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Small Press Review · Valerie Trueblood

János Pilinszky. *Selected Poems*. Translated by Ted Hughes and János Csokits. Persea Books, Inc.; New York, 1977. \$3.95. Alicia Ostriker. *A Dream of Springtime*. The Smith; New York, 1979. \$3. *The Mother/Child Papers*. Momentum Press; Santa Monica, California, 1980. \$3.95. Helen Wolfert. *Landlady and Tenant*. Sheep Meadow Press; New York, 1979. \$4.95. Jean Pedrick. *greenfellow*. New Rivers Press; St. Paul, Minn., 1981. \$3. Ripley Schemm. *Mapping My Father*. Dooryard Press; Story, Wyoming, 1981. \$6. Alberto Ríos. *Sleeping on Fists*. Dooryard Press; Story, Wyoming, 1981. \$5. Karen Sagstetter. *Ceremony*. State Street Press; Pittsford, New York, 1981. \$4. Bill Wilson. *Fundamental Car*. Tamarisk Press; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1981. \$3. Harrison Fisher. *UHFO*. Diana's Bimonthly Press; Providence, Rhode Island, 1982. \$4.50. Ann Nietzke. *Windowlight*. Capra Press; Santa Barbara, California, 1981. \$8.95. Elizabeth Hardwick. *A View of My Own*. Ecco Press; New York, 1982. \$6.95.

Volunteers¹

In 1899 Slason Thompson, biographer of Eugene Field, published *The Humbler Poets, A Collection of Newspaper and Periodical Verse 1870-1885*. He wrote, “. . . it is not well at all times to partake of the richest dishes or to drink the rarest wines. . . . I could not require that each piece should contain what was best worth preserving, but only that it should contain something worth preserving at all.”

While nobody today would say anything so gaily Philistine, Thompson's standard is still in use, and many readers look to the small presses for another. Recently *The Progressive* allowed it would be nice if the small presses were to “lead the way back to quality in corporate publishing.” It might be nice, but then again if one sits down to read small press books in numbers, there in black and white is the same occasional excellence amid dullness and uniformity of thought as in large press

books. To get at particular characteristics of the small presses perhaps we should imagine an anthology, a preservation, like Thompson's.

What have they valued? What will they have distilled from the period 1970-1985, not in a prize volume like *Pushcart* but in a broad representation of their tastes? (I will be speaking mainly of poetry, not of the practical and occult books that also flourish, and not much, alas, of fiction.) What are they bringing into being?

As newspapers' literary corners and magazines were in Thompson's day, the small presses are more and more the voice of what might be called the "writing public," an ever-expanding minority of the population, almost a class. Its size and professional mien will make a difference to an anthology coming a hundred years after Thompson's. In place of *The Humbler Poets*, we will have *Best-Loved Poems of the Poets Listed in the Directory of American Poets*. (3536 people in this country were registered poets in 1981, more than double the number professing in 1975.) Besides the verse itself, ours will have each poet explaining the work of another poet, an addition that will help readers in 2082 as they puzzle over the countrified poems of an urban, warring and technical moment in history.

Will they smile, at a poetry stamped with notices of its period as unmistakable as the baby-narrators, suffering animals and tearful patriots of the Victorian American newspaper poets? What sense will they make of our alimentary poems, for example? If it's there, a poet of our decade-and-a-half will have eaten it—thing or non-thing—in an omnivorousness that may convey something else to anthology-readers, perhaps surfeit.

Indeed this poetry, which is found everywhere today but most consistently in the chapbooks of small presses, may suggest by incongruity the life of the 1970's and 80's. Some of the sadness of that life is in it, in the straining after weekend Nature. To future readers, the languid autobiography may imply a harshness offstage, and an individual impotence, as the sweet-thinking Georgians are sometimes said to provide ironic acquaintance with World War I. But for now the effect is of *poets*, a sodality, and of consensus rather than creation.

A strange poets' accord has produced hundreds of descriptions of something that isn't real experience any more than a man-hour is anyone's actual hour. Along with these accounts has come a standardization of technique that makes it seem as if literally everyone knows how to arrange language into a numbingly competent "poem" now, making the reader of lots of them feel like a bug tunnelling in a bag of flour.

But when the good books shake free—emphatic work from newcomers, valuable reissues, editions of foreign writers not well known here—the strong claims for these presses begin to make sense. They do exist “to lead the way . . .” to introduce or reintroduce good writers, to allow young writers their first public utterance, to foster work that is beyond the horizons of the market-watching big houses. Reading them exclusively for a time, one begins to feel that while they are not a strong underground river loosening the roots of the popular, they have more than their share of editors with nerve and vital idiosyncrasy, and far more than their share of writers—particularly older writers—going subtly or strongly against the grain.

An exception to the foregoing, both criticism and praise, is the *Selected Poems* of János Pilinszky. After several months with handset print, rich papers, cute remarks on the colophon, and confusion of “lie” and “lay,” I came upon the austere Persea edition of his work.

