*, "that the most effective poetry reading is the one that never happens." The publicity generated by this non-event made poets in this culture appear to be more potent than they really are.

If poetry, as W. H. Auden famously observed, "makes nothing happen," perhaps that was the point of the poets' gesture of opposition to the president's policies: to make the war not happen. As one of the more intimate and humanistic art forms, devoted to precise language, individual vision and truthful communication, poetry is naturally antipolitical and antiwar—politics and war being notorious breeding grounds for lies, clichés and euphemisms. So how radical or difficult is it, really, to

write an "antiwar" poem? Virtually all poems, whatever their theme, are antiwar. The question is how clearly and truly they articulate experience or thought. The danger of assuming an artistic posture explicitly in opposition to the state is, in the very act of opposition, that of becoming a mirror image of official propaganda. Much of what passes for "protest" poetry is political rhetoric by another name—mobilized for a benign purpose perhaps but often shading into self-righteousness, proclaiming the virtue of the speaker as a champion of peace or justice and blaming the bad guys for everything that's wrong with the world—in this way resembling the good-versus-evil discourse of messianic moralizers like Bush and Osama bin Laden.

The most powerful and memorable antiwar poetry I know has been written not by protesters but witnesses. The English soldier-poet Wilfred Owen, fighting in the trenches of World War I; the Jewish German Paul Celan, who barely survived the Holocaust, and the Lithuanian Czeslaw Milosz, who worked with the Polish Resistance in World War II; the Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish, enduring the Israeli bombardment of Beirut in 1982—each of these, through charged, inventive language, unflinching perception and a ruthlessly self-questioning attitude, lays bare the pathos and contradiction and disorienting obscenity of organized violence. None speaks from a safe

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The Poet Abroad: the Cuirt Festival

The Cuirt International Festival of Literature celebrated its 18th year this April in Galway, Ireland. Originally a poetry festival when it first began, the Cuirt Festival agenda has expanded to reflect contemporary events as expressed through poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and the visual arts. Its current aim is to bring together "the very best of contemporary literature from a wide diversity of genres, styles, and nationalities."

The theme of this year's festival was Exile, and participants explored the impact and effects of military occupation, flawed attempts at settlement, and the importance of history and memory. The visual arts exhibit entitled "Settlement: A Project of the Culture and Conflict Group" included the works of ten artists from Palestine, Ireland, and United States. After a barrage of news media images of the war on Iraq, Tomas Hardiman, Galway Arts Center's Managing Director commented that "Cuirt gives us a space to reflect on the human face of the world through art." It should be noted, however, that plans for the festival and its theme of exile were long in the works

before the advent of the war on Iraq. The timeliness of this gathering was expressed and felt by all.

Many of the festival participants have experienced exile firsthand. Ariel Dorfman, author of *Death and the Maiden*, is a survivor of General Pinochet's regime in Chile. Witnesses of the turmoil in the Near East and Central Europe who also read at the festival included the Anatolian-born poet and translator Cevat Capan, the Iranian poet Ziba Karbassi, the Turkish writer Moris Farhi, and the Kurdish poet Bejan Matur.

I was fortunate to attend the readings of Bejan Matur, Joan McBreen, Douglas Dunn, and Carol Ann Duffy. Matur read poems in her native Turkish, followed by a reading of each poem in English by her publisher. Even without understanding the language, one could not help but be moved by Matur's reading. Her intonation and presentation were singularly memorable, and the English translation was equally strong. Matur's books include *Mansions Full of Breezes* (1996), *God Must Not See My Letters* (1999), and more recent, *Sons Reared by the*

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remove—Owen was killed on the battlefield at 25—and none assumes a position of political omniscience or moral superiority. As human beings, they imply (as Camus does in *The Fall*), we are all guilty. It is this acknowledgment of the inner shadow, this grief in the face of moral disaster, combined with great linguistic originality, that gives these writers their richness of expression and depth of spiritual insight. The individuality and intimacy and inwardness of their vision, rather than condemnation of the other's crimes, makes their art irrefutable in a way no strictly "political" utterance can touch.

But Mrs. Bush's dainty notion that literature should somehow be indifferent to or oblivious of history is absurd. Emily Dickinson may have been a visionary recluse, feeding on the genius of her own eccentric imagination, but to try to separate Whitman or Hughes from the turmoil of their times is ridiculous. Hughes deliberately set out to speak in a nonliterary idiom from the perspective and experience of "Negro" America, with all the pain and tragedy and defiant optimism of the black man's burden. And Whitman, for all his early expansive exuberance, was bitterly disillusioned by the moral horror of slavery, the nightmare of the Civil War (whose human casualties he witnessed firsthand as a nurse to the Union wounded), and the perversion of American freedom into a free-for-all of capitalistic greed. *Democratic Vistas*, his later prose testament, is still hopeful yet saturated with disappointment that "these States" were turning out to be grossly different from what he had originally envisioned. It is this mature recognition of America's failure to live up to its ideals that gives the younger Walt's enthusiasms their tragic poignancy. For the first lady, who as a librarian should know better, to airbrush away these critical aspects of our national poets is an act of willful ignorance worthy of the sneakiest Soviet censor.

