

The Wor(l)d of New York:

The New York City Epic Poem

The most underused of New York City's natural resources is its poets. They're everywhere! with their language jolts and their seeming inutility, their arcane zines and Tiny Town turf wars. Not to mention, slams!

In the most recent Directory of American Poets and Fiction Writers, New York City is the only municipality that is granted its own Chapter, so you have fifty states, one city, and nine pages of expats in thirty countries. Not only is New York the *only* city, but it has more listings by far than that of any state: 88 pages for New York City, 62 pages for California, 42 pages for New York State, and, in case you were wondering, 12 pages for New Jersey.

And once they get here, these poets make good use of their surroundings. Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Hart Crane's "The Bridge," Sara Teasdale gets "Gramercy Park," Marianne Moore just took "New York." And even though it was named in jest, we do have our very own "New York School of Poetry," with Frank O'Hara as crown prince typing his *Lunch Poems* on one of the typewriters on pedestals in front of the Olivetti Building, circa 1960. (Other members: James Schuyler, Kenneth Koch, Barbara Guest, John Ashbery.)

The Harlem Renaissance preceded the San Francisco Renaissance by a couple of decades: Melvin Tolson's *Harlem Gallery* is a forgotten classic, Zora Neale Hurston, so cool that she coined the word "cool," and of course Langston Hughes: "Harlem/Knows a song/Without a tune —/The rhythm's there:/But the melody's/Bare." Ginsberg's "Howl" id's Tuli Kupferburg of the Fugs and his fabled tumble off the Brooklyn Bridge. ee cummings imagined the scrap steel of the old Third Avenue El being sold to the Japanese — only to be returned to these shores in the bodies of the soldiers who died "over there."

And as unrepentantly individualistic and anarchic as poets' reputations are, New York City has somehow managed to corral them into a passel of poetry organizations, from the venerable Unterberg Center at the 92nd Street Y, site of the longest continuous reading series in the U.S., and the Academy of American Poets with its sensational website, to the OUR Series (Our Unorganized Reading Series) at ABC NO Rio, where the first person to get to the microphone reads. PEN International is headquartered here, with its mission of helping writers to emerge from the prisons of censorship. Poets and Writers is the largest service organization for writers in the world, Teachers & Writers places more poets in the schools than any other organization. The Poetry Society of America provides the Poetry in Motion subway poems, Poets House is readying a move to a gorgeous new home near the World Financial Center for its huge poetry library, the St. Marks Poetry Project is celebrating its fortieth birthday as the connector of Beat/New York School and

other outrigger traditions, the Nuyorican Poets Café continues as the home of spoken word and Slam, and the Bowery Poetry Club is the world's first seven-day a week poetry venture — these are just some of the resources that poetry has in our town.

And now, it's Payback Time!

So much has come from

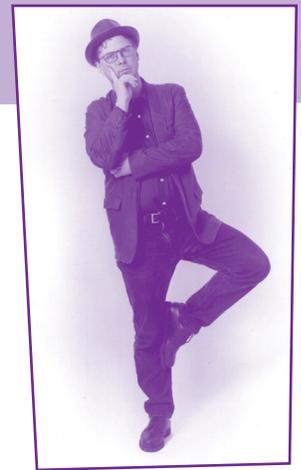
NYC to poetry — 'tis time to return in kind. So this year, the People's Poetry Gathering initiates The Wor(l)d of New York: The New York City Epic Poem, an infinite (re)creation of our Fair (and sometimes Unfair) City. In words. They say you can never eat at all the restaurants in New York — by the time you've finished the list, there's a whole new list. This is true too with our epic, acknowledging NYC's trick of constant reinvention, which is why the project has taken on the following dicta:

- First, it's ongoing. Like the City itself this poem will never be finished. It can be expanded, added to, built in many a medium — modular, form-shifting, and open.
- Second, it moves over and through the infinite time space continuum that is New York, for, as Whitman noted parenthetically in "City of Ships": (for all races are here;/ All the lands of the earth make contributions here). New York gathers all cultures here, so it is a wor(l)d , a world in a word.
- Third, the Peoples Poetry Gathering will allow for anyone to participate — scrolls and notebooks and pens and pencils are available for everyone to unleash their inner poet and become part of this living poem.
- Fourth, to use the phrase "I am..." so that your section of the epic personifies that element of New York.
- Bob Holman is hereby appointed the current gardener of the poem. It is his job to prune and order. After all, he came up with the idea, along with Steve Zeitlin, so shouldn't he do the work and receive the renowned wrath of the poets?