I was ashamed to discover that five years ago American readers were given, and barely noticed, a translation by Ted Hughes and János Csokits of 44 poems from seven of the great Hungarian poet’s books. “Translating Hungarian poetry,” wrote C.P. Snow, “must be about as difficult as translating Chinese—perhaps more so, since Chinese grammatical structure is as simple as English.” Ted Hughes bows to “several Hungarian writers” who gave him word-for-word cribs and to the poet János Csokits, whose rough drafts were already poems. The two have taken the conservative path, making no attempt to re-invent the poems in English idiom. Pilinszky’s severity and profundity—though much else may be lost—would, I believe, survive almost any translation, but this one appears to be scrupulous, starker and more unexpected than the work of other translators I have seen in anthologized poems (other than those of Peter Sherwood in Albert Tezla’s anthology *Ocean at the Window*, which are remarkably similar).

This is a book that Kafka could have been holding when he said, “I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us.” “Radiance” is Hughes’ word for the quality that makes the chill sorrow in these poems so endearing—for that is what the book is. Radiance may be too glad a word for the reds of these scenes, but in the spiritual sense it must certainly stand; looking for a writer to whom he could compare Pilinszky, Hughes could find only Simone Weil. But “radiant” is also Pilinszky’s word, as in the “radiant ledge” where his acrobats run—for a potential harm, or a devastation.

A struggle utterly outside the struggle for expression or for an attractive stance is waged in these poems, where the ditch, the cart being dragged, the wall, the prison courtyard are not artifacts or symbols. Pilinszky was drafted into the German army at the very end of World War II. He could not get over the experience of his brief passage through the prison camps in Germany; it seems he underwent a shearing of the self that continued as his poems—the most dreadful I have seen from that war—slowly emerged over the years. He never became ironic about the things he had seen, or attributed them to “wartime.” The demoralization of Europe and of individuals during and after the fighting kept on going exhaustingly in his consciousness until his death in May of 1981: “. . . Yet what has happened/somehow cannot even now finish.” (“The Passion”)

To him “the poem” seems scarcely to exist. The upbringing of the imagination that so preoccupies American poets is of no interest to him; in fact he declares that creativity takes place when the imagination is sacrificed. “Real value (beyond the chaos of publications, in the eternal peace and silence of communication) is a table that is laid, where everyone is welcome,” he said in a speech in 1970, “. . . it is usually one person who lives out the value and someone else who may write it up.”

What he “wrote up” was a prolonged agony and the thrashing of the spirit back to life afterwards—or to a half-life in sullied conditions: “like scrap iron thrown over the top/our hopes.” It would be hard to exaggerate the beauty and the fitness for its subject of his rather halting style, with its combination of child’s sobbing and granite judgment, in contrast to the oblique idiom of pain that is more usual in poetry today. He is guardedly called a Catholic poet. There is a Catholic sensibility in the poems, sunk, in deep agitation, in the problem of evil. The religious longing takes the wish for protection in a complete embrace beyond Hopkins and into the near-delirium of the Spanish mystics:

Bury me in your embrace.
Do not give me to the frost.
Even if my air is used up
my calling will not tire.

But the God he is trying to seduce to his side has let him decay, has orphaned him and made him see “the convict’s head twisted askew/. . . the caked troughs, the tortures,” has permitted the tortures and allowed

history. The problem can't be solved by a simple repudiation. If the power to stop these things does not exist, the horror is absolute. If it exists, he must consider what it means that it was not used. The victim looks out of these poems starved, trying to eat a raw turnip, awaiting execution, with the child's innocent humiliation that such things can be done to him, and the child's not-quite-broken expectation that safety will come back.

How to convey the sweetness in Pilinszky that accompanies the horrors? Listening to a Hungarian friend I found it was true that the word "saint" comes up in connection with this poet, used perhaps as it sometimes is in Rilke's case, for an extraordinary purity of motive—although his "angelic personality" too is mentioned in commentaries. It seems to be the stretched capacity for suffering, and the full identification with the sufferer, that give his poems their strange gentleness and wringing grief, as in "Van Gogh," where the half-sane painter sees

. . . the windows

where I too, dwelt and do not dwell,
the house where I lived and do not live,
the roof which tucked me in safely.
Ah God, then you covered me up safely.

Here is the homecoming in "Apocrypha," the poem Hughes believes to be, in its "weird splendour," Pilinszky's ultimate statement:

My ghastly shadow in the courtyard.
Crushed silence, aged parents in the house.
And already they are coming, they are calling me,
my poor ones, and already crying,
and embracing me, stumbling—
the ancient order opens to readmit me.
I lean out on the windy stars.

If only for this once I could speak with you
whom I loved so much. Year after year
yet I never tired of saying over
what a small child sobs
into the gap between the palings

the almost choking hope
that I come back and find you.

