Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Jack Grapes, Naked

Roni Keller · Wednesday, May 7th, 2014

This year, soaked in the grace of Saturday morning, no deadlines, no phone calls, just the quiet fall of wintery sunshine onto the floor, I began reading Jack Grapes' new book, *The Naked Eye: New and Selected Poems, 1987-2012*, an anthology of years of his work, past and current, from his previous books: *Trees, Coffee and the Eyes of Deer*; and *the running form, naked, Blake*; *Breaking Down the Surface of the World*; *Lucky Finds*; and the newest, *The Naked Eye*. (Since my graceful Saturday morning, a new book has just been published, *Poems So Far So Far So Good So Far To Go*. At the age of 70, Grapes appears to be moving on, even as *The Naked Eye* seems to wrap up a unique body of work in American poetry.)

Grapes, high among the most accomplished of post-World War II poets and a founding member of the Los Angeles-based school of Stand Up Poetry, provides crucial testament to the innovations and accomplishments of this era in literature. The so-called "Stand Up" poets, a term coined by Charles Harper Webb in his anthology of the same name, were often considered the progeny of Charles Bukowski, rejecting the academic style of university-trained poets and writing in a more conversational voice. Many of these poets followed the trail of poets such as Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath, focusing on personal issues rather than text-book poetic subject matter. That off-shoot was labeled "confessional poetry," but the Stand-Up poets brought to their work the sensibility and tone of stand-up comedy, a unique hybrid that could easily find among its mentors the work of Frank O'Hara and Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

Among the Stand-Up poets, however, Grapes was more inclined to deepen his comedic elements with darker confessional themes, lacing his work with a sense of loss, grief, death, and the alienating desolation that lay beneath the glitter of Hollywood and escapist fantasies of Los Angeles. Grapes embraced, with a playful humanism and aching slapstick, the full range of possibilities that life presents. Many of his reviewers and critics have found it difficult to grasp the various literary tactics he employs in his work, often pigeon-holing him as either a "confessional" poet, a "stand-up" poet, a "language/experimental" poet, or a more traditional academic poet.

Yet, Grapes defies easy categorization, and the vaudeville playfulness of his work can obfuscate his darker themes, while the morbid sensibility of some of his poems can confuse those looking at his surface geniality. "Now-you-see-me, now-you-don't" would be an apt characterization of his poetic strategy. The masks of tragedy and comedy are not only switched in the middle of a poem, but often the mask of tragedy lies just under the mask of comedy, and vice-versa. A tap-dance about ordering a beer in a Paris cafe can suddenly become a lamentation for the endurance of love

and the denial of death. A tongue-in-cheek escapade on hiking in the Sierras can suddenly become a knife-in-the-gut celebration of the fragility of friendship.

As Robert Peters wrote in a review of one of Jack's earlier books, "Grapes writes deceptively, inventing a constant voice, intimate, congenial, a voice you feel you can trust — until he flashes horror, jingling a cloth close to your eyes. 'I am the darkness within in you all,' writes Grapes, 'I will get you.'" Jim Burns, in another review, admits that "Grapes' magic cannot be pinned down even with a long involved analysis. His style is so unique – relaxed and playful one minute, dropping a bomb the next." In a review of an earlier book, *Breaking On Camera*, Dennis Cooper observes that while Grapes' work is often "easy to read," it is also "wonderfully and purposefully vague in atmosphere." And lastly, Nancy Shiffrin, in her *Los Angeles Times* review, summed it up by writing: "A surface geniality frequently masks something dark and bloody. This flip-flop from genial buffoonery to commandant of the dark side seems paradigmatic of Grapes' approach to poetry."

Grapes' astonishing range renders this collection of poetry extraordinarily complex in its ability to embrace domestic sorrow and joy, and yet deliver homage to the traditional literary greats, ranging from the ancient Homer to moderns such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, as well as more contemporary poets such as Frank O'Hara, Alan Ginsberg, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. Often overlooked though by many reviewers and critics are the influence of novelists such as James Joyce, Malcolm Lowry, William Faulkner, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers. As a matter of fact, his influences are so wide-ranging, it's hard to pin them down to even a select few. He's a bit of a magpie, building the nest of his poems from the twigs of so many styles and techniques that it's hard to tell from any one poem whether Grapes is doing a stand-up routine or defining the agonies of the human heart, which is always, as Grapes is fond of quoting Faulkner's Nobel Prize speech, "in conflict with itself."

It's nary impossible to do justice in this review to the wide range of poems in *The Naked Eye*. So many struck me as I read this collection of poems as if I were reading a novel: The poem about when Jack was five-years old, "The Picture"; the poems about life with his parents, "Mardi Gras 1950" and "This Is My Father" among them, including the gorgeous poem "Midnight In The Kitchen" depicting his dad in the kitchen in the middle of the night, and the poignant line:

> "a slow sweep of the hand
> and the salt is off the table,
> this white rain spreading on the floor."

The poems from *Breaking Down the Surface of the World, Part 1: Geography*, are named by alphabet blocks and parse out life in all its rough-hewn beauty. Asks the letter T:

> "Who is going to marry at a time like this?"

In *Lucky Finds*, lines such as:

> "I like to see what I set on fire";

The almost sensible Shakespearean edict:

> "Let the rope support

whomever is hanged,
from above, from below";

And the trippy,

"What can I tell you?
Stay close to a telephone pole,
the kind a stray cat
able to appreciate
the splendor of a cloudless day
would attack
if it were a mouse."

I move on to the glorious and visceral poem, "This Life," about Jack watching his wife Lori get dressed for work in the morning:

"Should I pick up Josh,' I say, "and what about the bread and milk?"
Actually, I'm not really talking to her, either.
I'm looking at her pussy
while she struggles
with the complicated long stocking or something,
her head down,
working it fold by fold
past her heel and ankle, then up the calf,
over the knee, up the thigh,
finally standing and jumping up and down,
small little jumps,
as she tugs the last part
above her pubic hair,
above the navel.

