

Lost Poets Review

Lost Poets of Los Angeles

*Selected and Introduced
by Brian Kim Stefans*

Poetry in the United States is focused in two major urban centers, New York and San Francisco. While other cities have developed poetry “scenes,” it is these two cities that seem perennially able to renew their poetic identities, with fresh influxes of young writers and a substantial group of older, decidedly “established,” mentors to maintain a sense of continuity with previous generations and their aesthetic strategies. Other cities, such as Philadelphia, Boston, Washington, D.C., and Chicago, also have a number of writers with national reputations, and their traditions are old and deep, especially in the case of Boston, but none of them have risen to or maintained the status of a pole of activity, at least since the time of the New Americans, when an axis seemed to develop between New York and San Francisco. Of course, it is impossible to determine the exact parameters of a “major poetry city,” the term itself being inelegant, and writers in these cities (and others, such as Austin, Seattle, Lawrence, or Atlanta) don’t often sense a lack, or if they do, it is a productive one. However, these writers usually recognize that they are not in one of the cities associated with poetry—they identify as underdogs, loyal to their local scenes and perhaps even energized by their marginality.

A city not often counted in any of these rubrics is Los Angeles. One of the largest American cities, once dubbed the “city of the future,” it is legendary for its highways, the movie industry, miles of quasi-suburban “villages,” racial strife and

wild economic disparities, and general air of being an outpost on the tail end of the country. It has also managed to nurture and sustain a number of poets who have attained national reputations, but nonetheless the city hasn't acquired, to most eyes, an identifiable poetic "style" that illustrates to the readers of its poetry what the city means as an intellectual, artistic center, a stark contrast to the various styles of visual art—including the pop-inspired works of Baldessari and Ruscha, the architecture of Richard Neutra, the found art/assemblage aesthetics of Wallace Berman and Edward Kienholz, the performance art of Chris Burden, Paul McCarthy, and Mike Kelley, and the murals of ASCO—that have identified L.A. for decades. There are many reasons for this—there really aren't many "older poets" active on the scene, for example, and many Los Angeles writers are quite happy to be working without an active local "tradition" anyway—but I won't go much further on speculating why this is the case.

I don't hope or want to create something like a Los Angeles "tradition" myself, but I've always been attracted to lost, forgotten, even "minor," poets—the "neglectorinos," as Larry Fagin once termed it—and it turns out this city is quite rich with such eccentric, often brilliant, and occasionally quite innovative figures. I am primarily concerned, in this project, with those poets who didn't go on to write much, or if they did, haven't received much attention by editors or scholars, either here or nationwide. My goal is an anthology, but one which I see as more of an illustrated essay than a loose collection of excellent poems. The history of poetry here is so fragmented—there are very few bridges across groups that suggest some sort of organic literary community that could be associated with the city as a whole. My "clusters," as I call them, have roughly broken down into the following:

- a) Poets of the Mexican era (1855–1880), most of whom published in the newspapers and whose work is not collected; much of this is anonymous or pseudonymous; Luis A. Torres's *The World of Early Chicano Poetry 1846–1910*, covers much of this material.

b) Poets of the prewar boom era (1905–1945), during which much of the literary publishing was geared toward landscape poetry describing Southern California as the paradise of the West; this is, so far, the sketchiest period; I’ve mostly collected work from various anthologies of Southern California Poetry published at the time.

c) Poets of the WWII/McCarthy era (1935–1955), during which many left-wing poets (Thomas McGrath, Edwin Rolfe) moved here; largely centered around journals such as *Coastlines*; Estelle Gershgoren Novak’s *Poets of the Non-Existent City: Los Angeles in the McCarthy Era* covers much of this material; I like to think of Bertolt Brecht as a “Los Angeles” poet during this era.

d) Poets of the Beat era and “Venice West” (1955–1975), which includes Stuart Perkoff, the one L.A. poet included in Donald Allen’s seminal *The New American Poets*; often the target of much parody (being a much rougher, dowdier group than their San Francisco peers, and having the hapless Lawrence Lipton as their champion), nonetheless some very distinctive work comes out of this moment.

e) Poets of the punk era (1975–1985), largely centered around Dennis Cooper’s ’zine *Little Caesar* and the literary institute Beyond Baroque (where the band X formed); self-consciously tried to adapt modes of New York school writing to Los Angeles; many of the major figures just ended up moving to New York.

