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GRAND VALLEY AND THE NATIONAL POETRY FESTIVAL

by Judith Minty

I have slept there with long
extended metaphors, caressed the body of syntax,
kissed simile's ear. Appetites
move with a rhythm like tides. They are
seldom satisfied. We eat, knowing we will be hungry again.

The valley fills the cup of the hand
with its gorges and meadows, its reservoirs
named after lakes. Fish swim there
almost free, tethered by invisible silver cords. They roll
in the river, fold their gills back with the current.

I have traveled to other cities
to fondle their books, proposition their young verbs.
But desire dies for weak nouns, for prepositions
that fall limp into voids. We learn
to beware of guards who station themselves near the walls.

It is back to that valley we trudge
when we feel ourselves thinning. Only there
can we dance in the fire, chew raw meat,
distill water from Indian lakes. There, baying at the moon,
we can suck eyes from all the little fish heads.

("Grand Valley," from *In the Presence of Mothers*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981)

I wrote the poem "Grand Valley" in the mid-1970s, after one of the three summer poetry festivals that took place on the Grand Valley campus. The poem is not literally about Grand Valley or about me, although I had been a student at Thomas Jefferson College, one of the cluster colleges at Grand Valley, and subsequently had taught for a few years at both Thomas Jefferson College and the College of Arts and Sciences.

It seems to be about an awakening, not only of the speaker of the poem but of the place itself. Perhaps it is even about an awakening of an era in American poetry. There seems to be a wildness to it, as if the poem and the speaker had been energized from within—and how could that not be true? For there was such an abundance of creative energy circulating during those poetry festivals that even the

corn fields surrounding Allendale, Michigan, must have been sizzling.

The bizarre and wonderful idea of creating a National Poetry Festival in the middle of Midwestern farmland was conceived by Robert Vas Dias, with whom I had studied in 1971-72. Robert had come from New York City to teach at Grand Valley's innovative Thomas Jefferson College, one of the few state-supported experimental colleges in the country. Not only was Robert a good poet and learned teacher, he was a true impresario. He'd recently edited a poetry anthology titled *Inside Outer Space: New Poems of the Space Age*, so was in contact with many of the avant-garde writers in this country, several of whom had been incorporating performance work into their readings long before that sort of thing mainstreamed into our culture. He'd also directed a poetry reading series in New York and run a writers' workshop for several years in Aspen, Colorado. It wasn't long before Robert was arranging regular campus "Happenings," events which were full of joyful celebration and ritual and which included multi-disciplinary combinations of such arts as painting, dance, poetry, and music. Food preparation and, of course, the eating of it, was always a part of these Happenings. I remember one Spring event that the rain would eventually wash away: it included sidewalks painted with pastels, costumes, singing and dancing, poetry readings, and trees decorated with hand-printed poems on rice paper. Out of these events arose a strong sense of community, particularly among those of us who were part of the TJC experience.

The first National Poetry Festival occurred in the summer of 1971. It was a nearly spontaneous Happening, much like those celebrations on campus during the school year, and the list of famous poets who'd been invited was breathtaking. It was to be Paul Blackburn's last public appearance, and his admirers had gathered to honor him. The famous and controversial Ted Berrigan was there, as were California poets Gregory Corso, Jackson MacLow and Diane Wakoski, who understood the oral tradition of poetry, and practiced it. African-American poet and fiction writer Al Young, and poet Sonia Sanchez were there; so were Tom Weatherly and David Henderson. John Logan and Robert Creeley had come in from the East Coast. Donald Hall and Robert Bly were there too. Michigan poets Jim Harrison and Dan Gerber, who published the influential *Sumac* magazine in the '60s and '70s, were there to talk about publishing and to read their own poems. Armand Schwerner read from his new language book *The Tablets*, and Philip Whalen, a practicing Buddhist monk, read his poems. Jerome Rothenberg, who'd recently published *Technicians of the Sacred*, an anthology of ritual and tribal poetry through the ages, urged festival participants to open the way to ritual in their own lives and work.

