

2-18-2013

10 Michigan Poets Edited by L. Eric Greinke

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Recommended Citation

Congdon, Kirby (1972) "10 Michigan Poets Edited by L. Eric Greinke," *Amaranthus*: Vol. 1972: Iss. 1, Article 75.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/amaranthus/vol1972/iss1/75>

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BOOK REVIEW

10 Michigan Poets. Edited by L. Eric Greinke. Pilot Press Books. Paperback. 154 pages. \$3.50

When I withdrew this attractive book from its envelope and saw the glossy cover stock, the colored inks, handsome design and good-looking typography, it made me think back to when we were all working in mimeograph and wonder, are we the new academics? Is there a literary generation coming up ready to accuse us of being an in-group, as we accused the literary generation of our own earlier period? Nowadays, of course, our enemies seem less prone to carp at our lack of taste, free-wheeling aesthetics and low-class irresponsibility as we have continued on and proven them wrong. One proof is the increasing number of small-press poets who are now in hard-back books produced by commercial publishing houses. Another proof is the small-press publications themselves which have defied the rigors of economics, the stringency of literary connections and the immediate loneliness of the avant-garde and underground scene - a loneliness not in numbers so much as in the thanklessness of it all despite the faith and the perseverance of its participants. This loneliness expresses itself - almost hysterically perhaps - in despair or joie de vivre. The despair is always a sore for which there is no immediate or logical remedy; suicides have the final say on that. But when the joy of the thing breaks forth without being desperate, what a comfort that is. And this is the spirit behind the publication of **10 Michigan Poets** - "in ten little books bound together as one."

I turned to Ronnie Lane's work first because I was already familiar with his powerful short stories. His poems are strong too - defining the things that make life so casually final - the passage of time, of movement itself, the restless death in a landscape - a girl passes under and through a streetlight, a door closes, heat lightening, the drama of an empty cabin. These momentary sights become insights into the nearness of the inexplicable. I don't want to say the nearness of death because that is a cliché and would cheapen the success of Lane's vision which is a revelation of the inexplicable within the continuum of life as we live it - not as hysterical, hypersensitive poets but as ordinarily intelligent human beings who feel. This exposure of the human being to what the philosophers call the human predicament is Lane's idea or message. That he conveys this message with emotion - that is, with all his senses and sensitivity - exemplifies why I prefer

poetry to philosophy.

E.W. Oldenburg's work seems to be a deliberate verbalization of ideas. His technique is evident, but being evident, it bothers me. The title of the first poem is "To A Dying Alewife, Observed Doing So Beside The Breakwater At Grand Haven, Michigan." If this is meant to be funny I think it is in poor taste. I don't understand the redundancy of "Observed Doing So" since obviously if a poem is about an alewife we could assume that the writer was there in one sense or another, imaginatively or factually, and that the alewife was there doing whatever it was doing, in this case dying. The designation of the headwater, and the town, must be proving something but having never seen the headwater, or been in Grand Haven nor ever having passed through the state of Michigan, this geographical assertion is lost on me. Poets often sign, and date their poems in manuscript, though no one will see the date or signature, as if this were a statement to themselves that the poem is finished. The date is, for them, memorable and important, if not even holy. Some poets even put down the time of day, and the place as well. But these egotistical indulgences are not carried over into the printed form of the poem, yet this is all I can get out of this long and detailed and unhelpful title of Oldenburg's, unfortunately. So right off I am not the person to read Oldenburg's work since I begin with a prejudice which may or may not be a fair one. But my confidence is thrown off again with the first line, "Why this last gasping tail slapping rage," which bothers me because it sounds like an imitation, rather than a transmutation as influences should become, of Hopkins. And to ask a dying animal a question seems the height of condescension, insensitivity and absurdity. The death of any living creature is a terrible thing and to address abstract philosophical queries to that brain, that miniaturized computer, that elaborate structure made for movement and endurance, that history of several million years whose one anxiety is to live - - is to exploit these unbelievable statistics for cute, vaguely provocative school-marm philosophical musings. But then poets often seem prone to watch things die with a rather large crocodile tear. I think of D.H. Lawrence's lines from "Snake": "I picked up a clumsy log / And threw it at the water-trough with a clatter. / I think it did not hit him." The poem, "Mumblety Peg" achieves what it sets out to do, but if a poem can be translated into prose, as I feel this one can, then it is not really being a poem. It is not fulfilling the potentials of the medium. The facts here are truthful, logical and wry but these are not emotions; they are descriptive analysis - - successful but still not satisfying as poetry.