f) Poets of Watts area and multicultural/Chicano poets (1965–1985), certainly my least populated “cluster” as I haven’t accessed any large archives or historical anthologies of this work; *Invocation L.A.: Urban Multicultural Poetry* (edited by Michéle T. Clinton, Sesshu Foster, and Naomi Quinonez), published in 1989, covers some of this material; I like to think of Jayne Cortez as central to this “cluster” though she left the city in the 1970s.

g) Miscellaneous “visual” and “conceptual” poets and artists (1965–1985) including Guy de Cointet (mostly known as a performance artist), the eccentric Hugh Fox (whose visual work is what most interests me), and Allen Ruppersberg (whose early text works seem to anticipate “conceptual writing”); I’d like to include Ed Ruscha as somehow an honorary member of this group, given that many of his paintings have more text than the average Aram Saroyan poem.

h) Poets centered around *Bachy* magazine, Momentum Press, etc. (1975–1985); this is really a rough group, but would include figures like Leland Hickman, whose collected poems have just been published, and Harry Northup, an actor who has appeared in several Martin Scorsese films; William Mohr’s anthologies *The Streets Inside: Ten Los Angeles Poets* and *Poetry Loves Poetry (An Anthology of Los Angeles Poets)* would be the sources for this material.

Certainly, poets like the formalist Henri Coulette (a Los Angeles native who gained great early fame but didn’t publish much in his lifetime), Clayton Eshleman (who published *Sulfur* from Los Angeles for over a decade), F.A. Nettlebeck (who didn’t spend that much time in Los Angeles, but did write his infamous long poem “Bug Death” here), John Clothier (a British poet who moved to Los Angeles in the 1970s and published some very interesting short volumes), and the various “meat” poets—those who saw Charles Bukowski as the one interesting thing in poetry anywhere and tried to write like him—do not fit into the “clusters” above. But as the anthology itself is primarily composed of misfits, I don’t doubt the final organizing principle will accommodate them. For now, the present selection can serve as a brief introduction to the work of the many “lost” poets of this remarkable city.

Dantés was a Spanish-language poet who published fifteen poems in the Santa Barbara newspaper *La Gaceta* in the early 1880s. By far the most accomplished of the poets collected in Torres's *The World of Early Chicano Poetry 1846–1910*, he wrote in many styles and genres, including love poems, elegies, philosophical reveries, satires, and meditations on nation. Almost no information about his life is available.

Nora May French (1881–1907) lived in Los Angeles for most of her life, largely impoverished. Her poems first appeared in local magazines like Charles Lummis's *Land of Sunshineland Out West*, but she eventually attracted the attention of poets and writers in San Francisco—her work is still in print, largely because of her association with George Sterling. She was clearly spontaneous and passionate in nature, not to mention quite beautiful, and was also plagued by health problems. She eventually committed suicide at age 26 when living in Carmel.

Olive Percival (1869–1945) is best known to historians of Los Angeles as a great collector of Asian artifacts. Her poems, collected in *Leaf-Shadows and Rose-Drift, Being Little Songs from a Los Angeles Garden* (1911), suggest this Asian influence (the book predates Pound's *Cathay* by about four years; the complete imagist poetical works of T.E. Hulme, which these resemble, appeared in 1912), though they are often marred, in my opinion, by her insistence around rounding out each quatrain with rhyme. Her first job was as a saleswoman at The People's Store; with her modest salary she built a beautiful home and garden in Arroyo Seco, initially without heat or running water. A posthumous volume of hers, *The Children's Garden Book*, contains many interesting, largely experimental designs for gardens.

Julia Boynton Green (1861–c. 1940) published two books in her lifetime, *This Enchanting Coast* (1928) and *Noonmark* (1936). A very skilled formalist, her precise and always interesting word choices lift much of her “landscape”

poetry above the norm. “Adaptable Euterpe” appeared in *The Anthology of Southern California Verse*, published by Primavera Press in 1930 along with another satirical and quasi-feminist poem called “The Provider.” Later poems of hers appeared in the science fiction journals *Amazing Stories* and *Weird Tales* in the ’30s, most likely because they dealt with technological themes.

Virginia Church (1880–?) only published one volume, *Teachers are People*, in 1945, which was reprinted in 1973 in Santa Barbara. The poems here are reprinted from the same 1930 volume from which “Adaptable Euterpe” was taken. The poems reflect the influence of Edgar Lee Masters and are strikingly low-key, ironic, and hence “modern,” especially in the context of the 1930 anthology, though for the most part her complete volume does not maintain this level of writing.