That is from the middle, warmer section of the poem. It ends outside all hope in one of the ditches Pilinszky makes worse than graves. Yet the strange fullness-in-diminishment persists. To begin to fathom it we must await his complete works in English.

* * *

From Pilinszky we pass into a kind of sunlight of hardihood in the poetry of American women.

In 1968 the National Endowment for the Arts came up with \$55,000 for the publication of the best work from the literary and "little" magazines of the day. The poetry section of the resulting *American Literary Anthology 1* included poems by twenty-nine people, of whom one was a woman, Denise Levertov.

Fourteen years later the work of women has begun to determine some of the "feel" or mood of our literature. It is not a particularly domestic mood. Certain women have had to work harder than ever to remove the stigma from the domestic, that stayed on when the ratios began to change in the tables of contents of magazines.

"It takes patience to appreciate domestic bliss," said Santayana. "Volatile spirits prefer unhappiness." Alicia Ostriker would argue that a volatile spirit can have all the unhappiness it wants in domestic bliss. The besetting world still exists, whether one loves one's husband's profile and "mad, faunlike, hidden mind" or not. Just before her son is born, the Kent State shootings take place, and she must mourn and rage while trying to lay claim to the awaited happiness.

Her 1979 collection *A Dream of Springtime* contains two of the best poems I have seen on the subject of family and dwellingplace, "Sonnet: To Tell the Truth":

To tell the truth, those brick Housing Authority buildings
For whose loveliness no soul had planned,
Like random dominoes stood, worn out and facing each other,
Creating the enclosure that was our home.

Long basement corridors connected one house to another

And had a special smell, from old bicycles and baby carriages
In the storage room. The elevators
Were used by kissing teenagers.

The playground—iron swingchains, fences, iron monkey bars,
Iron seesaw handles, doubtless now rusted—
Left a strong iron smell on my hands and in the autumn air
And rang with cries. To me it is even precious

Where they chased the local Mongoloid, yelling “Stupid Joey! Stupid
Joey!”

Now I’ve said everything nice I can about this.

and “Communitas,” a poem about her grandfather, as thrilling as
Schwartz’s “America, America.”

Ostriker is drawn repeatedly to the subject of joy (as a mother and
as a poet, allowed into the joy of creation). A problem of complacency
comes into poems of ecstasy now, partly because the Romantic construc-
tion “miserable poet, lustrous world” has been reversed. Even though
the poet is now widely seen as fortunate, in poems he or she is still a
protagonist who must not “win.” There is something troubling in
admitted happiness. If it were not so, we wouldn’t paste on smiles when
someone describes a vacation or a conversion. So the creation of an
intellectually bearable picture of domestic security or passionate familial
love is a difficult assignment. Ostriker has defiantly given herself this
assignment, and the equally ticklish (for poetry) job of publicizing
national folly and soft spots of the culture.

Her attempts to handle the contradictions are very different from
those of the new American rustics and mystics. She wills a place for
joyous love in the world as the opposite and opponent of war (which
is the sum of everything wrong), but allows herself no quarter when
war is happening anyway: “children marching and dying/all that I do
is a crime/because I do not reach/their mouths silently crying.”

As an intellectual, Ostriker runs counter to the generic “responsive-
ness” in much contemporary poetry. Her subjects in *The Mother/Child
Papers*—birth, motherhood, and war—are laced together with thongs of
reason. At her son’s birth the doctor says “he’ll be a soldier.”

It is startling to read the early pages of this book: where, before this,

was the literature of the squalid bliss and righteous woe of taking care of an infant? Is it possible that the Humbler Poets almost spoiled it for us? It is alive in Ostriker. And the power in her infant son's eyes is quite simply world-saving: "a power/such as flew out/and nearly knocked me over/through your staring eyes/intense, impersonal, like icy dawn."

These two books span ten years of writing by one of the most intelligent and lyrical of American poets.

Landlady and Tenant is the third book by the formidable and little-known Helen Wolfert. Several of the poems in it first appeared almost twenty years ago in her book *The Music*, which seems to have influenced a few poets but somehow found the wrong moment in American history to appear in all its gorgeousness.

Since her first book was published in 1946 she has shown a fierce resistance to the stripping-down of poetry begun by the Imagists. Now almost eighty, she is an extravagant and rhapsodic poet with an English of her own that runs on several extra cylinders. She has needed more than English offers and has used now Germanic tone and metaphysical mood, now French word order, now tamperings with parts of speech, now the 31 syllables of the Japanese tanka—and throughout her work imitated not so much the forms as the pure motion of music.