The tendency to sentimentalize, to idealize, to simplify and purify an otherwise murky and ambiguous reality is typically the symptom of an ideological agenda, whatever wing of the political spectrum it may be serving. The mythification of "heroes," whether warriors or war resisters, is often an act of selective memory and must be subject to skeptical scrutiny lest we lose sight of the complexity of human character. People with firsthand experience of catastrophe are less inclined to sentimentality than those whose knowledge has been gained at a comfortable distance. A good example of this phenomenon is Roman Polanski's recent film *The Pianist*, a Holocaust survival drama whose protagonist endures a horrific ordeal mainly through dumb luck and the incidental decency of strangers (including one Nazi officer). Unlike Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, which manipulates its viewers' emotions by cleaning up the character of Oskar Schindler into that of an admirable angel of mercy, Polanski's treatment of similar material is devoid of uplift—partly, no doubt, because the director himself as a child barely escaped with his life from Europe's

collapse into fascism. Even the victims in *The Pianist* are depicted as flawed or grotesque, thus depriving the audience of the comfort of easy identification. History, he seems to be suggesting, has no good guys.

A great range of responses may complement each other in the mobilization of an antiwar aesthetic. Preconceived notions of "moral clarity" (one of the president's favorite concepts) and/or sanctimonious militancy are imagination's enemies. Even apparently "escapist" art may serve a subversive or corrective purpose. Some 20 years ago in Santa Cruz, at the height of Ronald Reagan's nuke-rattling presidency and attendant fears for an imperiled world, the poet Gary Young was reading to a sizable audience one night; he read a delicate poem about his garden, and a heckler in the back of the hall called out, "How can you be reading poems about flowers when we're on the brink of a nuclear holocaust?" After a brief pause, Young replied, "I can't think of a better time." Which is to say that seemingly apolitical art can also evoke the values and pleasures that make the world worth saving and life worth savoring. Often such evocations of beauty can be an antidote to despair, just as anger and outrage can motivate and inform imaginative acts of resistance.

A week or so before Mrs. Bush disinvited the peace-mongering bards to her politically polite poetic tea, Secretary of State Colin Powell made his pitch for war against Iraq at the United Nations Security Council. As if to prove that art is more eloquent than even the most respected statesman's powers of persuasion, a reproduction of Picasso's *Guernica*—the painter's anguished denunciation of the Nazi bombing of civilians in the Spanish Civil War—was discreetly covered during Powell's speech. Such censorship only accentuates the threat that all art poses to official rhetoric. Like the child whose innocence exposes the emperor's nakedness, the artist is charged with unmasking collective illusions. Bombs and bombast may be more devastating than anyone's pen or brush, but the affirmation of creative witness, however powerless to save us from ourselves, may at least offer some pungent consolation.

For writers, finally, the only war worth fighting is the war against cliché.

Stephen Kessler's latest book is Tell It to the Rabbis. This essay first appeared in The Redwood Coast Review.

Poetry Santa Cruz is a poetry promotion and advocacy organization. Our unpaid staff consists of Dennis Morton, Len Anderson, Marcia Adams, Julia Alter, Phil Wagner, Maggie Paul, Tilly Shaw, and Suki Wessling. We are joined by wonderful and necessary volunteers from the community. Thanks to all our contributors and to Amber Coverdale Sumrall for her editing help with this issue. Poetry Santa Cruz NEWS is edited by Suki Wessling.

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Moon. I would urge anyone interested in poems that penetrate the soul and ask the hard questions to read her work.

For those interested in contemporary Irish women's poetry, Joan McBreen, a resident of County Galway, has compiled and edited a new anthology entitled: *The White Page: 20th Century Irish Women Poets* (Salmon Publishing). The anthology features more than 100 Irish women poets who have published at least one collection. Joan McBreen read from her latest collection, *Winter in the Eye*. Her poems of place transcend locale and resonate with the spirit behind the landscape, calling into play both personal and communal history and memory.

Douglas Dunn, a poet, short story writer, translator and anthologist read an elegiac address for his late friend, the poet Ian Hamilton. In a number of poems, Dunn's view of the cosmos through the lens of private experience and the wider reach of history was exquisite. He is said to "make small details matter with his love of the exact," and his expertise with the tension and precision of meter, and rhyme is apparent on the page as well as in his oral presentation.