Alice Fowlie Whitfield’s poem “Modern Adolescent” appears with two other short poems of hers in the anthology *Look to this Day*, published by the Poetry Society of Southern California and printed by The Ward Ritchie Press in Los Angeles in 1944. Outside of that, I’ve been unable to find anything else about her.

James Boyer May (1904–1981) is best known as the “maverick” publisher of *Trace* (1952–1970) which, in addition to publishing new poetry and reviews, indexed the activity of small press poetry magazines in the United States and elsewhere. It is also because of May’s advice that the first edition of *Howl* was printed in the U.K. and hence confiscated on its return journey. May self-published an attractive three volume boxed-set of his selected fiction, criticism, and poetry, though he doesn’t seem to have made much of a reputation for himself as a writer during his lifetime. He was certainly distinctive—his poems stand out in the volume *Poetry Los Angeles: I*, which he co-edited with Thomas McGrath and Peter Yates in 1958, mostly for the heightened vocabulary, complex syntax, and earnest affect, even if their “content” remains elusive after many re-readings.

Curtis Zahn (1912–1990) was associated with the magazine *Coastlines* and published only one volume of poetry, *One Extraordinary AM: Some Poems*, in 1964; *The Plight of the Lesser Sawyer's Cricket: Plays, Prose, and Poems* appeared in 1987 (I've seen neither of these). I'm not sure when "Tijuana" first appeared, as I've taken it from the loosely-edited *Poets of the Non-Existent City*, which doesn't contain a bibliography (and is marred by typos). Zahn himself worked mostly as a newspaper editor and writer, as well as a seaman and poetry-reading organizer for Pacifica Radio in Los Angeles. He was a conscientious objector in World War II.

Peter Yates (1909–1976) was best known as a music critic and supporter of the experimental arts in Los Angeles—his name appears frequently in the biography of Harry Partch, for example, whom he helped, and he was something of a go-between for Schoenberg and Stravinsky during the days of their feud. He wrote poetry his entire life, and clearly used poems to work out aesthetic ideas; his poems are varied in style, though always well-crafted. A beautiful edition, *The Garden Prospect: Selected Poems*, was published by Jargon Press in 1980.

John Thomas (Idlet) (1930–2002) is primarily associated with Venice, where he lived for most of his adult life after hitchhiking—inspired by Lipton's *The Holy Barbarians*—across the country to California. He is the curious case of an incredibly gifted poet who wrote very infrequently, and indeed he often resorted to republishing the same set of poems, sometimes decades after they had been written, in succeeding editions of work. Parts of a long prose poem, "Patagonia," appeared in the 1983 volume *Abandoned Latitudes: New Writing by Three Los Angeles Poets* (along with writing by Paul Vangelisti and Robert Crosson), though that work itself—which is a sort of fantastic prose-poem travelogue with more than a few hints of Bataille—was probably never finished. He died shortly after entering prison on a charge of child molestation in the 1970s.

Bob Flanagan (1952–1996) is best known as the figure documented in *SICK: The Life & Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*. Suffering from cystic fibrosis, he lived much longer than his doctors ever anticipated, and turned his disease, as well as his masochism, into wildly funny, controversial but very popular performance pieces, often with the assistance of his partner Sheree Rose. He was best known as a poet early on, being a major figure in the *Little Caesar* scene at Beyond Baroque; his later writings include *Slave Sonnets* (1986) and the posthumous *Pain Journal*.

Mich  lle T. Clinton was very active in both the Watts and Beyond Baroque literary scenes in the 1980s, a bridge of sorts between communities, and is often cited as an influential teacher and poet by younger poets in Los Angeles. She's published two books, *High Blood/Pressure* and *Good Sense & the Faithless*, and was co-editor of *Invocation L.A.: Urban Multicultural Poetry*. She recorded a CD with Wanda Coleman, *Black Angels*, in 1988; she has since moved out of Los Angeles.

Dantés

Reflecciones en un cementerio

En un cementerio oscuro,
De muertos triste mansión—
Ay! mirando su futuro,
Lloraba mi corazón.
Triste hasta la muerte estaba
Pensando en la eternidad,
Mi corazón palpitaba—
Sollozaba de ansiedad.