Here we go, uniting writers in the poetic task of creating the City in words, and acknowledging the stupendous service organizations who help bridge poetry and world. Is that the best we can do with our extraordinary natural resource of poets?

No!

Never underestimate the power of a poem! While it is true that "Poetry makes nothing happen," as Auden, who lived on St. Marks Place ("I sit in one of the dives/ On Fifty-Second Street/Uncertain and afraid/As the clever hopes expire/ Of a low dishonest decade"), wrote, we propose that mak-



Bob Holman

ing Nothing “happen” is more difficult than just rolling up the shirtsleeves, and allowing Something to happen! And thus we urge the Department of Cultural Affairs, the Mayor of New York, the City Council, the Board of Education, in fact, ALL NEW YORKERS, to help us envision a City where we put the Poets to Work. A WPA for Poets! (And if you don't know from the WPA, Google it.)

Imagine a City where all poets who wish to are put to work leading workshops and passing on the empowering idea that speaking/writing for yourself is what creates an active, responsible citizenry. Imagine a City where words are spawned over each new building and civil event, where we can see our City through the eyes of the great wordsmiths, and feel literature as part of our dailiness.

Imagine New York with not just a Poet laureate for each borough, but Poets laureate attached to the Police Force, the Fire Department, the Sanitation Department. We urge the creation of an army of poets! Well, somehow army sounds a bit strident. How about we call it a UTOPIA of POETS, who would pass on the news that poetry has become a participatory art, that in all of us is the ability to mythologize, demythologize, and remythologize our lives with a deep, built-in responsibility to the language that we generally use so diffidently, even abusively. Let us see these words we spit out so unconsciously as consciousness itself, as great connectors, as the most necessary utility, as an art of everyday life, like jump rope rhymes and lullabies.

Who better to speak for us than the poets whose stock in trade are these little trills and fillips, these words, this meaning nested in sound? Who better to speak these words for us than ourselves? And where better to start this movement than by building the City itself out of poetry, one image at a time.

Excerpts from the Epic

I am the Statue of Liberty,
my girdle curdled by partisan politics,
my hem ripped by the patriot act,
but despite recent events
my intent remains intact...
— Tsaurah Litzky

O West Side Street that I am—
I dip my toes into the Hudson
my head wreathed in trees of Central Park
— DH Melhem

I am Sydenham Hospital
first integrated staff gateways
above ground natal-charted births
in Mothership Harlem West
their saints played last gasp's first breath
hallway wards of arranged flowery for
obits and births Baptist moans of mirth
records of Harlem arrival's departure
on cue...

— Keith Roach

**I am the accumulated memory and waistline
of the dead restaurants of New York** and the
dishes that will never be set before us again, the snow pea
leaves in garlic at the Ocean Palace, the blini and caviar at
the Russian Tea Room, the osso buco at the New Port Alba,
the kashe varnishkes at the Second Avenue Deli, the veal
ragout at C'ent Anni...

— Bob Hershon

**I am an illegal immigrant looking for Decatur
Avenue in the NW Bronx on May 1st, 1980**

Then I'm out the door and I'm on my way
Down a pot-holed street that was a virgin one day
Before it got knocked up and renamed urban decay

— Larry Kirwin

I am the Chelsea Hotel red brick walls
wrapped in black iron lace
memory of a thousand parties still rocking
the staircase that runs through my heart
all the way to the starlit roof
where Merce's dancers once
kneeled to face the dawn...

— Max Blagg

**I'm Corona, home of all those old-time
World's Fair relics in Flushing Meadows**

Some ancient tribe of white people lived here long ago.
I'm like Stonehenge or the Easter Island sculptures
made from a time when New York City and all the country
was imagining the world's future...

— Bushra Rehman

I am the song of subway musicians massaging the minds
of the masses with interludes for the day
— Toni Blackman