

## New in the series NEW CALIFORNIA POETRY

Edited by Robert Hass, Calvin Bedient, Brenda Hillman,  
and Forrest Gander

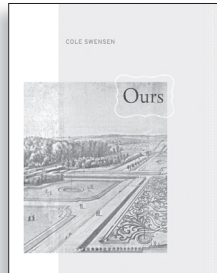


### It's go in horizontal

Selected Poems, 1974–2006  
LESLIE SCALAPINO

"A superb and important contribution to philosophy, theology, psychology, and the science of knowing. To have the selection here now, to be able to see the whole trajectory in one volume, is to experience a revolutionary moment."

—Fanny Howe

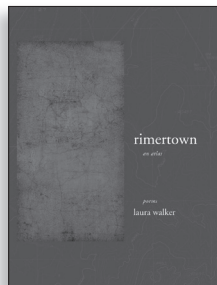


### Ours

COLE SWENSEN

"Swensen's recent thematic book-length sequences...combine scholarly meticulousness with a postmodern flair for dislocation, cementing Swensen's reputation as an important experimental writer."

—Publishers Weekly



### rimertown

an atlas

LAURA WALKER

"Walker's atlas is sung and wrung out of a deep listening to every word, and this is rare....Such singularity of connection (actual!) opens the field of meaning and experience for the reader coming into it, to gather and move, to suffer in spells and flower "in the greening and the sound."

—Lisa Fishman, author of  
*The Happiness Experiment*

## Transcendental Studies

A Trilogy

KEITH WALDROP

## Virgil and the Mountain Cat

Poems

DAVID LAU

## Sight Map

BRIAN TEARE

At bookstores or [www.ucpress.edu](http://www.ucpress.edu)

 UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

## INTERVIEW

# 10 Questions for Alan Bernheimer

STEPHANIE YOUNG

### 01: What movie did you most recently see?

AB: On the silver screen, *Cold Souls*. It questions whether melancholy is an honorable feeling. On DVD, *Touchez-pas au grisbi*. If gangsters can make a midnight snack of pâté and a glass of wine from Nantes and go to bed in striped pajamas, civilization may be worth saving.

02: At the end of *Happy Days* last weekend [a production at the California Shakespeare Festival we went to with friends], you and I shared a strong visceral reaction to the curtain call. Almost immediately after the lights came up (following a long, lovely and flickering fade-out, appropriately slow and semi-agonizing) the actor playing Winnie popped around the mound of dirt from stage left to take her bow. She was bounding and full of energy and almost sprightly. I thought she was a tech person at first. It was really shocking to see her embodied, especially following the second act where one had to struggle to make out her face among the clods of dirt and debris. It was a perfect example of my overall problem with the (otherwise outstanding) production—its speed, which I registered as discomfort with gaps, spaces, silence. But my question is more about something you said a few seconds after that disconcerting curtain call, seemingly in response to the entire production: "Poets theater." Maybe it's obvious, but can you say a little bit about what you were thinking?

AB: As for Winnie's curtain(less) call, the abruptness of the actor's break with her character was even more disorienting than when a just-deceased character takes his bow at the footlights, death's pallor replaced by an appreciative smile. This woman had a body? And if so, why wasn't it still in the first act's electric-blue dress? (And, come to think of it, did that dress even exist below the waist?) Her sudden appearance in what looked to be black rehearsal togs—how could she even move so energetically after two hours of mostly stasis? How could she not? Did she need to do yoga at intermission? And, yes, it took too long for me to reconnect that head to this new body, when I should have been bravo-ing what was some kind of tour-de-force performance, other issues aside.

My recollection is I actually made the "poets theater" comment at the end of the less downbeat and dismaying Act I—reacting largely to the foregrounded language vis-à-vis production and narrative, the modernist avant-garde distancing from naturalistic mimesis, the surface tension as buoyant medium. And just as poets theater has never really succeeded in attracting a crossover theater audience—not even with the relatively rich production values and three-weekend runs that SF Poets Theater in the early 1980s

afforded—I overheard a departing audience member remark his amazement that this was the third time the leading lady has performed Winnie, amazed that “this play” had even had three productions...ever. Beckett in the suburbs!

**03:** You and I first met and had the chance to work together on poets theater a few years ago when you were between jobs. You’ve written elsewhere about a particular economic and personal climate in the ’70s/’80s that lent itself to a vibrant poets-theater scene in the Bay Area. What’s the current relationship between your day job and writing life?

AB: Sad to say, they are at loggerheads. The only time I have the mental clarity to write is in the morning. Since I’ve never had a night job, or even a swing shift, writing takes the back seat. I can usually find a little vocabulary at work to repurpose (terms of art), but I’ve never been able to harvest it as productively as, for instance, Kit Robinson has. That year off was very productive. I got writing done, did poets theater, reconnected with the Bay Area poetry community, and got a translation project off the ground. It cured any fear of idleness, which I never had when I was younger, but had begun to lurk, perversely.

