

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 Ghali* (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

about the size of
two beer cans so
then the senator asked
well clarence is that
eight ounces or twelve
ounces the american people
need to know facts
they are so deprived
not depraved just deprived

to elegies of mystical proportions in grains of sand:

then i turned

and flew
down the dale

in the late
sunset light

the air
was full

of blackbird dust

One seems as depraved as its subject, the other as spiritually charged as it is frightening. The truth is Williams despises depravity and embraces moral amplitude, an Emersonian stance with the Zen sight of all-in-one — reminding us as Shelley once stated: “Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted” or Teilhard de Chardin’s “Whatever happens is to be adored.” Williams adores human frailty and eccentricity — for it reveals us as we are — raging against a universe aiming to disintegrate and yet desiring to become.

Williams offers a rich coffer of judgements and celebrations of American and British late-twentieth century artists. Among the essays subjects are outsiders such as Ernest Mickler (author of *White Trash Cooking*); visionary poets Alfred Starr Hamilton, James Broughton, and Ronald Johnson; outsider artists James Harold Jennings, “cartoonist” Bill Anthony, and poet Spike Hawkins; photographers Clarence John Laughlin, Ray Moore, Harry Callahan, and Art Sinsabaugh; modernists geniuses Basil Bunting, James Laughlin, Robert Duncan, Kenneth Patchen, Joel Oppenheimer, and Lorine Niedecker; a little mini-survey of his favorite overlooked books called “The Moon Pool and Others” in the style of Henry Miller’s *Books in My Life* or Pound’s *ABC’s of Reading*; poems in Williams’s “new” form the meta-four (the only rule each line must have four words); contemporary visual artists James McGarrell and Ian Gardner; a wildly funny yet fact-filled self-interview; photographs of Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, mountain roadside graffiti, Kenneth Patchen, Carl Ruggles and others; and irate letters to the *New York Times Book Review* and the (London) *Spectator*.

Williams never fails to entertain while instructing. Once called by critic Hugh Kenner “The Custodian of Snowflakes” Williams continues to find the “high” hidden in the “low.” Testimony to his brilliance, wit, and ability to appreciate is this from a memorial to a Highlands friend Virginia Randall Wilcox (known as “Ted” to her friends): “Even a few weeks ago, with hardly any voice left and sadly confined to a wheelchair, Ted looked exactly like Queen Elizabeth the First of England, ready to read the riot act at one and all: NO FOOLISHNESS! Get on with the business of leading your life. George Bernard Shaw defined a lady or a gentleman as someone who treated everyone the same. I’ve known miles of snobs and people convinced they are better than you and me, but I have met few ladies and gentlemen. Ted was one of the first.” Only a mind such as Williams could follow this tender loving essay with one about Patchen which saunters by Robert Mitchum, Allen Ginsberg, James Dickey, Dean Koontz, John Grisham, Danielle Steele, Camus, and Babe Ruth while praising Patchen’s ability for “Severity, gravity, and wistful sadness.”

If you read one book this year and want to EXPAND your consciousness and sensibility, this is the book. Buy it.

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evaporate again
C. A. Conrad.
Mooncalf Press, 2000.
22 pages. \$5.00 (paperback).

C.A. Conrad joins Garni, Hamilton, and Edson as master practitioners of the self-ennobling fable, but with a mystical sensual-body feel honed from a Queer sensibility. These seventeen minimalist poems pack a big punch:

I introduce the new hair
on my leg
to the rest of itself

we’re so much
water we’re clouds
when we die

evaporate again elegizes a loved one gone. It curses the cruelty of death and the finality of grief:

you said
hold your
hand out for my
weight tonight for what
falls from me

my hand cupped could