Among my favorite readings was that of Carol Ann Duffy, a Glasgow-born poet now residing in Manchester, England. The author of seven books of poetry, Duffy's sense of humor and adeptness with poetic form was not only impressive but absolutely entertaining. Duffy read sections of her long poem, "The Laughter of Stafford High" interspersed with the short lyrical poems "The Diet," "Mrs. Aesop," and "Sub." "The Laughter of Stafford High" is a comic elegy for an all-girls

boarding school the poet attended as a teen in England. In the voices of students under the care of a humourless head mistress, Duffy re-creates the strict disciplinarian nature of the school and the uncontrollable mischievousness the students inevitably engage in as a way to endure the experience. The technique of punctuating her reading of the long poem with short pieces, segueing back to "Stafford High" with, "Let's go see what happens to the girls when they are found out..." relieved the audience (and the poet) of the length of the poem and in fact created an excitement and anticipation in the audience to hear the next part. While much of Duffy's work is a dance of acerbic wit, elements of life's misfortunes and individual isolation arise in unexpected moments: a perfect blend of the tragic comic. "The Laughter of Stafford High" and another exquisite poem entitled "Diet" both come from her recent collection, *Feminine Gospels*.

Readings at the Cuirt Festival are quite affordable and many of the lectures and informal talks which take place at the University of Galway are free. If a trip to the west of Ireland is of interest, you may want to coordinate your dates around those of this April festival. It is a wonderful way to experience the work of an international segment of writers all in one location. For further information, contact The Galway Arts Centre at gac@indigo.ie or their website: www.galwayartscentre.ie.

Maggie Paul is a founding member of Poetry Santa Cruz. Her chapbook Stones from the Baskets of Others was published by Black Dirt Press.

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If you are reading this Poetry Santa Cruz membership newsletter, chances are that you are a member. . .right? That means that somewhere along the way, you discovered Poetry Santa Cruz and decided to support our efforts to bring top quality poets to the local community. And that you agree that poets deserve adequate compensation for their creative work.

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them aboard. Better yet, invite them to our Tuesday evening readings at Bookshop Santa Cruz and Capitola Book Café. Point them in the direction of our informative web site, www.poetrysantacruz.org. In other words, we invite all of our members to become ambassadors for the cause of poetry in our community.

Thanks to the generosity of several highly regarded poetry presses, (Graywolf, University of Pittsburgh Press, and others) we are offering premiums for memberships above our basic level.

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Poetry Santa Cruz Calendar, Summer 2003

Sunday, June 8

2:00 pm

Poet/Speak Open Reading with featured readers **Patricia Grube** and **Renata Kynast**
Santa Cruz Main Library

Tuesday, July 8

7:30 pm

Greg Hewett and **Joanna Martin**
Bookshop Santa Cruz

Sunday, July 14

2:00 pm

Poet/Speak Open Reading with featured readers **Joseph McNeilly** and **Robin Lopez Lysne**
Santa Cruz Main Library

Tuesday, June 10

7:30 pm

Readers TBA
Bookshop Santa Cruz

Sunday, August 10

2:00 pm

Poet/Speak Open Reading with featured readers TBA
Santa Cruz Main Library

Tuesday, August 12

7:30 pm

Readers TBA
Bookshop Santa Cruz

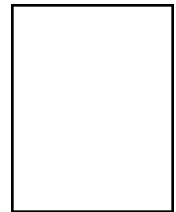
Volunteers Needed!

If you like what we do, consider helping out. We can use your time and expertise in many ways. If you can help in any way, e-mail info@poetrysan-tacruz.org or talk to us at a reading.

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PRIMITIVE DIVINITIES

Joanna Martin

Between the purple storms of philosophers cracking the sky
wide open white with lightning philosophies,
at the outskirts of technologies' campfires,
eluding the hum of science packaging up
the shriek of the wild,
beyond thought,
sidestepping economics covering everything like acid rainfall,
within, yet outside, all borders,
evading all political systems,
at the center of the mandala of all religion,
nestled between east and west, axis and horizon,
matter and spirit intersect and hang on the cross,

there, that same directionless woman squats on haunches
supporting her torso's arch,
delicate, light-reflecting crescent,
part beast, part goddess,
scoops out from her blouse on aching breast
mute as a planet,
the pink nipple descends,
fills the black hole of humanity's wailing lips,
suckles it.

Joanna Martin received her BA in Literature and Creative Writing from San Francisco State University and works as a nurse in Cardiac Care at Dominican Hospital. Her first collection of poems is The Meaning of Wings (Hummingbird Press, 2003).