**04:** It’s been a real gift to the Bay Area scene, your reconnection and presence. I just read your guest appearance in the most recent installment of *The Grand Piano*, where you write about Warren Sonbert’s films, narrative, and poetics. Can you talk a little bit about the relationship between some of those filmic techniques you discuss (the cut, the shot) and your writing, especially the books of poetry?

AB: Replacement and displacement are my habitual modes of avoiding sentimentalism, which seems like a necessary discipline in this sad, Kerouacian world. The right word always has a neighbor and the bumps between them are how I get my thrills. In film editing, it’s even more obvious that you are assembling the final effect from discrete pieces that you order and reorder, delete and replace. Warren made this sublimely clear in his talk on “Film Syntax” in the San Francisco Talk series.

**05:** I was watching Sondheim’s *Into the Woods* last night (Clive is directing it for a local high school next spring) and there are a few moments that occur between scenes/acts where the language reminded me so much of your work; especially the play, *Particle Arms*, and the poems collected in the *The Spoonlight Institute*. During the moments I’m thinking of, characters from overlapping narratives rush the stage and deliver one-line aphorisms that are sometimes tangentially and sometimes directly related to the “action.” They’re not really talking to each other, the audience or themselves, but rather some combination of these positions. In Sondheim’s case, those moments are rare, when the language gets peeled back from its narrative aims. In the case of your writing, it’s quite the opposite, language gets freed up from narrative requirements and seems to even hide out from narrative that would settle onto the language too easily, like a coat. I’m thinking here less about narrative and more about voice, particularly in your many investigations of aphorism and cliché in both the plays and poetry. Who’s talking and who’s listening?

AB: My most liberating moment as a young writer came in the permission to eliminate introspective self and emotional (in)experience as abject subject matter, and get on with things. Stop trying to manipulate the feelings of your audience. That’s their job. Make every word an interesting choice, but make it a choice, often through use of calculated accident. Along with that liberation came the realization that there was (and is) an audience, not unconnected with social formations like the St. Mark’s Church Poetry Project in the ’60s and ’70s, the Language writers ten years later, and ongoing writing communities in San Francisco, New York, and elsewhere today. “It is so very much more exciting and satisfactory for everybody if one can have contemporaries.” —Gertrude Stein. But back to your earlier thought. The bulk of my reading has always been narrative, and when the opportunity came to write a play for SF Poets Theater in 1982, I picked up where my high-school drama career had foundered in college. Although I knew the written surface would inevitably maintain a hallmark frag-

mentation, I deliberately asked Nick Robinson to direct *Particle Arms* because I thought he’d give it a more straight-ahead production than our other more wildly inventive director, Eileen Corder. The tension between the somewhat fractured, foregrounded text and the enacted, noir-comedic plotline was what drew me on. And the play of received phrase against fresh recombination in the service of an absurdly thin narrative seemed to work as well in this genre as in lyrical prosody.

**06:** That makes me think of the live film narration performance you did a few years ago, to a scene from *Letter of Introduction*. The scene features a conversation between a ventriloquist and his dummy. Rather than alter or rewrite the language of the scene, you turned the sound off and then voiced/lip-synched the dialogue exactly as it occurs in the film. It was a complicated performance choice, ventriloquizing a ventriloquist and his dummy, and I’m still not entirely sure what it did—its action was multi-dimensional. I do remember your performance opening up/illuminating these gaps between performer/audience that are always already there, really really fine layers, like the layers butter makes in a croissant. I think what I’m trying to ask is, is there a relationship between ventriloquism and the way aphorism/cliché shows up in your writing? Does a phrase like “cultural ventriloquism” apply? But in the sense of a doubled or triple ventriloquism. What is the work of a cultural ventriloquism? What is its relationship to the outside, as in the outside of poetry?

AB: When Konrad Steiner, the impresario of Neo-Benshi, asked me to do a piece, I was casting about for the right film sequence and I remember deciding it would be better if it was unfamiliar to audiences. About the same time, he suggested someone should someday try the “null set” approach—not in fact creating an apposite dialogue or narration but just reenacting the original. When I happened upon John Stahl’s 1938 backstage Broadway melodrama, *Letter of Introduction*, I hit pay dirt. To begin with, a backstage narrative is reflexive in itself. The genre shift to film adds another remove. And to find Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy

actual participants in the theatrical boarding house plot, instead of just vaudevillian relief, was an unexpected richness. I took the Neo-Benshi challenge as a form of ventriloquy in its basic effect, so using a sequence where Bergen not only ventriloquized the dummy but also a milkman's horse was too good to be true. My greatest satisfaction with the piece was that many in the audience didn't realize that I was simply reenacting the original dialogue, and that's a testament as well to the screwball genius of the script. But what is cultural ventriloquism?