In the spirit of TJC, the event was conceived as a "festival of poetry, poets, and students of poetry . . . not as a spectator-oriented, performance situation, at which an 'audience' sits passively at 'lectures' and 'seminars,' but as a place and a circumstance in which for ten days, the human, esthetic, and practical resources [would] be available for a sustained experience of the art of poetry and engagement with the artistic personality." It was an extraordinary ten-day affair. Here was a gathering of poets who valued each other's work, who were forming the poetry of the future, who were discussing with enthusiasm their art and its possibilities. Here were

poets who were actually performing and chanting poetry. Dancing it even.

The second National Poetry Festival, operating under the same generous premise as the first, took place in 1973. In the intervening year since its inception, the festival had achieved a national reputation. The literary world had heard of Allendale, Michigan; literary magazines were abuzz with it, and the invited poets were eager to gather together, to have meaningful dialogue with each other.

On June 14th, another notable cast of performers arrived for ten days of "poeting," as Etheridge Knight would call it. Those invited included Diane di Prima, Robert Duncan of the famed Black Mountain School, Allen Ginsberg, David Meltzer, and the charismatic Kenneth Rexroth—all from the West Coast. Although the nightly readings and the daily workshops and exchanges were remarkably rich and rewarding, an impromptu Midsummer Night celebration—complete with bonfire and singing, dancing and chanting, and revelry until nearly dawn—was also memorable.

Ed Dorn, whose famous long mythopoem "Gunslinger" had recently been published, was there, as was Ted Enslin, who'd come down from Maine. Dorn, I remember, offered a late night performance of "Gunslinger" in its entirety toward the end of the festival. That reading, attended by about thirty die-hard enthusiasts, lasted until 5 a.m. George Economou and his wife, the New York poet and playwright Rochelle Owens, were also in attendance. I was impressed that Rochelle refused to eat for the entire day before her reading. I was also astonished when she announced that her mother believed that George wrote all of her poems for her.

But if these writers weren't enough of a list of talent to converge on Grand Valley that summer, the Objectivist poets—George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, and Charles Reznikoff—all well past middle-age by then, were also in residence for the entire ten days. Louis Zukofsky had already died, and this was the first time that the remaining three had ever been together; they considered it an historical meeting. Oppen and Rakosi came with their wives—Reznikoff was a bachelor—and they all stayed in the college's dormitory with the rest of us, sleeping in their bunk beds and sharing the communal bathroom.

About 100 registered participants were in attendance for the length of the festival, but the nightly readings often drew audiences of 400. Everyone was aware of participating in a major moment in American poetry. The digressive talks by Robert Duncan about form were brilliant. Ginsberg, who'd arrived at Grand Valley with his leg in a cast, still managed to delight his entourage of devotees with afternoon blues improvisations. Di Prima offered meditation sessions and spoke about women and creativity. Enslin, who was working on "Ranger" then, spoke of the long poem and its function. Meltzer had just finished anthologizing a two-volume collection of texts from the Jewish mystical tradition, and he and Ginsberg engaged in long ongoing dialogues about the Kabbala and the hidden wisdom found therein. Economou conducted translation workshops and Rexroth held forth on the art of translating the work of Chinese and Japanese poets. Rakosi, a clinical psychologist for most of his life, delved into the psychology of the poet. Poets all, we were in awe, I think, to be in each other's company. I remember that Charles Reznikoff, 79 years old and an esteemed poet himself, announced, after having attended Robert Duncan's lecture

on form, "I have touched genius in the form of Robert Duncan."

July 9-19th were the dates of the 1975 National Poetry Festival, and although we didn't see it as an omen then, it would prove to be even more dynamic than its predecessors—like the finale at a Fourth of July fireworks. Robert Vas Dias had moved to England, so volunteers and students were running the festival, which was sponsored by Grand Valley State Colleges and the Michigan Council for the Arts. Information on the poster touted Readings, Workshops, Discussions, Poetry Events, Exhibitions, Film, Music, Dance—And Theater. "For ten days," the red and black poster promised, "the human esthetic and practical resources are available for a sustained experience of the art of poetry and engagement with the artistic personality."