Negros estaban los cielos
Con densos nubarrones;
Invadían á los suelos
Airados aquilones.
Brama el trueno en las alturas.
Los relámpagos brillan
Sobre tristes sepulturas
Que en mi torno habían.

Una cruz se levantaba,
Con funesta magestad,
Que un ciprés, sola, sombreaba
Con sombra de eternidad.
Sus verdes brazos caían
Sobre la blanca losa
En donde en pólvoro dormían
Los restos de una hermosa.

A la izquierda se levanta
Otra tumba suntuosa,
Donde el tecolote canta
Su canción pavorosa.
Y esa tumba rica encierra
Algun cuerpo apestoso—
Tal vez el polvo la tierra—
De un rey que fué poderoso.

Melancólica arboleda
Al necrópolo poblaba,
Que al son de bóreas cantaba
Alabanzas á los muertos.

De la luna encapotada
Rasgó á las nubes un rayo—
Que con tristeza y desmayo
Bajó á alumbrar una tumba.

Cuán conmovedora escena,
Es ver los rayos quebrados,
Por los brazos enlutados
De los cipreses verter,

Sus luces sobre las tumbas.
Que encerraban hermosuras.
Poderes, reyes, bravuras,
Para manjar de gusanos.

Yo sentado ante una tumba
Tenía un solo sentimiento—

Y éste cera mi pensamiento:
¡Hé aquí, el fin de mi jornada!

Unos van y otros venimos,
Como las olas del mar—
Mas tenemos que parar—
En polvo—pues polvo somos.

(*La Gaceta*, Santa Bárbara, 13 de Marzo de 1880)

Reflections in a Cemetery

In a dark cemetery,
Sad mansion of the dead,
Oh! My heart wept, gazing
Upon its future.
Sad even unto death,
My heart pondered its
Eternity and throbbed,
Fearful from foreboding.

Dense, threatening clouds
Blackened the sky;
Angry north winds
Swept the earth.
Thunder roars in the heavens,
Lightning flashes
Over sad sepulchers
Surrounding me.

In mournful majesty
A cross rose, shaded
By a lone cypress tree
Casting eternal shade.
Its green arms hung
Over a white gravestone
Beneath which slept the
Dust of a beautiful woman.

To the left rises
Another luxurious tomb,
Upon which an owl sings
His dreadful song.
And that ornate tomb
Encases a once-powerful king,
Now a putrid corpse—
Its dust becoming dirt.

Amid the teeming graveyard
The melancholy grove
Sang praises to the dead
To the tunes of the north wind.

From the cloud-covered moon
A beam pierced the clouds—
Sad and dismayed it settled,
Shining, upon a tomb.

Such a harrowing scene
To see the scattered rays

Through veiled, drooping branches
Of the leaning cypresses,

Moonlight falling on the
Tombs enclosing beauty,
Power, bravery, royalty—
All to become food for worms.

And I, seated before a tomb,
Felt just one premonition,
And this was my intuition:
This is my journey's end!

Like the waves of the sea
Some arrive and some leave—
But all must reach this shore—
Of dust—as dust we are.

(*La Gaceta*, Santa Barbara, March 13, 1880)
Translated by Luis A. Torres

Nora May French (1881–1907)

Vivisection (1906)

We saw unpitying skill
 In curious hands put living flesh apart,
 Till, bare and terrible, the tiny heart
Pulsed, and was still.

We saw Grief's sudden knife
Strip through the pleasant flesh of soul-disguise—
Lay for a second's space before our eyes
A naked life.

The Panther Woman (1906)

I face the tranquil day with tranquil eyes
On high sea-hills my cheeks are cold with mist,
In white foam-fingers quick desire dies.

Dies as a strangled bird the wave has torn—
Ay, drowns and dies this winged desire of mine
In white sea fingers of the tidal morn.

But I would kill the restless silken night
And I would still the wings that beat the dark,
And grasp the little throat of heart-delight,

And drown the savage will that understands
How love would laugh to clasp your bending head,
How love would hold your face in her two hands,

How love would press your angry lips apart,
And leave the willful bruising of her kiss
In the sweet satin flesh above your heart.

Olive Percival (1869–1945)

from *Leaf-Shadows and Rose-Drift* (1911)

Trees After Dark

Close against the old, old mystery
Of the blue night-sky,
Stand black and tall the eucalyptus trees;
They sway like marching spearmen in the breeze;
And aloof, like idlers, live-oaks stand,
Watching them go by!