Recent Books by Monterey Bay Poets:

Dane Cervine, *Blue in the Face* (chapbook, One Pony Press)

Sandra Dasmann, *Praying for Fog* (Spindrift Press)

Patricia Grube, *The Green Door* (Chartreuse Publications)

Ron Lampi, *Lamp Light* and *Poetry Is* (chapbooks, self-published)

Ryan Masters, *below the water mark* (chapbook, Puddinghouse Publications)

Joanna Martin, *The Meaning of Wings* (Hummingbird Press)

Joseph McNeilly, *In Here* (Hummingbird Press)

Maggie Paul, *Stones From the Baskets of Others* (chapbook, Black Dirt Press)

Who Are These Local Poets?

Each issue of Poetry Santa Cruz NEWS features work by Poetry Santa Cruz members and prominent local poets. For information on Poetry Santa Cruz membership, visit www.poetrysantacruz.org or call our Poetry Hotline at (831) 429-2399.

EVEN THE SMALLEST ACTION

Dee Roe

"And so it is that even the smallest actions of a determined spirit can bring grace to the world"

The Buddhist story of Tasoo

It takes courage to write a poem in times of war,
invite the horror onto your clear white page
where normally spring's rushing streams would flow
or the story of Basho's trip to the mountains.

Instead your words must be given
to the woman's eyes, dark flags of grief
above her long black shrouds,
young boys playing on sandbag barriers
in the battle-torn city,
and the desolate hearts of the mothers
as they bend over their hungry children.

If writing down the smallest detail of each new atrocity
would bring comfort to the violent world
then I would be a studious monk, carefully
recording each broken shard of the fallen mosque,
every footprint in the sand of a departing father.

I would gladly be the small bird Tasoo,
flying back and forth to the river,
filling my tiny beak with water a thousand times
to drop on the raging fire.

Dee Roe has published poems in the Porter Gulch Review, La Gazette and is currently a finalist in the 2003 Pablo Neruda Poetry Contest at Nimrod. She began writing poetry three years ago and loves being part of the Santa Cruz poetry community.

HISTORY STUDIES

Philip Wagner

On Monday, the A-bomb didn't fall
but rain did, drops the shape of grapes
that burst themselves on the city.

On Monday, Uncle Jim went out to shoot Koreans

& I went into the second grade to open
page one of the Catechism, "Who is God?"
then the picture book, "How to Hide"
when the A-bomb falls to kill us all
and President Eisenhower with his air raid siren
saves our town and
me, under my desk repeating "Our Father,
whoartinheaven..."
until I die or until
President Eisenhower gives the signal
to say I can walk home
and study page two of the Catechism.

...shoes already soaked, I wade
the creek that rages near the school grounds
perplexed:
This same water can find its way
into a grape, then a tear
without explanation at the riverbend
I push a large stone into the stream
and stand back to watch the river
flood the playground.

How fragile history must be
when a single well-timed
and placed
stone, will re-route a river.

Tuesday again. No bomb blast in spite of our sins. More rain
arrives and a photo of
"Uncle Jim holding his ground" Dad tells me
"Wave after wave of Koreans attack
him and his machine gun."

Logged in Lately?

www.poetrysantacruz.org is your online link to
poetry in Santa Cruz and beyond. We have an online
bulletin board that is just itching for a controversy,
listings of local authors and their books, events both
here and abroad, interviews, and more.

Call for Submissions

Poetry Santa Cruz NEWS is published approxi-
mately quarterly. We are hoping to include a
variety of voices from our community. If you
have a topic you'd like to write about, please
contact info@poetrysantacruz.org.

I go to school anyway.

"God loves me."

"God loves me" I repeat,
when my friend Zimmer leads the charge
splashing into what remains of the school grounds,
the re-routed river still stripping away layer after layer
and Zimmer, prancing out into the Promised Land
like the Old Testament "Chosen One"
like David versus Goliath with a single stone
like Uncle Jim
like Hercules himself, I'd changed
the river... allowed it to sweep into Augeas' Stables
to clean out centuries of horse manure
in a single thrilling night
I had entered the great history book.

No bomb, so Wednesday came to make more history
watermark and mudplaster an already undermined structure.

How much ground was lost?
Father McLaughlin's eyes screw shut
"...one maybe two years of instruction"
he tells Sister Gerard that God had informed him:
"The devil got loose."

which meant that Zimmer, for really having a terrific time
had to have his mom come and take him away
and who, like Uncle Jim
I never saw again.

Thursday, more rain.
We turned to page three of the Catechism.

*Philip Wagner. Longtime peace activist. Did ten political docu-
mentaries and was editor of an underground press, ACT, in
Paris. Has had poems published in a dozen smaller poetry
magazines. Translator of Jean Pierre Rosnay. Did a couple
chapbooks "Wild Horses Are Always In Heaven" and "Found
Poems". Working on the proverbial "collection". Member of the
Emerald Street Salon.*