Her poems are page-filling, gymnastic creatures, all covered in bas-relief, that waltz you off balance while explaining about Time, or the Id, or Human History. And they are terse *contes* like "Old and Near," in which the poet, a "ghetto princess," is given "liver fine to the tongue as cream,/and golden chicken soup hung/with golden noodles made by hand" by neighbor women,

But the givers of food—wading and paddling,
I paid little heed to the givers of food.
Yet here they awake, those ghetto serfs,
to sleep with me in late dawn.
By what rivermood did they reappear,
and how have they become my blood?

They are also dramas like "The Design," in which a dying man addresses God, " 'Universe of Order and Design,' he writes, 'I have loved you always./ . . /Soon, algebraically soon, this holiness between us will snap.' "

In some of the poems, which I believe to be earlier ones, the influences can be heard very clearly: Hopkins, Thomas, Auden, Stevens. But Wol-

fert, who has taught English in elementary and high schools, has a child, a rapt pupil in her, and she escapes all influences but the strongest—that of her own life—in her autobiographical poems, the jewels of this book. They begin with “Birthdays,” about her own premature birth, a “green berry daughter/. . ./so minutely unfit/for my new dwelling,” of whom her father “ably said,/“You could thread a needle with this baby,’ ” and continue through the childhood-poems “The World Was Made of Words,” “The Two,” “White Earth,” the magnificent “Letter to Rabbi Akiba,” “Area of the Visit,” “Memory (Though Never Our Names)” and “Young Poems in the City Streets,” a series of excursions miraculous to the child who is making them and to us. This remarkable series is a Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl that is like nothing else in our poetry. It is about the discovery of language, “Early as milk, early as thirst,/that brooding and sudden wing of knowing,” that sustained her during a confined childhood as “a lush preserve for bacteria,” and the discovery of the world by herself when freed:

I, the Stefansson of the efflorescence
 out of bakeries, the stink fuming past
 the unbuttoned vests of saloons,
 the trough for horses no longer coming
 to drink, the Colonial hobblestones called
 cobble by everyone walking them but me;
 and yes, I, the Schliemann of this,
 my Trojan city, of the lively aliveness
 of its unknown people and their Trojan children
 playing in the spaces between the pushcarts . . .

The young poet is sustained, too, by a mother who does not mind her being “Upside down . . . in everything!” and by a grandmother who she feels is her twin. Out of this benevolent nest sprang a mind that is fearless and a voice that dares to use open diapason for the song of soul-in-actuality it has been singing for almost four decades.

Jean Pedrick’s sardonic *greenfellow* is a crooked little pageant of a book, fifty-three short poems with a medieval feeling and an absence of familiar coordinates, told in a voice with a cackle in it. Greenfellow may be the devil, or only the leaf-covered green man of English masque and festival, now “twining and dancing all dressed/in black leotards.” With the appearance of this “adversary, known/but not known” in the first

poem, Pedrick goes into a comical-sinister register and stays there (with a few plain statements thrown in), arriving unexpectedly at a beautiful little fable, "Thus, Jude," about consolation, the next-to-last poem that crowns the book. It is as if you've been looking at Klee and suddenly get Dürer. But various things in the spells and mummery leading up to this poem have prepared the way for its seriousness.

The droll tales and maxims are airy, peremptory; they have a slight morbidity and a moral tone. Her vocabulary is rich, and the trapping of verbal peacocks in the cages of her small forms adds to the bound, indirect emotion, as in "tinker's dam":

His sweat is black as tea and rancid;
his eyes stroke lower parts
or pretty things to heist;
his voice is teasel and rasp.

He is, in fact, so bad she
can't hitch body and soul.

Pedrick faces down the adversary with declarations ("Die, I will say to death." "In fact I remember nothing. I intend/to remember/Nothing.") and makebelieve: "Sometimes we dream our mother fed us/spells, inducing birth of/seven little men to do the dishes." Random things happen in the poems: she buys an old horse, there is a flood, someone (I think) dies. In the background are marriage, children. One can't paraphrase the mysterious, unsettling goings-on. If there is a "clue" it is in the poem "words":

Adam was English
strolled the deerpark calling
deer hind roe.
Named hedgehog dove
goose goat.

She was not charged
with naming. Foreign birds
came over squawking *tragedy*
ardor travail.

Her business seems really to be with the foreign birds; if these poems took substance they would be alchemy's salt of Saturn, or "sugar of lead."

Born in 1922, Pedrick did not publish a book of poems until the 1970's. Since that time she has written five, of which the two others I have read (*Wolf Moon*, Alice James Books, 1974, and *The Gaudy Book*, Juniper Press, 1979) have the eccentricity, verbal limberness and deep temperamental dye of *greenfellow*. Neither quite prepared me for her move to ellipsis and irreality, however, and I suspect she has more surprises and pleasures to come for a growing number of readers.

Another late-publishing, fully-formed poet is Ripley Schemm, whose *Mapping My Father* is a warm wind of a book, modest, individual, devout in its regionality, mild-tough as we are coming to expect the Western woman poets to be, but breaking that mold with a more "urban" affinity with people:

... I live all the lives
I pass on the stairs,
in the street, in the park.
I hardly know which of the women
is pushing this child in a swing.