The New Moon

Above the gum-tree's silhouette,
In sky of pale, pale gold,
Night lifts an Indian silver ring,
Her broken bracelet old!

Clowns

O the goggled hop-toads are fat, old clowns!
All day, in a fern-bed so cool, do they loll and wait
And rehearse their joke; but at dusk, attired
In spotted, green silk, how alert and importunate!

Amaryllis

O the world it withers in the desert-wind;
(And three moons away is the rain!)

The wild-gourd vine swaggers through the roadside-dust,
Too content with its white domain.
In my brown, drear garden, is a sudden pink:
(Not a rose on vine nor on tree!)
Tis a row of lilies and without one leaf!
O adorable bravery!

The Remembrancer

Under my window, a green carpet is spread;
No sacred prayer-rug and yet
Precious it is: for on that day in Mid-March
You planted this mignonette!

Julia Boynton Green (1861–c. 1940)

Bougainvillea (1928)

Judge if I read the evidence aright.
 Some strolling Titan fared this way last night,
 His towering figure in its stalwart strength,
Royally vested, a resplendent sight.
Feeling his mantle irked him by its heat,
 He flung it off, and cast its sumptuous length
Along this garden wall, a dazzling sheet
 Of vivid dye, that quenches neighboring bloom
 As lightning pales the candles in a room.

Adaptable Euterpe (1930)

“They’re past,” I mourned, “the days of ode and lyric
The Muse has fled offended, sad and hurt.”
I vented my dismay by lines satiric
In many a bitter spurt.

“The earth is grown,” I cried, “a loathsome welter.
Machines, machine-made men, command the stage.
Who could wax rhythmical upon a smelter?
Oh, dull prosaic age!”

“All inspiration’s dying—or diverted.”
Just then I glimpsed Euterpe—she was bobbed!
Young Artemis she looked, so briefly skirted;
I gazed and gasped and sobbed.

“In Gotham who could frame a stanza Sapphic?”
I grieved, “who rhyme—in Hell?”
Then spied Euterpe in the maddest traffic
And making for the “L.”

“A poet might as well turn blacksmith, hedger!”
I grouched. “No golden age will come again.”
Later I saw the Muse perched on a dredger,
And riding a steam crane!

I do an ode to Spring; she lightly scans it,
The pert provoking wench,
Suggests I hymn a T-square, or a transit,
A maul, or monkey-wrench.

Parnassus!” scoffs the jade. “All gabble, gilding!
Forget that hoary nonsense, and make shift
To attain your vision from the Woolworth Building
Via a speedy ‘lift’.”

She’s far from sad or snobbish then, I take it,
And no provincial. So, perhaps, when Greece
Went smash she packed up gamely to forsake it
And revelled in release.

She landed here before the day of quotas,
No doubt a trifle homesick, shocked, surprised.
But she’s adaptable—good sports she’d vote us;
Oh yes, she’s naturalized!
Well—we are friends again; we’re doing a ballad
On Diesel engines. She, at luncheon hour,
Laughs at ambrosia—swears beef, beans, and salad
Have far more staying power.

Virginia Church (1880–?)

Intercepted (1930)

Jimmy sits in the front row;
Across the aisle is Flossie.
Today as I turned from the board
I intercepted a look,
Holy as altar fires,
That flamed from youth to youth.
I caught my breath.
All afternoon I’ve felt old and lonesome.

Gwen (1930)

I sent for Gwendolyn Hall's mother,
She must be made to understand
That silken hose and spangled gowns
Were not for school.
Other girls could not afford them;
Besides, the lack of taste.
She came,
A shawl over her faded cotton dress. "I'm a washerwoman,
I never had nothin' pretty.
I mean Gwen shall have the best
If it means rubbing the skin from my knuckles."
Tears came into the old eyes.
I, too, pledged myself that Gwen should have the best—
Though it might mean discarding spangles.

Not Mellin's Food (1930)

In the Study Hall today
I took a lurid-back novel
Away from Clarice Ritter.
It was called "The Purple Passion."
I warned her
Not to waste her God-given intellect on such trash,
To spend the remainder of the period
On Pope's Essay on Man.
I was about to consign the Passion
To the waste basket,
When a phrase intrigued me;
I took it home and finished it in bed.

Alice Fowlie Whitfield

Modern Adolescent (1944)

She walks with equanimity—
A product of today—
Where fiction, amorous films and schools
Usurp parental sway.
She never acts surprised or shocked
At any happening;
A secret code of right and wrong
Keeps her from wantoning.
She poses as the worldly type
Emotionally spent,
But though she may indulge in words
Her heart is innocent.

