

Ron Silliman describes *The New American Poetry 1945–1960*, edited by Donald Allen, as "unquestionably the most influential single anthology of the last century." Published in 1960, this anthology was the first to gather together the work of a new generation of 'anti-academic' poets who emerged after World War II. It was an alternative and departure from the predictable "official" poets, the academic poets, the establishment poets found in the respectable anthologies of the day, and included Black Mountain, San Francisco, Beat, and New York School poets. *The New American Poetry* helped identify and define a poetic trajectory that describes, more than any other poetic bible, where I came from and where I might be going as a poet. Though poetic groupings and lumpings usually include a signpost, meant especially for me, that says, "Stay Away. Thin Ice!", if I have to go to a literary party this is where I would probably end up.

But in 1968, The New American Poetry (NAP) meant nothing to me, I'd never heard of it, as I wandered through the lives of Keats, Shelly, Byron, and Blake in Mrs. Halperin's 11th grade English class in Miami Beach. "Beauty was Truth," I was sure of it, as I consumed, along with "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the popular music of my day.

The Beatles, Dylan, and blues & jazz collections I got my hands on from Uncle Miltie, a record distributor & friend of my father. I dug the Romantic "life-style", because it resonated with the 60's vision, but the poetry of the Romantics seemed like old stuff. The new stuff was pop music. Then one day Peter Schneider, a misfit friend from Miami Beach, where I was born and raised, played me recordings of *Howl* and *A Coney Island of the Mind*. Something changed. "Truth was still Beauty" but weirder. What were these strange languages and voices, songs without a band? What kind of poetry was this? The Beatles' *Sgt. Peppers* and Phil Ochs' *Crucifixion* were lyrically mysterious, but Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti were unintelligible. They obsessed me and belonged to me. In retrospect, *Howl* and *A Coney Island of the Mind* were probably more accessible than most of the pop songs I listened to, but maybe it was their "clarity" that was unintelligible. Their language was fresh and new and mysterious, and I embraced the mystery.

Poetry offered me possibilities. I could use it to sing my own song. A poet is what I wanted to be and I wanted to learn poetry from everyone. But mainly I looked to Bob Dylan for inspiration, his surreal flashes of imagery, "Desolation Road" and "I Want You" seemingly disconnected but emotional and inspiring. Living in Miami Beach, I was late to the game, but I made it to San Francisco before high school graduation, and stepped into the "Wild Kingdom" after having only seen pictures of it on the TV. I witnessed the flowering of the counter-culture, walked among beatniks and hippies, saw Allen Ginsberg playing harmonium with a rock band! I had finally transgressed, made my pilgrimage to City Lights Bookstore, and found "The Wild Kingdom" real and alive. And I was a part of it, appropriately middle-class, alienated, and wanting nothing more than to be a poet. I was under the spell of Ginsberg, Dylan, Ferlinghetti but there were no specific signs, billboards that said: The New American Poetry this way. All I knew was that there was "Real Poetry" or should I say "Official Poetry," and this other thing, dumb drop-out hippies and beatniks were writing, that I identified with the most.

Then, in college I found out at a poetry workshop with Howard Nemerov that I was not a poet at all, and that I would never be one. According to Nemerov, I had the entirely wrong idea, heroes, subjects, politics, god knows what. But I didn't give up. I began digging deeper into the meaning of language, reading "esoteric" writings like *The Hobbit*, *The Little Prince* and *Technicians of*

the Sacred. It became obvious from my readings that there had to be some kind of connect between how I approached poetry and how I lived my life. I was on a path. In came Forest Reed, a great English teacher at UNC-Chapel Hill, and he gave me some hints on how poetry was possible. He was a Pound scholar who was in love with poetry. Every day he took on the personality of the poet he taught, Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Robert Lowell, Frost, and Williams, mostly samplings of *The Norton Anthology*, but all the while Reed hinted at the infinite possibilities of poetry, the experiment of poetry, *The New American Poetry Anthology* and beyond. I really had no idea that there were camps, schools, armies that divided writers, institutions that trained armies, literary canons that exploded when you crossed from one boundary to another. I learned from all the poets I was reading. I did understand poetic encampments. For me, poetry was a diversity of voices exclusive of gangs. Of course, I had my favorites they gave me the biggest highs. The New American Poets were most of them. But still there was room for Plath's "Tulips," Stevens' "Blackbirds" and Frost's "Birches." And Chinese poets like Tu Fu and Rexroth's translations. And Rexroth! But I didn't see the NAP signs that would have let me know that a literary revolution was taking place. I was too naïve and wide-eyed to have understood the divisions. I didn't want to believe. Poetry for me was an ideal not a machine.

