

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Sublime and Grotesque

Chiwan Choi · Wednesday, January 16th, 2013

It's 2:22AM on Sunday. I obviously can't sleep. After a full, rewarding, and draining Saturday, in which we had our greatest book release ever, here I am [writing on my cracked iPad](#), [Devotchka](#) through my earphones, this new installment of Literary Alchemy that is due on Monday and that you probably won't be reading until Wednesday. Hopefully by then, I will have slept. Hopefully by then, my excitement, the rush, will have settled.

Hopefully, the anger will have subsided too.

The Sublime

I am happy to report that this was as beautiful an event as I could ever hope to attend, let alone be a part of.

The house was packed for the release of *Eulogy to an Unknown Tree*. Not just packed, but packed with happy people. The great Jason Gutierrez was there shooting photos and video. While mingling with the crowd that were filling up the lobby area, I was struck by how much each and every person there expressed their love for Billy Burgos's work. It was obvious they'd all been waiting for this moment, as family, as friends, and as fans, for a long time. After about 45 minutes of people talking, greeting each other, buying books and enjoying the food and wine, we moved everyone inside and began the reading.

And wow, what a reading it was. Five of Billy's closest friends and favorite poets led off. Conney Williams, Venela Flagg, Jessica Ceballos, Melissa Alvarado, and Rebecca Gonzales each read one poem from *Eulogy*. It's the first time I'd experienced a reading like that and it made me emotional. The amount of love and respect going back and forth was palpable. And as Billy would admit later, it was an experience that allowed the poet to hear his own work for the first time.

Then Billy came up, struggling at times with overwhelming emotions but always clear and engaging. He read poems about his neighborhood, Leimert Park, and about his daughter and about his childhood and about his own identity. I fought back tears through the entire set, especially when he put down the printouts of his poems and cracked open his book and read from it.

When the reading was done, we went back out into the lobby and people bought more books and Billy sat and signed them as [Malik "The FreQ"](#) serenaded the crowd from the top of the steps with gorgeous music.



Book sales were great. Forty-five books to 80 people is fantastic, considering there were many families and groups and couples. Counting groups as one (since a couple will most likely will buy one book between them normally, same with a family), pretty much everybody bought a copy of the book. This is great. And because we had our Square credit card set up and running (except for the brief wi-fi hiccup), this is the most credit card payments we've ever received at an event. This is definitely going to be the norm and as an independent artist or small press, you have to get a [Square account](#) and make this option available for your audience.

The event was everything we'd hoped it would be. The book. The reading. The music. The crowd. The love. We got everything right and it should have been a perfect night. But it wasn't. And now I can't sleep.

The Grotesque

Judeth and I got there about an hour and a half early. When we walked in, we were greeted by the poet [Ellyn Maybe](#) who works at Beyond Baroque. She asked us to set the books up inside the store and told they'd take a 40% cut. The worst was another staff member, Carlye Archibeque, who tried to give us some BS talk about how this was a bargain, that there were no places that would give us such a good split. Um, no. The turnip truck? I have not fallen from it just now.

I'd spoken about this very thing with Billy in the morning and was assured that he and Richard Modiano hadn't made such an arrangement. I believe this was the case. I know Richard and respect him quite a bit, not just for his work with artists and writers but for his politics and worldview. So we told Ellyn we'd wait for him and figure it all out.

And when Richard came, he told us about the need to cover costs for staff being there and such, about \$90 or so. Between Richard, Ellyn, Carlye and myself, there were mentions of selling 20 copies of the book to the store at wholesale discount and a door fee and working out a split. But I said no to those options and offered to donate \$100 to Beyond Baroque no matter how few people came or how few books we sold. Richard gladly accepted, although once again, Carlye was mumbling something about wanting more money.

But apparently this wasn't enough for Beyond Baroque and Carlye. Once the lobby area was packed and it was closer to the start of the reading, Ellyn sat down *right next* to Judeth, who was selling Billy's books, with her own cash register. And from there she demanded everybody shell out \$7 to enter.

And guess what? Some people didn't have more cash. They had come only to rejoice with Billy on his special night, bringing enough money just to buy a book. In a few cases, when Judeth saw that there were people about to leave because they couldn't afford \$7 (or more if they were couples or families) and nobody was allowed to enter without paying, Judeth paid for them out of our own cash box.

Unfortunately, we didn't catch all. We got an email from someone who had to stand outside and listen because she couldn't afford either the book or entry. She just wanted to show her love for Billy and hear his work.

Let this image burn into your brain and try to remember what year and city we are in. At least this person stayed.

Because there were people who actually left without hearing the poetry that they'd come to hear because they couldn't pay the seven dollars.

At the end of the night, after much thought, I still handed over the \$100 to Richard because that's the word I'd given him and he'd tried to work with us every step of the way. And Beyond Baroque? They kept all the door on top of that. And sales from their bookstore. Doing quick math, considering there were about 80 people in attendance, even assuming only 60 people paid to get in,

Beyond Baroque made about \$400-\$500 off our event. Not only did they break the agreement that Billy and Richard had made initially, but the one we'd just made an hour earlier. They exploited a poet and his fans. The entity that profited most from 10 years of a poet's work was the venue that we used for 3 hours.

To cap it off, we watched the next group, the long running *Poetry in Motion* (hosted by Eve Brandstein, a board member), and watched the almost all white crowd walk in, and after the shakedown they put on our crowd, many of whom had driven from the inner-city that Billy has written about so beautifully and was reading about inside the performance space, this group was merely greeted with a donation box on the refreshments table (sandwich and veggies donated by us, by the way).

The only word in my head right now to describe it is: *grotesque*. And if I had two more: *fuck you*.

The Takeaway

+ Billy Burgos is one of the best poets writing right now. Not just in LA, but anywhere. He should be appreciated and his work needs to be recognized.

+ Writ Large Press has become damn good at putting on events, and really, nobody does book releases like we do. But we do have to learn to get *everything* down on paper, even if we're using the backyard of a rich uncle's house, so that we don't get hoodwinked like this.

+ More than ever, we have to get our own space so we don't have to deal with ridiculous shakedowns. This is Los Angeles. It's 2013. Writers and small presses don't need the approval of any establishment or the permission from dinosaurs.

+ Sadly, I'll never be stepping foot inside Beyond Baroque. I've been taking part in readings there, through Jack Grapes's workshop readings, for over 20 years. But on Saturday, they proved their irrelevance. If you're a bookstore or an arts center and you don't feel the need embrace and serve the community and its artists, you no longer have a purpose. Money and effort and energy is being wasted on you. You no longer deserve to stay open.

Well, that's the post-game wrap up of Saturday's event. Thanks to all of you who support our writers and our publishing work. I know many of you will disagree with my sentiments and have had wonderful experiences with both Beyond Baroque and the people who staff it. Let's have a dialogue about it. Peace.

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