James Boyer May (1904–1981)

The Dissimulating Lunatic (1958)

whose realm is ever present, spaced in careful
careless pause upon his whimsical desires so
dreamed, unmet... He wills to not-will his
discoverment of fantasy, through testing
whether these are servants on his vast estate – nor
trying if one ordering of change
can move a wall or lop one tree or budge one post.

His happiness relies on self-controlling

vision, holding back command, while reveling in
sanctuaried thoughts of genius,
his own; for ALL could disappear, *supposing*
only that he'd stop his measured pacing bounds of
measureless domains and speak hoarse word
to cause split earth to gobble up his hates.

Curtis Zahn (1912–1990)

Tijuana (c. 1955)

In all that thin, squalid, exploited valley
there exists no security, only the stoic
freedom of the economically damned, and
everywhere hangs listlessly the olive-eyed
color of greasewood's smoke. Here, crab-grass
rebounds under the lifted hooves of melancholy
cattle, but it's crew-cut, it's sparse, dry
and creamed with dust. And manzanita thinks
adolescent thoughts about willow, knowing, too
the peculiarized smell of corrugated tin
roofs that defend from rare rain, the radios
which talk all day long of things
nobody will be able to buy.
Here they grow soft, small, men with musical hearts
and wives gone fat with poverty's diet, and absurd
dogs that caricature a civilization
ground thin between two restless nations, and
slowly pulverized by shock of opposed ideologies.
A wire fence makes it Mexico, but God

has never been asked. And the vegetation
does not change its citizenship overnight, nor do
the Animals, and even the river
in its winter plumage, traffics casually
across the International Line, bringing home
the raw sewage deposited there when
Good Neighbors built the fence
and created an incident, and
caused a City, a roadside beggar whose hat had
better stay away from his head.
But no, the birds need no passports
and coyotes can cross and re-cross; the
tourists too. Only the residents are immobilized;
frozen to the north by
the sprawling verbiage of passport wordage
and turned back south and east by centuries
of sterile desert, and held to the western
beaches by the Pacific's relentless combers.
Tijuana? One can get into but not out of it
and into it from the whole world
have come seekers, drifters, escapes;
wanted men and unwanted women, come here
for the final stalemate. Their shoes—
their city shoes frozen by dust, and
stomachs bleached by begged Tacos shot with horsemeat.
Here to dry up while drinking and stealing
and waiting. Converting their German, French,
English, Chinese into the oiled, grey
pidgin Spanish of bordertown; to wait
beside the flagrant streets for new faces
come to be horrified by sin, and to
grovel in the spectacle

of abortion and absorption. And to hear
lame, warped, U.S. made guitars, chord-wreaked
by Indians too poor to fatten
their dogs for the eating.

Peter Yates (1909–1976)

*A Twelve-Tone Statement of Popular Opinion in
Regard to Arnold Schoenberg and His Music* (1958)

If it were not for that, we could love you
Like anything, anything it were; if not
For that we like, love you.
We're for it; we could love you
Like anything, not that, if love
Were like—if for that
Could anything: it, not you, we love not.
Anything, we're for it: you like it if that
We love not like that.
If anything could, you were for it: we
Could love you for that.
Not anything like it! We were, if anything.
That you love we could like it,
If for anything, that you like, love, love.

John Thomas Idlet (1930–2002)

Epopoeia (1976)

1

in the Ur-chasm, the Organza Deep
among anemones big as elm trees
move whole herds of kraken, grazing
on eel larvae 6 ft. long

& at the very bottom, nothing, the mere
navel of the world, bed of primordial slime
boulders of solid manganese
scrawled tracks of great blind worms

2

the volcano they passed in the night, at sea
& the whale alongside that paced the ship all week
scratching its hide against the barnacled hull

prowls along strange interminable coasts
hideous reconnaissance
the march to the interior: valley of dry bones
his friends dying of yet-unclassified fevers
fruitless expeditions

tokens
& mementos: grisly fetish

brown & faded snapshot of himself
beardless, flanked by grinning aborigines

plaque or gorget of sea-ivory

inscribed with curious characters
he can no longer read

gold watch, dented, the works
frozen with salt & rust

bottle of powdery dirt (the handful of
bottomslime brought back as proof he had
been there