I found Barbara Robbins' poems difficult to read, the only punctuation being an occasional capital letter which may or may not mean the subject of a sentence. Ms. Robbins also shuns subjects, verbs, and objects in her grammar. This imposes an immediate movement, a kind of spontaneous or automatic breathlessness to her work. I am willing to trust that this poet knows what she is doing because her choice of words and phrases is always provocative. "Motorcycle Poem" and "The Ride" interested me, and I felt that the words suggested a genuine reaction to motorcycling. From the rest of the poems (and I have the advantage of being able, also, to refer to her first separate book, **The Hard Ride**) I get an overall impression of a strong character, willing to accept reality, capable of handling paradoxes, and mature in regard to love and vision. Most of the poems end with a comfortable clinch and there is enough in her work to warrant her right to an individualized syntax.

Barbara Drake has the sophisticated humor of Phyllis McGinley or Stevie Smith. Her's is the first poem about children I have ever found bearable. "She Dreams Herself Titanic" is brilliant in its delicious care. The ideas flow effortlessly like those stones at Machu Picchu between whose joints one cannot insert the proverbial knife, or, as here, a verbal criticism. "Case History" drives fellow poets to envy at the resourcefulness of finding so much to say about what the rest of us had dismissed. The act of looking at oneself transmutes reality. This poem is not as important a work of art as Picasso's **Girl In The Mirror**, but then the poem does not attempt to be that monumental; it is a private personal poem, a miniature, only because the subject is dismissed with wit. What will happen if Barbara Drake turns to something with the eyes of a pop artist who blows the mundane up into terrifying proportions so that a flower becomes a vast orgy of entrapment or a comic strip a dismissal of humanity in a lusting indulgement in death and violence? "The Ideal" is about the self in the mirror, "I can neither free her nor kill her, and so -- someone must feed her. Each day I come to tend her. . . ." The idea of the ties between prisoner and keeper is marvelous in its originality, in its -- once again -- probing into, teasing of and toying with the awesome experience of ordinary reality. It is this position -- of the author poking sticks at the tiger in the cage -- that is so wonderful. It makes this poet first class. She is up there with the

very best: Dickinson, Moore, Parker, McGinley, and in the underground, Barbara Holland and Joan Colby. The great voice is there -- singing from the depths of being -- with probity -- with life.

I liked John Knapp II's "Losing The Body," a prose poem in which the writer supposes his death by drowning, and his transmutation into the shore-line wells of the summer people. "My blood shall swim in their veins as they spin out tales of seeing me climb ashore, again and again, rising with the tide. . ."

"Killing A Bat. . ." by Joseph Dionne seems to be just that: killing a bat. I can never understand poets who consider or commit a death voluntarily. The bat's death is a comment on those who, killing it, discuss "the unities", but still the carelessness of the death is not reconciled. Perhaps I misunderstand this poem. Other poems have the authority of experience. "Among Our Marble Origins" has a lot of stunning ideas, particularly the contrast between life and the dead permanence of art. "We are eternal virgins, You and I. Watching each other move among marble with tight bloodless eyes. . ." Some lines, as well as some poems, are obscure, but it seems always to be good work and the obscurity seems to come from the difficulty of the particular circumstances of technique and communication rather than indifference.

