

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

An Island in the Middle of a Lake

Jack Grapes · Wednesday, March 21st, 2018

I came to Los Angeles 50 years ago — in the fall of 1968 —
the same year George Drury Smith founded Beyond Baroque —
to do a pilot for a tv series.

I knew where all the actor-watering holes were — Jo Allen's, Nicodell's, Hugo's, etc. —
but what about the poet-wateringholes?

Where were they?

This was Los Angeles, you know,
not Paris, where the poets sat in cafes on Blvd. St. Germain
and spouted modern poetry.

It wasn't New York, either, where the poets hung out in coffee houses
and slouched on park benches in Washington Square in Greenwich Village
and spouted modern poetry.

It wasn't Chicago where poets at the Green Mill
slammed poetry out loud,
and it wasn't even San Francisco where
poets could be found in North Beach
at City Lights Bookstore or standing on street corners,
reading their poems.

It was as hard to find a poet in Los Angeles
as it was to find Los Angeles in Los Angeles.

I heard there was some poets in Hermosa Beach
hanging out at the Either/Or Bookstore.

Someone spotted a poet at Small World Books in Santa Monica,
and there was a rumor going around that two poets
were seen walking along the pier in Long Beach.

There was a bookstore on Hollywood Boulevard
that sold poetry books, so I took my just-published book of poems
PERCHANCE, IN ALL YOUR TRAVELS, HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TO PITTSBURGH?,
and asked the owner if he'd take 5 copies on consignment.

I was hoping I'd run into a poet among the stacks of "thin" books,
but alas, it was just me and the handlebarred-mustachioed owner behind the counter.

Lots of thin books, no thin poets.

I became desperate.

I walked the streets of Westwood in my black sweatshirt

and asked if anyone wrote poetry, but was ignored by everyone, especially the college-dressed hip-now-and-happening crowd coming out of the movie theater next to a pizza joint.

“Poets,” I asked, “anyone here a poet?”

I got nothing but blank stares and pitying looks.

Someone put a quarter into my hand so obligingly I recited one of my poems, but by the time I got to the big closing line, they were already across the street walking into the Hamburger Hamlet.

One day, walking the mean streets of DTLA,

a guy in an alley pulled me over and said,

“Hey, kid, I hear you’re looking for poets.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I’m a poet myself.”

“Listen,” he said, “there’s a poetry reading today in Topanga Canyon. For a few bucks, I can give you a map.”

“Topanga Canyon,” I said, “where’s that?”

“Right off PCH,” he said.

“PCH?” I said, “sounds like a drug.”

“Kid,” he said, “don’t get smart.”

He pulled out a map, showed me the route, and unable to contain my glee, I hit the Harbor Freeway, took the 101 West and turned up PCH

like I was fresh from the creeks and loaded for bear.

A few miles up the twisting turning road on Topanga Canyon, and there it was, a little theeee-ater carved into the hillside.

I signed up to read, read a few poems, met a few poets, and kept a look-out in case we’d get busted

by the Secret Police for spreading unauthorized modern poetry.

A tall guy wearing a blue work shirt introduced himself, said his name was Jim Krusoe, and that there was a poetry workshop in Venice that met in a place called Beyond Baroque.

“Beyond Broke,” I said, “that sounds perfect.”

“No,” he said, “Baroque. Like the highly ornate art that appeared between the Renaissance style and the Neoclassical style.”

“Oh,” I said, folding my poems in my back pocket, “that Baroque.”

“Yeah, we meet in a storefront on West Washington Blvd every Wednesday night, read poems, get feedback. About 20 of us. Why dontcha drop by?”

Twenty poets, all in one place. The end of the rainbow.

Twenty struggling, straggling, scrawny poets. The motherlode.

“Why dontcha drop by?” he repeated.

So I did. A few days later I gathered up a few poems, drove down Olympic Boulevard, and headed west toward the ocean.

Turned out Beyond Baroque was nothing more than a small

seemingly abandoned store next to a liquor mart and a bar.
Looking through the plate glass window, I could see several
people sitting on folding chairs arranged in a circle
on a concrete floor, and a few others
perched on the platform where mannequins might have stood
when the place was a dress shop or a retail outlet.
Whatever they were selling before, now they were
giving away poetry, for free.
Two poets, John Harris and Joseph Hanson,
were in charge, mostly calling on people to read,
and acting like traffic cops when the feedback got testy.
I later learned that John owned Papa Bach bookstore,
a block down from the Nu-Art Theater on Santa Monica Blvd.,
and Joseph Hanson also wrote detective novels
featuring the first gay sleuth, David Brandstetter.
The room was small, not much bigger than my kitchen,
but when the poets read,
it seemed to get larger, as if the words pushed the walls
west toward the ocean and east toward the San Diego Freeway.
All the poetry and poets and poetry publications
were either in New York or San Francisco.
We were an island in the middle of a lake
in the middle of a large desert.
It felt like we were on an L.A. Ghost Ship
re-inventing what modern poetry could be.
The twenty of us.