3

wallowing galleons
dragons dolphins camelopards

serpents unicorns
great volcanos spouting whales & mermaids
& the four fat faces
 spewing wind

*Nullus nostrum ad illos neque illorum ad nos
pervenire potest*

 he destroys the chart
lest others waste their youth upon it

4

(a nomic exode)

the act, the
axis mundi

the smoke hole

(Hassan & the Assassins. Assassins slew Raymond of Tripoli
& Conrad of Montferrat

(the Ismailite society at Cairo: 9 degrees
of instruction, the last being
“that naught was to be believed, everything
might be done”

in Paradise (traditionally): conversation
 with animals
& immortality

e.g. the shaman as heteroclit, as tribal jester
goofy gesture: tripping out
climbing right out
through the smoke hole
to talk to Buzzard, who sez: when acorns ripen
they will have no shells. snow
will be salmon flour

cf. zen master's peculiar behavior
the immediate crazy gesture (Q: “Does Goofy
have the Buddha-nature?”

& he climbs right out
through the smoke hole

Bob Flanagan (1952–1996)

Burn (1978)

*People don't want to be healed. They
want a nice juicy wound that will show
well when they put neon lights around it.*

–Kenneth Patchen

water down my face
my chest
burn me
make me warm
this bathroom
cold
the chrome towel racks
bare window
white feet
the skin blisters
burn
cigarette
hot sidewalk
hole in my shoe
sofa
mom forgets
burning
even the firemen

come
break windows
neighbors point
and kids drop bicycles
run
the black smoke is in my house
my soft mattress
my sheets my pillow
bright
my fingers bright
my feet so bad
look
i'm hurt
my hands tied behind me
kids light fires
at my feet
watch me dance
indian howl
slave
spiders and lizards in the tool shed
want to see something?
look—
where the hand was
left a red mark
see the skin broke open
flood finch eggs, roses
splash the white night-gown
she throws off
look how she holds me
mornings
white friends in jail
burn with losing

downstairs
women talk to dogs
my wrists in her hands like birds
her mouth on my cheek
she asks
was it good?

Love Letters, Cut Up (1978)

ice floats penis clinic/ i was raisins and apples,
me blender full of *was* and *mistake!* my squeal—i
expected/ i howling, asleep on little dimes/ until
UP THE WHOLE PROCEDURE!! like that with you deep
kept pillows curled/ and it was all over . . . i don't
burn—i ponder, upon you the schedule, ribs my fingers,
the realization: oh i IT for eight, about two weeks,
crying on 21 days, takingness or irritate, have a
period, then beg (or very near with) (what a hassle)
etc., angel we cannot pill belly at lunch time/ when
all open, all were, we were/ we lay in bed . . . the
afternoon/ on top of blankets / pursuing quiet ends/
i'd love to have an evening, plants, draw you, not
cough so much/ i might even (once would be enough) . . .
we were, you are an excellent person

Michèle T. Clinton

*Warning To Young Bright Sisters/
White Am. Culture 101a* (1986)

Once, a pre-med white boy laced his fingers into mine
& introduced me to foreign films, espresso in cafes, & existentialism.
As far away from niggerism as I could get, I ran to him,
relieved to be caught by his thighs & fucked,
dry, for hours & hours & hours.

Hardened black faces filled the ceramic cups
& picked up the tips he left. I brooded,
& after Camus had been exhausted I suggested
Ntozake, Jean Toomer, Baraka.

“Why are you so angry?” he told me, & dropped my hand
when black men passed us on the street;
“Where do these moods come from?”

His childhood of piano lessons & little league,
an occasional bloody nose & a fat idle mother
was a calm crack in the black rat faces that haunted me
at night. The fissure grew & grew by white magic,
white power I wanted to be swallowed & cleansed.

I told him about mine: 2 and one half rapes,
nigguhs cutting up my younger brother,
cardboard in the bottom of shoes when it rained,
& poetry books I stole from the library.
Fatigued, he poured French coffee, lit a cigarette
& picked up Sartre. “Strive to be positive,” he told me,
looking up from his book, “or at least impartial.”

Impartiality scalds the tips of tongues into silence:
I said nothing. The crude dry lessons of hot white men
can make you numb. Or spin in anger exponential to street abuse,
or thrash in dizzy shame of black innocence.
Impartiality burns blind in young white men who feel
the hope of Nietzsche, the power of privilege
& the servitude of women who want only to escape.