The book has subject, feeling, expansiveness, intelligence and a light way with a moral, reminiscent of Marianne Moore. No proscriptions; rather the entirely unsentimental single directive, to love. This collection, too, begins in girlhood with "Rules," five episodes preserved in quiet, beautifully-paced lines. In the dozen poems that follow she creates Montana in a few strokes: horses, creek, lupine, mule deer. There is none of the dogged taxonomy of the committed nature poets, no hailing of weeds and varmints, just the range, evoked most strongly by the presence in the middle of it of this particular person:

I'm leaping downstream
now, ahead of the wind,
led by moon in the thicket.
Round stones let go to springing grass.
I kick off a sandal for love,
fall flat on my back for love,
my ribs a rack of stars,
a willing constellation.

The book memorializes a kind of sagacious father, a doctor who said, "Disease is abnormal," who "knew the broken feedbox for a man's/wornout heart, the greasy linoleum/for a wife's blurred vision." He passed the secret knowledge that forms tearless pity to his daughter, and the title poem is a monument to him:

Now that death has let you get back
from town, town where frailness dragged you,
town that called these aspen Breedtown,
pull up here where buffalo willow
used to hide the crossing.
We were quiet as fish fighting for bait.
When you let us water the team.
We were your children.

* * *

Among the younger poets now writing, both men and women, there is a tendency to want to "take the measure of the huge flat foot of the public," as Henry James said, without seeming to care. One way to have your public and yet remain above it is to invite it up to see your place. The "hostess poem" is becoming a minor genre. A blank young man or woman escorts us into a private apartment. We attend, as the hostess indicates is proper, to the decor. It is merchandise. Fruit, books, the view out the window, the photo album, relatives, the past, American history: all, all are arranged as in a prospectus. Uneasily we feel we might be expected to buy them. We don't know who lives here, we suspect it is the hostess, but he/she says it is "you."

Meanwhile, of course, many serious poets are working with personal history and milieu in complete freedom from this rather parochial connoisseurship. A poet like Alberto Ríos is not the proprietor of his belongings and experiences but a writer on whom they have not been lost.

The poems in *Sleeping on Fists* are depictions of people, including Ríos himself, encountering fate, sometimes cruel and sometimes the light brushing of good fortune and poetic calling. Some of them are distantly related to "Richard Cory" and "Reuben Bright." Here is Panfilo, the child with a head "shaped awkwardly/so that his mother would let out/one side of his hat" being born into his yoke:

But this is ugly! said his father
and held him up by the lightbulb
so the other men would see.

Many of the poems are stories, quite unlike the current narratives with poets in costume proving historical figures had anxiety too. “From my corner I remember seeing as the men . . .” Ríos is there undisguised. The butterfly-collecting Uncle Humberto in “True Story of the Pins,” who went into a rage “too terrible for a butterfly collector” and died, is “your poor Uncle Humberto/whose picture is here/on the wall behind you, did you feel his eyes.” The fortune-teller in “Madre Sofia” is an angel of sorts to whom the poet is taken as a little boy; she bends her huge, erotic body over him, he recoils—and then he is won utterly:

I sat there, no breath, and could see only
hair around her left nipple, like a man.
Her clothes were old.
Accented, in a language whose spine had been
snapped, she whispered the words of a city
witch, and made me happy, alive like a man:
The future will make you tall.

If these poems have a tutelary spirit it is that of Elizabeth Bishop. They call to mind the tabulating gaze and the breathing imagination of poems like “Manners” and “First Death in Nova Scotia.” The boyhood poems “The Arroyo, Sergio, and Me” and “The Purpose of Altar Boys” are vivid and funny: “We went in that arroyo just to cuss/down everything,” and

Tonio told me at catechism
the big part of the eye
admits good, and the little
black part is for seeing
evil—

That’s why at night
the black part gets bigger.

There are more good poems in the first half of the book than in the second. Midway through, the ignition sputters a little, and themes and

diagnoses appear in place of the irrefutable portraits. Phrases vaguer and more fashionable creep in: "I dream of the apples, of the origins of hollowness," "more real than anything we can remember." These are flaws that appear when he is not counting on himself alone. When he does, in poems like "True Story of the Pins," "Madre Sofia," and "The Purpose of Altar Boys," his judgment is nearly perfect. His wit is sharp but kindly, his energetic voice full of timbre.

Ríos won the Academy of American Poets' Walt Whitman Award in 1981.

Karen Sagstetter is pleasingly direct: "I didn't want to lie so I told the truth." She uses some of the prevailing techniques: the robot "you," the occasional feyness ("I wanted you the way wings/want a bird"—from an otherwise fine poem "After You Left," the "you" here being a real person). But she has a gentle pressure to exert on language; she can express grief:

After we said we don't love each other
I left the windows open and later got up
in the middle of the night hearing cicadas
and other sounds. I went outside where
I saw the stalks of my own day lilies against the shadows

and ran my palms up and down the stems.