**07:** I'd forgotten that part, about the audience not realizing you were lip synching the dialogue as given. Yeah, what do I mean by cultural ventriloquism? I think I'm trying that phrase out as a way to think more about the way your work inhabits these daily, culturally available, rhetorical figures of speech. An example, from the poem "As you may know": "Melancholy is the new irony". That's a case where it feels like you're lip synching a given script exactly (given script: language as collective, group activity). I'm the audience member who can't quite tell. Haven't I heard this exact iteration of an endlessly updated construction before? Or have I? Then there are cases where a slight shift registers with a pop. The given, with difference: "nature especially abhors the smell of vacuums" or "the one worth fainting for". Other moments where I feel/recognize the structure but the content is totally switched out: "Nobody knows / what kind of trope is / has your name on it". Of course it's not as simple as diagramming three modes; "Everything I touch turns / to flesh or vice versa". Although I can't stop trying to schematize things. Maybe poetry is the dummy, sitting on the performer's knee, or maybe the poet is the dummy who finds a way to go off script and talk back (although ugh, the dummy's speech is always recuperated, part of a closed loop managed by the ventriloquist). Maybe the question should be: can you talk about the relationship between ventriloquism (as metaphor, or as historically specific performance moment) and your idea of writing? What about your poem "Ventriloquy"?

AB: Ventriloquy was one youthful ambition that I never mastered, even though I sent away for a small device advertised in comic books that was supposed to help produce certain sounds. I did have some modest success with hypnosis and sleight of hand. Ventriloquy shares a lot with the latter, since one of its fundamentals is misdirection. Misdirection of attention for magic, misdirection of perception for ventriloquy. (I once took a set of precepts for card tricks and substituted the word poetry for magic. The effect was partly successful.) I think of ventriloquy as a voice that seems to come from somewhere else. Related to artistic distance, estrangement, Shklovsky's defamiliarization, laying bare the device. Which explains why I am busy torquing conventional formulation. Plus, it's my job to keep the reader reading, and I'm likely to resort to irony and verbal humor, which are distancing devices as well. But I'm very sincere about wanting to know what kind of trope is "this bullet has your name on it"!

**08:** You brought up Kit Robinson's work earlier, his repurposing of vocabularies from a work/professional context (his writing probably has something to do too with these questions I'm trying to pose around ventriloquism). What vocabularies does your work engage with and draw from?

AB: Scientific vocabulary, with its phenomenal precision, though you have to watch out for its drying effect. You need to temper it with supple, labile language. For me, there is always an oversupply of nouns, not enough verbs. Abstract terms, especially ambiguous ones. We haven't talked about ambiguity, my calling card, and where I need to avoid over-indulgence. I need to be careful of too much multivalence, in phrase to phrase and line-to-line maneuverings.

**09:** Melancholy is a word that keeps showing up in this exchange, and one that I would use to describe the emotional tenor of *The Spoonlight Institute*. Even (or especially) in its wit and humor. Are you actively working against something like melancholy appearing in the writing, or are you working it in?

AB: I've been reading Orhan Pamuk's memoir, *Istanbul*, and melancholy, or the Turkish *hüzün*, is his theme, the bitterweeet sorrow for the lost, crumbling city of his youth, his people's lost empire. But it's a much more complex and ambiguous concept, with deep Muslim roots. He explores it as a state of grace, "a way of looking at life that implicates us all, not only a spiritual state but a state of mind that is ultimately as life-affirming as it is negating." And that, of course, circles back to Kerouac, the pervading pity (his trademark use of "poor") and his concomitant, "leaping lizards" joy.

**10:** I'm curious about the location of *Particle Arms* in your new book, at the very end. Is it a coda? Does it close? Is it an appendix? A final performance of what the rest of the book has been doing/does? Is it a version of what the poetry makes possible in some way?

AB: I'm not sure there's an interesting enough answer! The play takes up a quarter of the book, so shape made it sensible as a book-end. Poetry certainly made the play possible, as a practice and method enabling me to put words together. Poems and play share vocabulary and sensibility. Any script is just a piece of a play, lacking all the dimensions of performance. But a poets-theater script has a better life than most, since the language is at least as interesting as the performers.

---

**Stephanie Young** lives and works in Oakland. Her books of poetry are *Picture Palace (in girum imus nocte et consumimur igni, 2008)* and *Telling the Future Off (Tougher Disguises, 2005)*. She edited *Bay Poetics (Faux Press, 2006)* and curated/produced several *Poets Theater Festivals* during her tenure on the board at *Small Press Traffic*. Current editorial projects include *Deep Oakland (www.deeпоakland.org)*.

**Alan Bernheimer** grew up in New York City and has lived in the San Francisco Bay Area for more than half his life. Books include *Café Isotope (The Figures, 1980)* and *Billionesque (The Figures, 1999)*. *Adventures in Poetry* is publishing *The Spoonlight Institute* this fall.