Once a month, Beyond Baroque invited a poet
from another city to read,
and we twenty straggling struggling poets gathered
to see what the outside world was doing.
They were usually published poets, bringing their “thin” books
to the podium and reading to us, hungry for word from other planets.
What were the language poets doing?
What were the confessional poets doing?
What were the neo-narrative poets doing?
Every Wednesday we drove from Hollywood,
Compton, the South Bay, the Valley, East Los Angeles,
Culver City, Santa Monica, Calabasas, Ventura, North Hollywood.
We got in our little boats and rowed out to that island
in the middle of that lake in the midst of this great desert,
and we listened to poetry, and we fought among ourselves
for our place in this world of poetry, a world,
as John Harris was to say, was no bigger than a postage stamp.
After a year or two, we moved to the back room
of this store front, but it was just as small,
just as cold, just as packed.
The twenty of us grew to forty, and the forty

grew to sixty, some of the original gang moving on,
 newcomers jockeying for position in the center of the circle.
 When John Harris and Joseph Hanson moved on,
 four of us were appointed to run the workshop:
 James Krusoe, Francis Dean Smith, Carol Marsh, and me.
 And at some point, after another few years, we moved on too,
 and others took over.
 The Ghost Ship sailed on, poetry kept going.

During that time, I met lots of poets, wrote lots of poems,
 argued about poetry, shared wine. Some nights a mild fight would break out,
 some nights a drunk or stoned street person would wander in,
 try to figure out what was going on, then stagger back out.
 Some nights someone would take their clothes off and spout modern poetry.
 Some nights Barry Simons would sit bent over, his bald head bobbing up and down,
 as he recited a poem he'd made up on the spot, a wild kind of
 stream of consciousness filling the room with Surreal images.
 Tom Waits came in to read "Diamonds on my Windshield."
 Exene Cervenca and John Doe read poems that ended up songs
 in their L.A. Band "X".

We were a motley crew, huddled together in that storefront room,
 chilly in winter and humid in the summer.

But for all the crazy shenanigans,
 we were serious poets
 serious about poetry:

Wanda Coleman, Dennis Ellman, Michael C Ford, Peter Levitt, Michelle T. Clinton,
 James Krusoe, Michael Andrews, Leland Hickman, Bob Flanagan, Holly Prado,
 Harry Northup, Eloise Klien Healy, Kita Shantiris, Dennis Cooper,
 Doraine Poretz, Steve Richmond, Curtis Lyle, Kate Braverman, Ron Koertge, Deena Metzger,
 John Thomas, Bill Mohr, and dozens of others who came for awhile and left.
 Bill Mohr published several anthologies of poetry as part of Momentum Press,
 John Harris published Bachy Magazine that featured many of the L.A. poets,
 Michael Andrews and I founded Bombshetler Press,
 and so on and so on and so on, dozens of presses and hundreds of poetry books
 and many hundreds of readings and performances in the small back room
 of that small storefront on West Washington Boulevard.

I forget when exactly, but Beyond Baroque moved
 to what was the old Venice City Hall, that big white building
 on Venice Blvd, next to the old Venice Jail,
 that is now SPARC, Social & Public Resource Center.

Most all the poets I know have come through Beyond Baroque at some time or other.

Beyond Baroque has been the touchstone of my life
 as a poet in this city
 for the last 50 years,
 and it's hard for me to imagine what I would have done had it not been
 for the energy they allowed and the focus they provided for all the poets in L.A.
 We didn't need the Paris cafes nor the Greenwich Village coffee houses
 nor the Chicago south side bars nor the San Francisco hippies.

We had Beyond Baroque.

All — or most all — of the poetry venues, cafe readings, workshops, and poetry gatherings that have sprouted and flourished in the 50 years since George Drury Smith founded Beyond Baroque in that little storefront on West Washington Blvd trace their beginnings in some way shape or form back to that first watering hole for poets, that small island in the middle of a lake in the midst of this large desert.

Well, it's getting late and I have to go write a poem

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Information about Beyond Baroque here: <http://www.beyondbaroque.org/>

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