"Don't" rather than "didn't" in the first line, the crying of "saw," "stalks" and "palms," and the distracted trailing off of "and other sounds" have the air of real misery. The whole poem enacts it, as "Furlough" enacts another side of loss, the daydream of reunion.

The thing that checks our acquiescence to some of her statements is their perfect agreeability. But she has written two crusty poems about age, the affecting loss trio "After You Left," "Birthday" and "Furlough," the witty "Letter of Application Long Enough to Indicate Writing Ability"; and she has presented—without salesmanship—things of her own: a moving old woman "tired/of feeling so clumsy" who says "Isn't there anything to celebrate with?/. . . forgetting there's wine in her glass," the "elated trees" of Vermont in October, the leg of a man dancing, rising on "invisible reins . . ./like nothing in nature except/its partner"—enough to mark a poet's debut.

Bill Wilson and Harrison Fisher are two East Coast poets of wild

invention and sidewalk epiphany. Wilson's *Fundamental Car* and Fisher's *UHFO* are each single-artist issues of literary magazines, from Pennsylvania and Rhode Island, respectively. Their satire and mutinous spirit are descended from the Beats, along with their hopped-up melancholy, but they are traveling in vehicles of their own.

The title poem of Bill Wilson's *Fundamental Car* is a prayer:

...Wilson to earth
come in please. Please
quicken in me you mercurial spirit
of colts at play by the buttes
& handsome exciting board games Monopoly Parcheesi
that I may rip it away the common denominator

Wilson's ability to suffuse the absurd and the parodic with emotion has more parallels in fiction (Barthelme and Sorrentino come to mind) than in current poetry. A fitful woe is always playing over the cartooning. A passage from "the king & queen of wyoming" may give an idea of what his characteristic grafting in of the high tone does to farce:

how hurtful later to see them—zapata einstein annie oakley
crazy horse susan be anthony calamity jane wyatt earp george
washington carver oliver wendell holmes cochise the king &
queen of wyoming—walked through the macy's parade as
mammoth balloons experiencing the tawdriness of mortality, as
if time equalized without redeeming, excepting one should
break rank & escape rubbery-numb to the fastness of the north
seas

In the midst of all the comic-book hastening back and forth and driving in his "car of first energy, his fundamental car" and "fighting a hidden war where shadows alternate with flesh,/where a daub or a smidgin comes disguised as a sense-datum,/or an iota is a sense-datum in smidgin's clothing," we hear the furtively elegaic note of "pairs of souls like empty dry cleaning bags/whip by in the plaintive wind. Marimbas, distant, tentative" and "left to roam like lastmen/without warmth without grace" and "it must be you who breaks the mythic stranglehold,/who pauses, turns back." "At a Train Station in Bucharest, Snowing, 1961" is a marvelously-brought-off prose piece in which a touching scene dissolves to its physics, to complex emotional effect.

It's all very energetic, funny, and trenchant, summed up in the compressed little jazz-poem "Being," in which the poet lolls in the available paradise of

noticing a mural of the Acropolis
in a Greek diner, Brooklyn. Below it
I watch my reflection venture
out along the splashboard's
radiant contours.

UHFO is a more cryptic and even more staccato version of the same country. Harrison Fisher is less easygoing, though, and sterner. He is free of nostalgia; past and present rankle equally. Virtually anything going is a subject for his ticker-tape on the state of being "acquiver amidst the decayables," though he avoids Wilson's American themes (the West, the recent past). He leavens pulp-fiction materials with formal, anachronistic or specialized language. "Impeccancy," "corruptible," "divestiture," "minions": these filchings keep company with a Zap comics version of Blondie and Dagwood, a number of surreal take-offs on sleazy reading ("Harry Noir," "The Lives of a Bengal Lancer," "Few Thing About B-Girl," "UFO Scenarios") and "No Timid Sawyer," a prose piece about brains. In it Mary Shelley is Frankenstein, with Shelley her monster, his brain taken from a "well-to-do dandy run over by horse and carriage," his fate when not at his "tentative scrawlings" to stand "immobile in corners around the mansion for hours, less haunted in those spots." Here too in the final segment the formal diction is placed like a flower on a mudpie: "Some fears persist in earth. Fears that the body is not wholly one's own to command, helpless if torn from the total incorporation. Strangely, fears that this is not a final place, automatically resistant to will."

It is refreshing to find poems—after so many telling us, as Virginia Woolf said she wished not to be told, "how buttercups are polished on one side and not on the other"—in which "sparrows and wrens/mate with my blessing, even/dogs with cats," and instead of angst "Dormant viruses/coming to life/beautifully hitting/the blood in kayaks." Yet Fisher is serious; he has a mordant sympathy to bestow on the centipede in the toilet:

I cannot believe this
that a bundle of legs without a head
is fighting to breathe.
The scene rapidly expands
until all motion is devoid of concinnity, and
everything either dangles its legs
or flails them to create atmosphere.

