

later in this column.)

These four booklets, all handmade and published by Garni himself, continue the obsessively Marx Brothers madcap conversations Garni likes to hold with himself — and thus with our own little internal parentheses. As Garni states in the introduction to *fred*: “the moon attacks us all individually and collectively, sort of like an army does. that’s what I love about it: I can whisper things to it, and some hear, some don’t, but the body keeps going towards me, collectively, and yet, would it be a paradox to say, individually? I think it would. somehow, though, the whole body hears. maybe they all hear a little bit, or maybe together they hear it all.” Paradox, fable, fun, and salt on the tongue, all flavor Garni’s tales.

I suspect Ricky Garni is just too brilliant by far. He’s writing at a higher pitch than most can hear. Maybe dogs can hear it. *fred* begins like this: “hi fred. would you like to / walk a little while with me? // there were eggshells on the grass /// sure, said fred. did you happen to see those / eggshells? /// that I did, I said, but I am tired. women / are tired. you, fred, are tired. /// are you saying that you don’t want to walk / said fred. /// au contraire, I said, but have you / ever seen such vibrant colors?” This kind of Dadaist deconstruction of language makes for many dream-like moments. Is this a nightmare you say? Or will this turn out pleasantly? *fred* searches for his place, regains and loses it over and over again, and remembers, once asking the narrator, “do you remember back in the old days, where / we used to sleep // of course! we slept in the trees. I said. / yes! we did, and nothing ever bothered us, except, occasionally, other trees.” Every now and then they would descend and “watch *la dolce vita* on the television.” Garni always keeps you guessing. Even at the end. As in *fred*. Which closes with: “fred shut up.”

Cloud Writing, dedicated to Garni’s youngest son, tells of Garni’s visits to his son’s crib — whispering such things as “tomorrow the garbage men will come” into Dashiell’s sleep-filled ears, or laying a sprig of wild jasmine on his pillow. This off-the-wall yet affectionate lullaby story’s seventeen sentences carry immeasurable transitory grief and elated love. *El Hombre* masks itself as the outline of a story, each chapter presenting the linear facts so as to tell us the story. The heroes of the tale seek and catch fleeting glimpses of *el hombre*. One gathers finally, an understanding, that the heroes are tourists in Seville and the surrounding countryside and “hath given steadfast chase amid the cypress & pomegranates of granada.” *El hombre* remains at large.

Garni tells us *Wardrobe* “is a tour of my clothes. I own very few items of clothing and so they are all very important to me and they are all very worn out except of course for the . . .” Thus begins a charming evening’s entertainment meeting Garni’s shoes, leather jacket,

hat, sneakers, scarf, etc. But this misleads. For as always, Garni teases us to reveal. For example, “The Button” states simply: “A BUTTON IS / AN UNHOLY / THING.” Or “The Cape”: IF YOU WALK TO THE VESTIBULE AND SPY A MAPLE LEAF. AND SMELL LENTILS AND SAUSAGE COOKING NEARBY. AND NOTICE A PLUME OF BLUE SMOKE RISING FROM THE CHIMNEYS. AND HEAR THE SOUND OF DISTANT CHIHUAHUAS. AND WATCH A LITTLE GIRL ON A SWING AND WALK INSIDE AS YOU CONTINUE TO THINK ABOUT THE MAPLE LEAF. THE SMOKE RISING FROM THE CHIMNEYS AND THE DISTANT SOUND OF THE FARAWAY CHIHUAHUAS, THEN YOU ARE DEFINITELY NOT . . . WEARING A CAPE.”

I hope somehow I’ve been able to express the subtle and comic abilities of Garni as a poet. The poems just can be paraphrased — a sign of a real poem. I treasure my Garni books as among my most precious possessions. Garni’s poems are wise, wisecracking, wry, wiggly, whimsical, restless, potent, and poignant. Kenneth Rexroth once told Jonathan Williams “Be careful, honey! Always wear a raincoat when you go up a dirt road.” when Williams wanted to go after something that seemed unobtainable. Garni’s poetry is like that. Wear a raincoat. Do an Internet search for “Garni” and you’ll find other poems scattered in online journals.

* * *

Particularities.

Kevin Bezner.

Volcanic Ash Books, 2000.

58 pages. \$10.00 (paperback).

Particularities is a sad and wholesome book — sad for it recounts the griefs and sorrows of a life of want, abuse, and insecurity — wholesome because Kevin Bezner, in looking back at his life in the 1950s to the middle 1990s, observes and records his imminent mortality with an intensely emotional yet concentrated distance. This long poem skirts the boundaries of confessional poetry to make, instead, an objectified truth reminiscent of the best of William Carlos Williams’s later poems, or a similar project James Laughlin was working on when he died.