The very romantic and real "Passport to Paris: City of Lights" about Lori and Jack being in Paris while their son Josh settled into his junior year of college abroad, which includes the simple heartfelt revelation as he writes in his journal around midnight in Cafe Deux Magots: "And then, between bites of a club sandwich that cost about $25, it hit me. I could be in Denny's on La Cienega or Canter's on Fairfax back in L.A. and it would be the same thing. The garish lights, the clinking of dishes, the smell of fried eggs and hash browns."

And I started weeping, then sobbing, real tears running down my face, something profound happening inside of me. Maybe, just maybe, for this still cold Saturday morning in time, the key to life is in Jack Grapes' poetry, the happiness, the overcoming, the power of being alive, the gift of being who one really is, is the job of being real and the courage and the confidence that we all need to cut through the baloney — it is all there in Grapes' powerful words.

So then I say to myself, damn, I have just got to tell the world how much I love this book. And I said to Jack, I said, can I interview you for *Cultural Weekly*? And Jack generously said yes. At the conference table in his office he sets for the community he founded, the Los Angeles Poets & Writers Collective, his talk leap-frogs from the Language Poets to Book Eleven of Homer's *Odyssey*, to the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound which is honored by homage at page 237 in *The Naked Eye*.

They are all there in this collection: his nods to Ovid, Catullus and Plato, coupled with his gifts for farce and slapstick, intertwined with his gentle mastery of the art of imbuing the written word with the power of love, truth and beauty.

Grapes graces me with quotable quotes: "I am an academic at heart," he says with a shrug of apology, then smiles in defense, adding, "but a heart-felt academic." He talks about the sarcasm that can be missed by a pedant when reading Grapes' introduction to *Lucky Finds*. It's over-the-top scholarly, using the technical linguistic jargon of Language Poetry via the sieve of Russian formalism, while at the same time making fun of that very impulse to dehumanize poetry. I can just see the formalist critic reading this, nodding in assent, then brought up short by the self-parody. "Huh?" they might say. Here's a snippet you might try on for size, relishing the language and tone, while enjoying the joke:

"This is not the place to rehash utopian concepts such as symbolism, futurism, and surrealism. What was, was. No amount of recapitulation can bring back the purifying word of the tribe. Even the deliberate flattening of tonal register and the extensive use of non-sequitur fails to diminish the role of the lyric subject in favor of a relatively neutral voice (or multiplicity of voices)."

See, it means what is says, and it's accurate, but somehow the tongue-in-cheek tone belies the high falutin seriousness. It's hard to separate the precise truth of the statements from the sly parody. When I brought up the many tactics and strategy he uses, the references to other poets, the symbolic allusions all folded into what appears to be casual chatter, Jack said with a shrug of his shoulders, almost as if confessing to a crime, "Well, I am a little Protean, I guess." The dictionary defines Protean as resembling Proteus in having a varied nature or ability to assume different forms. Jack is Protean all right – comedic, serious, farcical, slapstick, philosophical, humanitarian and both reverent and irreverent academic (though heartfelt!), for starters.

Jack Grapes. Photo by Alexis Rhone Fancher

Breathless by the end of the conversation (me, not Jack), my pen still racing on its own accord, I have no idea what the notes are that I am writing anymore. In the same sentence Jack references Aristotle's "Ethics", Buster Keaton's camera shots, Marlon Brando's picking up a pair of gloves dropped by Eva Marie Saint, Shostakovich's 5th Symphony, Ludwig Wittgenstein whatever, Pinky Lee and Vincent Van Gogh. I ask Jack about his book on the history of "modern poetries", aptly titled *Etherized Upon a Table*, (a line taken from a poem by T. S. Eliot), a book I have been begging to read since I caught him carrying around a cut-and-paste in about 2006. He tells me that it will be more years of patience while he continues to edit the volumes, which are over fifteen hundred pages long, and counting. He's also finishing up a book titled *How to Read Like a Writer*, and a series of critical essays, *The Tender Agonies of Charles Bukowski*, which he says is one essay short from completion, not to mention his books, *Method Writing* and *Advanced Method Writing*, based on the curriculum he's used in his classes the last 30 years. And he's also working on a new book of poetry, *All the Sad Angels*.

"When do you sleep?" I ask.

"During class," he says with a laugh.

Afterwards I tell my college-bound son about the interview. He wishes he had been there and reminds me that Charles Bukowski, master poet of the mid-20th century, also Los Angeles-based,

had expressed a general dislike for other poets, but that Bukowski said about Jack, “The poems in your chapbook, *This Thing Upon Me*, are as good as anybody can write.”

The Naked Eye is an absolute must read, an experience, an exaltation of life and literature. Besides, who can really afford to pass up a transcendent poem about taking in the groceries and watering the front lawn from “The Man In Charge of Watering.”

In *Lucky Finds*, Jack writes:

“The past is so enormous, gathering shape, coiling its arms and tongue around the death of a careless future. That’s why you run so fast: to make pudding of this poem. To reach back and right the upturned salt shaker. To leave the cold kitchen alone and cheap with its voices. How many times can you make love do the work of a hundred deaths, in vomit, in rages, in rage, in sunlight, in bruise, in bloodsuck, in locked closets, in eye-patch. This is what they do not teach in school. This is what cannot be written.”

This may be so, but somehow Jack does it. Both *The Naked Eye* and *Poems So Far So Far So Good So Far To Go* are available on Amazon. You could do worse then spend a weekend with both these books.

Top image: Detail from the book’s cover art by DeLoss McGraw.

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