It has all been done already,
and it is being looked back on.
We are being trenchantly shown
how we got to the end.

In all the mischief, superficially the stuff of Lampoon magazine, there is a watchful, hunting intelligence, and a lyric poet in hiding who sneaks out to mention that the earth is a “solid fuse beneath the feet,” and lament that “There is not yet a place for us, although we live there already.” The particular high confidence, just missing lordliness, of these poems, in combination with unusual gifts of control and innovation, announce an important young poet. This book and Fisher’s no-fewer-than seven other small press collections ought to be collector’s items.

* * *

Though works of fiction were few among the small press books I considered for this essay, Ann Nietzke’s novel *Windowlight* would have stood out in any company. On the back was the news that it is an “intensely compassionate ‘journal’ dealing with alcoholism, drug addiction, poverty, racial conflict and loneliness set against the bizarre Southern California backdrop of Venice.” *Venice*. Rarely has jacket copy so confidently promised the worst.

But *Windowlight* is a very good novel. It is about all the listed conditions, it is “A Woman’s Journal from the Edge of America,” as the subtitle threatens; its heroine is a divorced woman who has fled to this edge. But before one begins muttering and swatting the air where fictional divorcees hover, let it be said that this narrator is a heroine, and a highly developed central consciousness such as few novels are keeping alive. Through her, Nietzke studies a dozen people, seeking to know them without the use of categories and unfolding a year in the small

downward alterations in their circumstances. She fights this downward current with an almost 19th-century attempt to express the waxing and waning of individual morale and the mystery of unbearable lives lived energetically.

Novelists such as Dostoevsky and Genet tell us that what we do in ordeal or catastrophe is the measure of what we are. Writers in another camp, say George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Proust and Trollope, offer a more domestic or “civilized” idea, that it is what we do every day that matters. Nietzsche belongs to the second group, but in their individual stories her characters have crashed through from the territory of the first.

Thus her book has two rhythms, the slow circadian rhythm of the narrator’s journal, with its regular stations of memory and sorrow and its push towards the future, riding like a deck beneath the starker, faster, trapped movements of the other characters. Most of them are street people who live on the sidewalk and boardwalk below her window in garish public misery and pleasure. It is Nietzsche’s great talent to be able to place these characters, some in their last throes, some being finished off in small increments, exactly on a level with an artist-narrator who believes that her life is beginning anew.

This gracious half-bohemian young writer is bound, only partly by eccentricities and troubles of her own, to the dispossessed. She isn’t slumming or sleuthing. She knows the unhinged old woman Iris, the homeless, smiling, magnetic Danny, and to know them is to be implicated in what happens to them, to be—she is frightened to discover—forced to love them. She has a divining empathy left out of most of the hurt, tough women protagonists in novels lately, always sensible of some advantage in themselves as escapees. “We’re New People,” they might say, “but freaks are freaks.”

The book is devoid of satire—an unusual feat in a book about California. That achievement deters the easy comparison to *Miss Lonelyhearts*. On the other hand, Nietzsche’s avoidance of a *tragic* reading of all her narrator sets down is something the reader feels as a shirking, or as “ullage”: the amount a vessel lacks to make it full.

From time to time failure and displacement engage a tragic writer in this country, like Flannery O’Connor with her studies of grotesque compensation; more often they attract a neuralgic one like Thomas Wolfe or Sherwood Anderson. One thing the small presses are demonstrating is that we have another disposition. It is resilient but not

confident. It is found more commonly in women writers. Much of its material is bleak, but it abstains from the tragic view. Yet it does not partake of the new sentimentality of evil, the close interest—*not* compassion—in harm that is evident in so much of our poetry and fiction; that, along with most of the brutal anecdotes called “narrative” in poetry today, seems to be traceable to television, in the first generation of writers reared with it, rather than to any particular artistic credo.

This new sensibility, shared by Alice Munro in Canada and a number of poets in this country, is “Californian” in the sense that it is tolerant, unshockable, used to life. Underneath the latitudinarianism is pain, with no leaning, as in writers like Grace Paley or Tillie Olsen, towards the prophetic. It is a guarded, almost a favored pain.

Nietzke’s style is pensive, sorting, unapocalyptic. Her paragraphs are leisurely, the movement of her sentences rather steady and tidal, with their “and . . . and,” “one day,” “some evenings,” “the next time.” Her immediate stylistic forebear, oddly enough, is probably Hemingway. That is, she carries on straight where his declarative, rather pathetic, sensuous sentence veered into manner.