For a fee of \$50, none of the 200 registrants was disappointed. More than twenty-five poets of national and international reputation participated. Among the culturally diverse group were Asian-American writers Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, Lawson Inada, Alex Kuo, Shawn Wong, and Jessica Hagedorn, who, it was hoped, would perform with her West Coast Gangster Choir.

African-American poets Etheridge Knight and Nikki Giovanni, and novelist Ishmael Reed were invited. Jim Welch, the Blackfeet poet and novelist, drove in from Montana. Laguna Pueblo writer, Leslie Silko, arrived from Arizona. Other Native American poets included Simon Ortiz, Carroll Arnett and Howard Norman.

Diane Wakoski was there, as well as Carol Bergé and Kathleen Fraser. William Heyen, co-founder of the Brockport (NY) Writers' Forum, was there. Ira Sadoff came from Ohio. Several Michigan poets joined the reading roster. Charles Simic, who just last year received the Pulitzer, also came. And like cream on top of the coffee, Robert Creeley was there. As were Robert Bly, Galway Kinnell, and James Wright. Word of the festival had spread, almost by underground. Students and participants converged on the Grand Valley campus from all over the country. Some hitchhiked or came by bus; some rode motorcycles—a man named Stanley came all the way from San Francisco on his; others drove cars or arrived by plane into Grand Rapids.

The offerings of daily discussion groups, panel discussions, seminars, and workshops was impressive. Readings and performances went on every night; films, music, and dance "happened." Robert Bly played his zither and sang. With so many egos and so much creative talent gathered in one place, sparks sometimes flew. There were often shouting matches about poetry, about art, about politics and ethnic differences, about publishing. Carol Bergé stormed out of Bill Heyen's reading of *Swastica Poems* because she misunderstood and thought he was pro-Nazi. Robert Creeley mumbled through his entire reading and only the sound man wearing a headset heard him and wept. People fell in love and strolled the campus hand in hand. One of the most famous poets ravaged the dormitory soft drink machine after it stole a handful of his quarters. Clearly, it was reported, trolls guarded the bridge at the ravine, but that didn't stop someone from stealing Robert Bly's bookbag. A psychic was called; she "saw" the bookbag at the bottom of the ravine, but it wasn't found. Later, Robert told me that he'd never managed to reconstruct all of the work from those lost notebooks.

The '70s were the Golden Days of poetry at Grand Valley, and we all thought they would go on forever, but hopes for a fourth National Poetry Festival in 1977 were crushed when the National Endowment for the Arts withdrew its preliminary approval for funding. They were the Golden Days for TJC as well, but the college was unable to bear the festival's expenses alone. The disappointed students disbanded and eventually formed The Third Coast Poetry Center, first at Thomas Jefferson College, then in Grand Rapids. Out of this group emerged the Michigan Poetry Festival, a more or less annual event which focussed on Michigan poets and poetry and which lasted for several years.

Those of us who attended a National Poetry Festival will never forget its impact on us. Seldom have so many poets gathered in one place at one time to share their passions, their work, and their ideas about poetry. The poets who participated in the National Poetry Festivals represented what was happening in American poetry at that time. They were the ones who were extending the language and experimenting with form, who had rejected the safe and expected ways of making poetry, the ones who were proving to all of us that a rich and diverse literature can still be created in this country.

Twenty years later, many of us continue to carry that message. We continue to write, continue to explore the boundaries of our art form. Some of us have entered universities and now teach the work of the poets we came to love and admire two decades ago, and we understand the importance of introducing work of those who have followed in their footsteps. At least a dozen of us have written about the National Poetry Festival, either in poems—as Carl Rakosi has, for example—or in essays. When any of us meet, in different parts of the country, the subject of the National Poetry Festivals often is brought up as common ground, always with a sense of pleasure. Dick Bakken, a participant in the 1975 festival, now directs the annual Bisbee (Arizona) Poetry Festival. Joyce Jenkins, a TJC graduate and also a participant in the festivals, now publishes the popular *Poetry Flash* in Berkeley, California, and is one of the most influential people in the Bay Area poetry world. None of us who were there will forget those happenings, or the nourishment we received from them. Even then, we knew we were participating in a unique moment in the history of American literature.