Now, the poetry I liked was one thing, what I could write was another. I couldn't write a "whole anything," just fragments, which started to bother me, lock me up, since it seemed there would have to be some kind of "whole thing," like "Birches" and "Tulips," that I could write that would end up in Norton's Anthology. Then Ed Dorn and Robert Creeley came to UNC-Chapel Hill, read their poetry, and talked about Black Mountain College, and a new poetics I never heard of, and hardly understood. But a bootleg copy of *Gunslinger* was circulating and it blew my mind. It was narrative but not confessional, with language that jumped off the page. I signed up for a 1-on-1 with Ed Dorn & told him I couldn't write a poem, that all I could write were fragments. And he said, "What's wrong with fragments?" So I began to work with fragments, and learned how fragments in juxtaposition tell stories, or could exist on their own, like William's "Wheelbarrow" or Whalen's "The dog writes on the window with his nose." I didn't have to lead the reader with elaborate exposition. I just had to take it down, and somehow it might add up. But still no signs of NAP. I did find a copy of Philip Whalen's *Like I Say* in a used bookstore, which I tried to read, but couldn't understand.

Eventually, I moved to Pacifica, CA, where I started Shelldance Bromeliad Nursery. I wrote and read, and met Margo Patterson Doss, who wrote about Shelldance in her "Bay Area at Your Feet" column. Margo lived in Bolinas and knew poets, hosted Olson and Whalen in her home. She introduced me to Joanne Kyger. I read Joanne's *The Japan & India Journals*. She asked if I ever read Donald Allen's anthology. Talked about breath, space, projective verse, Charles Olson, and reinforced my understanding of the movement of thoughts in the mind, how I could speed them up or slow them down, or as she said, "If I was really lucky, have no thoughts at all." That's when I finally got an idea about NAP. Joanne helped expand my ideas about the journal, urged me on to writing lots of journals. And she encouraged my involvement with ecology and activism on the Pacific coast. She supported the idea that community and how one lived in the world mattered. This all seemed right, bromeliads and activism and poetry. I thought, isn't that what the poetry and poets I liked were about?

Then Michael McClure came to the nursery.

He heard from ornithologist, Luis Baptista, about the bromeliads on the hill. We became friends, hiked the hills around the nursery, spoke about art, political activism, and poetry. I learned from both Joanne and Michael, and from their friends, at lunch, through gossip, that there was a lineage, a NAP, bigger than the Beats, Black Mountain, Objectivists, any generation of New York School, more inclusive and expansive than San Francisco or Berkeley Renaissance. There was an all-of-it-world-of-poetry, disparate, desperate, and diaphanous voices, all rolled up into one, diverse and inclusive realm. That was my milieu.

And Joanne introduced me to Philip Whalen, who explained that there is more than NAP, more than an Anthology, a defined poetics to look back upon, more than a named, dead and dusty verse, but all that we were doing and saying, creating and celebrating was a small “part of the huge stream of evolving language.” Then at New College, as a “returning student,” David Meltzer taught me more about the poetics of NAP, erotica, pop music, jazz, the mystery of language, signifiers, tradition and the Hermetic. And Joanne, all the time curious about what I was learning from David, telling me to “Date my journals,” and asking, “Are you writing?” Then I became Philip Whalen’s editor. And as an editor, I learned how to read Philip. He taught me to not be so serious. Not to take myself so seriously. He helped me develop my capacity for caring, and accept that Idealism was only an Ideal but that it was okay too.

Finally there was Naropa, the summer sessions I attended over the years, which drove home more of NAP, where William Burroughs brought Joyce to Punk and Comic Book to Political Exorcism; Amiri Baraka taught race and jazz; Anne Waldman rejoiced, obsessive and elegant, breath sweeping and tenacious; and Allen, Allen, showed me line, verse, line, and shared his dream of meeting Ma Rainey; writers from all over, who taught, learned, and heard the same possibility of meaning in poetry, recognized a freedom, the inside and outside as one consciousness, dharma, karma and practice, serious, playful, and rooted, always meaning something but never too much to atrophy. Naropa became a spiritual home for NAP, for me for a while, more than just a bastion of Beatitude.

And my poetry friends were part of that home, walking, living, breathing embodiments of NAP, my sangha, a home for my experiment with myself, my consciousness, a place to gossip and share the story of a vast agreeable and sometimes disagreeable tribe. I learned that poetry was more than a product, a religion, a god, a piece of nothingness, the quotidian, a fragment, that there was no Beat Thing or NAP really, and the closer I lived in my breath, and looked and learned, in my breath, and space, there was only practice, lots of practice, a life time of it, an art that would never be resolved, the beauty and horror of that unresolvedness, impermanence and poetry, experience, “a continuous nerve movie.” Finally, it is too much to say, what was or is my experience of NAP. The signs are never so clear, and I’m still learning.