Cor Barendrecht. "Landscape" very effectively compares an old man watching children through his window with God. "No Man's Land" seems to be about a depressing trailer camp in a park caught between the negative obligations of organized lives and times. The camp, I think, is meant to be a contact with nature but the circumstances as described seem just as horrid as business and cities. It is a sad poem because we come away with the impression that the trailer camp and park is the only access the author has to relief and that relief is still full of children, police, public toilets, strangers, groupees, and an empty togetherness, a togetherness with people and with nature that one suspects is ransomed by entry tickets, licenses, organization of movement, and public signs pertaining to rules of behavior. The poem seems to accept this like a science-fiction story come, at last, true. For this reason "Landscape", which also deals with the terrors and anxieties of organized life but with more pertinent implications of those terrors, is more successful as a poem. "Footprints Unseen" are the footprints of our own experience. When

we don't realize they are our's they take on a distance that is strange if not frightening. Unfortunately, the author hits us on the head and turns the poem into children's verse by explicitly pointing out to us that the tracks were indeed made "by my feet" so the poem degenerates into a puzzle in blank verse.

Herbert Woodward Martin has nine short poems which I respected for their competence but I was not moved by them, although I liked the moralistic statements that suggest serious thought and insight. Whether these are glib rather than real I can't make out. I am left on the outside looking in because for some reason these poems don't speak to me. However, there is a long poem entitled, rather definitely and pretentiously, "The Deadwood Dick Poems." It is, however, a work in which I can put my trust; I feel Martin is writing about something he cares about and with which he has an affinity. I didn't understand it, but in this instance I don't mind not understanding it. Something is going on, very American, and I feel something valuable has been accomplished here. Let the explicators define and evaluate it. I, for one, was stimulated and interested in this poem. I wish there were not this intellectual veil between the likes of me and what the poet is doing but in any case I hope I will hear more about him in the near future.

Albert Drake's poems are about nothing special but he makes it special with little ironic nips at the heels of his poems by contrasts: the timeless historical traditions in poetry with his own transience: "unpaid bills. . . the dry hair (that) falls onto pages"; the inhibitions he feels toward a dumb blonde in "Academic Freedom"; the indifference and vulnerability of the very young before death and change; academic routine and the loss of time, and in the same poem the beautiful student dissecting a corpse, the poet's own existence in contrast to the intense super-real fantasies of television. Only one poem in his eleven pages ("The Craftsman") falls down in illustrating this poet's bitter-sweet examinations of his life. Perhaps in its prayerful attitude toward the business of writing this indicates an advance rather than a retrogression; that remains to be seen. The two Drakes make an astonishing pair - - rather like the Rosettis or the Brownings but much more appealing than those pairs because the Drakes are of our own time and speak our language. Where the 19th century leaned on the life of the spirit, the Drakes speak of life in the marrow, by which

I mean finding spiritual values in daily, non-romantic, non-poetical situations of the immediate world.

I read L. Eric Greinke's work last because I had known it previously and expected the poems to be good before I looked at this new group. They are. His style has always appealed to me: the declarative statements like mystical aphorisms: "The gates are locked. I am on watch," or ". . . I cannot walk here," "The road is black"- - "The cymbal crashes"- - "The snow melts." As a consequence, it seems, Greinke's longer poems seem to be the best ones and the short declarations have more impact as revelations within the context of the more lyrical kind of form. The 15-sectioned poem, "The Cymbal Crashes" is, for me, like one of Rimbaud's prose poems - - surrealistic yet precise and detailed. I don't understand it (neither do I understand Rimbaud) but I have this same kind of confidence and reaction to both poets - - that this is literature. It is interesting that while writing this review I have also been reading a book, *Poetry And Prayer* (William T. Noon) in which Hopkins is, appropriately for my purpose here, quoted: "Poetry (is) speech framed to be heard for its own sake and interest over and above its interest of meaning. . . Poetry is in fact speech only employed to carry the inscape of speech for the inscape's sake. . ."

I think **10 Michigan Poets** is a pleasure.

- Kirby Congdon