She employs an uninsistent and comfortable present tense. This last is remarkable when one considers the forcing of this tense to carry shock in much current fiction. She manages in her seemingly pure and momentary observation to include the sense of time, and of missed chance. The question buried in past-tense narrative, “What was to have been, that was not?” is a barb of regret that the present tense often removes from stories. But this dark question is at the heart of *Windowlight*.

* * *

I am not sure Ecco Press, with its wide distribution and its prominence, will qualify much longer as a small press. And the book I am reviewing here, Elizabeth Hardwick’s *A View of My Own*, has been a mainstay of writers’ libraries since it first came out twenty years ago. But the bringing back of treasures for a new generation is a serious commission for the small presses, and one beautifully fulfilled by the reprinting of these essays.

When *A View of My Own* first appeared, its clear prose was a tonic, I remember, amidst the Faulknerian English we were all imbibing as students then. Her essay on Caryl Chessman, written at the time of his execution in 1960, was a work that introduced many young people to

a personal kind of evaluating (always rather different from the camouflaged tusks and snagging thickets of reference in the social criticism of her magazine, *The New York Review of Books*). It has been followed by louder acts that only throw into relief the subtlety and originality of her study. She focuses a delicate beam on Caryl Chessman's *Cell 2455, Death Row*, an autobiography in the tradition of American apolitical prison writing, and uncovers not the invisible ink of a hidden political work but the "exceptional truth" that an afflicted, ambitious personality mustered in his labor to account for himself. "Lest his very gifts save him, some people wanted him executed in order to show the insignificance of personal vigor before the impersonal law." A Hardwick sentence: balance, grace, and a variety of contempt that is all hers, calm and almost humane.

She occupies the high slopes of the essay, where philosophy intersects with the spellbinding of fiction. Her human subjects stand forth in that attracting strangeness usually associated with the short story. "Dining almost anywhere, they have hardly unfolded the table napkins before Valery is saying, 'To read, to write are equally odious to me.'" ". . . [T]he most haunting fact ever recorded about this odd man [George Henry Lewes] is from Charlotte Bronte: 'the aspect of Lewes's face almost moves me to tears; it is so wonderfully like Emily's. . . .'"

In a delightful essay on the letters of Sherwood Anderson, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Hart Crane she concludes, "What they [letters] most often show is that people do not live their biographies." "Poor Hart Crane," she writes, pronouncing on the culture more than the poet,

—a genius from Cleveland—with his little pair of parents or his pair of little parents, so squeezing in their anxiety and egoism, so screeching in their divorce, the mother rather beached and given to a humble mysticism, the father, dazed and busy, a business success but not really. Crane's parents are curdling and outrageous by their very multiplicity in America, their typicality; they are as real and to be expected, this young couple, as Cleveland itself. Vast numbers of people under middle age now have parents like this and are these persons' only child. And the son himself, a poet, homosexual, drunkard, a suicide. One had not imagined much could be added to this macabre, but neat, biography. However, what the letters amazingly suggest is the disturbing possibility that Crane had a happy life.

The long essay “Memoirs, Conversations and Diaries” is like an expanding and drifting smoke ring that stays intact . . . you think it will stay on and on as she consults with herself about why the English and Americans can’t write a *hommage* (they are embarrassed), the “something nearly insane” in Boswell’s spontaneity, the Goncourts’ violation of women’s privacy, that so shocked Henry James, why the hills where Dorothy and William Wordsworth walked “nourish eccentricity, not scandal”—but it does end, in one of her Gallic summations, and the reader sighs a sigh from childhood, when *Gulliver’s Travels* ended too soon.

When Hardwick takes up a book she takes up the worlds of effort and obstruction that it passed through on its way to us; “the vast commerce of fame and reputation;” the “national doubt;” the “din of static” heard by sociologists; the things left out of books, like the men who might have been included in *The Second Sex*: King Edward, and Baudelaire who “flowed along on a tepid river of dependence, futility, refusal,” and the plight of those who engrave their sad lives on our consciousness through others’ books. Of the Sanchez family immortalized by Oscar Lewis she tells us, in a sentence for the Reagan years, “The economy and the nation have no real use for these people, and yet the useless are persons of strongly marked temperament who must fully experience, day in and day out, the terrible unfolding of their destiny.”

* * *

As early as 1954, R.P. Blackmur was describing an academic proletariat, with multitudes of degree-holders having to get somewhere in their fields. When art, too, gets taken up into the workings of an economic mechanism, we can expect textiles to emerge. The growing number and diversity of presses may increase the chances that good work will surface; on the other hand they foster the networks, academic and lay, that benefit from continuous and relentless publication. Should we worry about this, muse on a kind of self-censorship, a Poetry Bank, that could function like the Soil Bank? As a nineteenth-century squire might pay his son-in-law not to go to Paris to paint, so . . . but of course not.

The books that rose to the top of a year’s reading do not seem to represent a type of publishing, but rather the eternal flowering of “volunteers” in a seedy garden—in which the small presses have a fertile corner—that is literature.