Bezner offers autobiography unlike the self-referential work the MFA crowd produces. Work of elegant yet sturdy exploration, an almost scientific discernment of self and origins, and a natural and mostly unadorned language that sings with a beauty married to its open form, it flows water-like down the page, occasionally hitting boulders of prose text, and then running on.

Recounting his impoverished beginnings in which he guiltily admired those better off than he, describing the physical abuse which confirmed his worthlessness and

the subtle ease with which he welcomed abuse into his relationship vocabulary, while conveying the sadness and melancholy which resulted, Bezner discovered through literature a way to a new self. His story mirrors my own which is one reason *Particularities* moved me so, but I think Bezner has captured a right sense of place and time, and succeeds in communicating complicated, debilitating, and eventually rewarding self-examination, into a coming-of-age wisdom with which any reader can identify.

Despite its uncovered rage, *Particularities* is a beautiful and lasting work. Bezner lives wholly in its pages and one can anticipate forthcoming books with pleasure. He can mend your heart as quickly as he can break it. This book should be required reading for alienated youth. Psychologists, priests, and parents should read it too. It should be written in stone within an oak grove.

Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English.

Agha Shahid Ali, editor.
University Press of New England,
Wesleyan Poetry Series, 2000.
196 pages. \$14.95 (paperback)

Having written ghazals (pronounced "ghuzzle") myself I was immediately drawn to this anthology of English language poems in this ancient Arabic form. Formed of couplets that have no apparent thematic connection, a ghazal builds an eerie aroma of meaning from its "ravishing disunity." Original ghazals remain "melancholic and amorous." The opening couplet sets up the rhyme scheme which must follow at the end of each couplet's second line. Traditionally, the poet closes the final couplet by invoking his or her own name. Poets of note such as Heather McHugh, John Hollander, W.S. Merwin, Forrest Gander, Stanley Plumly, J.D. McClatchy, and Maxine Kumin give their voices to this work of 107 poets. Mr. Ali offers an animated discussion of the history of the ghazal, and a polemic against the less strict ghazals (like my own) which resulted from the 1971 *Ghazals of Ghazalib* (edited by Aijaz Ahmad) which versions allowed much more freedom from the strict traditional form. Mr. Ali claims not to be too rabid about exorcising less resolute ghazals from the canon, but his words are pretty strong. It seems, however, he mainly wants to strike a balance — and articulates an excitement about the freedom in structure which the form allows — while celebrating the form's pure capacity for amusement.

This anthology eschews any but the most formally strict ghazals, and it is a pleasure to discern a wild abandonment hidden within the poems. The ghazal allows for any subject although it seems many of the poets here

avoid the melancholic and amorous for a more jocular approach. This seems to me the real danger. Such a strict form lends itself easily to caricature in American hands — which would be a worse fate than poems that might somehow break the form. I admit I haven't read the whole anthology yet, but I'm eager to dip into it regularly to see what treasures may hide therein. *Ravishing DisUnities* can only serve to add another tool to the poet's toolbox, one which, I know, we Americans will find ways not only of honoring to the rule of law, but also to its spirit.

Blackbird Dust.

Jonathan Williams.
Turtle Point Press, 2000.
243 pages. \$16.95 (paperback).

No one writes like Jonathan Williams, and why should they? The world would be a frightening place with more than one huffed word-conjurer to upset our appercart of conventions and pretensions. His words are conjugal — marrying sense and nonsense, brightness and dismay, wisdom and foolhardiness with ease and splendor. His essays, poems, and photographs (of which examples of all appear herein) chisel and sizzle. They hide the sun only to reveal the harvest moon. Whereas most critics entreat us to welcome those they champion into the quiet fold of the accepted, Williams, as always, encourages his readers to pay attention to the deliberately wayward, or the chronically offbeat. This is a good thing for he ferrets out gold from seemingly humdrum bad art allowing us to see the work of experimenters and discoverers on Art's ripe edge — where interesting things happen and can be buried by the more copious dross.

The essays in *Blackbird Dust*, a companion volume to *The Magpie's Bagpipe* published in 1982 by North Point Press, are perhaps less substantial, more ephemeral, than those of the previous collection, but they are no less artful. Williams, himself, works in the same alien landscapes he defends, oftentimes misunderstood because of his determination not to be corralled into any school, camp, academy or posture. He eschews traditional academic aesthetics in both poetry and prose, opting for a prose that is friendly, eccentric and yet always beautiful. His most recent poems, frequently bawdy and always satiric range from works as disturbingly anti-status quo as:

at the senate hearing
senator thurmond then asked
well judge thomas just
how big is it
well said judge thomas