

## Dispatch #54 — Hasta la vista, baby

*Dispatches from the Poetry Wars* began on a whim and a prayer. *Whim* is important. Although seemingly insubstantial, *whim*, and its attendant *whimsy*, undercuts the stilted solemnity of so much poetry and poetry discourse these days. Even better, whim opens the door to Emerson's proposal that we write *whim* on our doors' lintels as a technique of developing what he called "self-reliance." Invoking the lambs' blood in Egypt that spared one innocent while another was killed, he advises us to escape another form of death, entropic-past-its-prime-same-old-rerun Death, sometimes known as The Given or The Administration or Conformity, with which the poem is as if at war. *Is as if* is pretty much *is* in so far as the metaphor extends an actual range of vibratory relation, though there are no guns, which is important, just yelling, both literal and figurative, and every once in a while, a poetic punch. Aside from the irresistible pun, prayer was the usual expression of gratitude for even the possibility of whim.

A lot of things actually go into a whim. In the case of *Dispatches*, Jack Clarke's *intent.*, Ken Warren's *House Organ*, and Ed Dorn's *Rolling Stock* and *Bean News* loom large. Behind them lurks the remarkable profusion of mimeographed magazines that fueled the resistance in the 50s and 60s, circulating the work associated with the *New American Poetry, 1945-1960. Floating Bear, Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts, Big Table, The Magazine of Further Studies, J, Open Space, and Tish* are examples of how you not only don't need the sanction of the Institution to do your work, you can actually slip through its lines in the night and meet up with others outside its range of control giving rise to a new *being-together* of poetry such as the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference. You don't need grants,

budgets, licenses, permissions etc. *ad nauseam*. All you need is intent. *House Organ*, *Rolling Stock*, and *intent*. acted something like strange attractors, or, say, an uncloaking device, not for Klingon ships, but for configurations of relation outside and beyond the Authorized Zone, outside the Institution's permissions and support.

Anger also played a part in the birth of *Dispatches*. The whim was provoked by anger at the repeated claim some critics made that "the poetry wars are over," even as the claimants then set about firing a few hostile rounds at Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, Ed Dorn and others – the usual targets. Poetry wars here refers to intellectual and poetic disagreements that have arisen periodically since the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, but more specifically to events that occurred in the wake of the publication of *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*. And those wars are never over. Because of poetry's very nature, its situated-ness in language's complex uncertainty, poetry wars are inevitable. And necessary. To claim the poetry wars are over is to assert the conquest of poetry by the principle of universal equivalence, as if all poetry were the same trivial self-expression that dominates the current poetry Market.

Whims unfold and this one unfolded into the work that became *Dispatches* in all its flawed glory, what we called, at the outset—lifting it from Hakim Bey—a TAZ, a *Temporary Autonomous Zone*. The Institution's Doom Program implicates itself in every dimension of our lives, including wayward, utopian attempts to dismantle and replace it with Plans for Social Perfection. As participants in organizations that fancied themselves Leninist in the 1970s/80s and that sought to discipline History into forms of non-exploitative communism, both editors of *Dispatches*, Fric and Frac, witnessed firsthand the brutality unleashed by the Mechanics of Perfection in the quest for Eternal

Form. “Progress” is the Virtue that animates it, whether toward new and better Classic Coke or the dictatorship of the proletariat. It’s all the same irresistible Progress toward (the same old) Perfection. And it is the Doom Program’s ever present entangling modus. Ed Dorn put it straight in *Gunslinger* when “I” points out that “Entrapment is this society’s / Sole activity . . .”. Hence the crucial importance of the “temporary” in TAZ. The TAZ offers an unregulated model of resistance as finite action, resistance not just in its content, but in its committed finitude, its *be(com)ing-in-time-that-comes-to-an-end*, that is not progress, and has no plans for utopia. This is it. Get used to it. Do the best you can. Be kind and generous. Dance.

Entrapment and ossification are two faces of the same death. You have to stay on your toes and know when it’s time to pack up and move on. You need to be free of limiting entanglements, from being in thrall to an institution that provides you with a living, and so holds you dangling over the pit of penury by a thin spider web, and also be willing to pack it in and move on before spiritual/intellectual *rigor mortis* (i.e., institutional Sanction and Recuperation) sets in. It requires attention, impeccable timing, and the will to keep moving, to be responsible to the ever renewed resistance you incarnate. That is the crucial *Temporary* dimension of the TAZ, without which it will quickly become a husk, an entrapment, a death vehicle.

What we call the *showcase magazine* crucially supports the corrupt, ossified poetry culture thriving today. It retails the Commercial Poetry Product, usually in a small, trendily decorated space full of carefully curated artisanal products guaranteed to be literarily excellent, whether your taste runs to passionate copyrighted identity claims, conceptual folderol, or avant-garde razzle dazzle. It exists to

display poems and essays as objects — commodities — within the Literary Zone with all its perks, prizes, capital investments, and social configurations. Oh yes, and etiquette. Decorum.

*Dispatches from the Poetry Wars* was never meant to be a showcase poetry magazine, much less a glossy site for performing professional-poetic etiquette and decorum. It was meant to resist that. It was meant to be a provocation and an example for others. It opened as we said on a whim, a shoestring budget (15 bucks a month, Canadian at that) and a will to learn whatever skills necessary to give resistance a presence. It eventually cost a bit more, but it didn't have to, and in the end it wasn't that much more. Certainly no more than a group of like-minded poets with intent could find a way to fund.

We have had fun doing this and we got to be part of making some interesting stuff happen, not least by talking back with a bit of badass, impolite insouciance to the cozy Mainstream-conservative/Avant-liberal Poetry Senate which currently rules the roost in PoetryLand. That's what a TAZ does – it stirs shit up and pisses people off. By its very existence. It claims its own authority without reservation. PoetryLand and its Commercial Poetry Product have been sustained by and tethered to Institutions that confirm the authority of surveillance capitalism (society), the individual subject of surveillance- capitalism's State (I), and the process of representation and anti-representation (legibility) that "I" is responsible for. Our goal was to take a few pokes at the illusions/delusions that sustain that world while bringing together those who exist outside its boundaries. With help from a multitude of smart, interesting, fearless people, *Dispatches* became what some said was as a gadfly antidote to the ossified Institutionally Integrated MFA/Poetics Program to Train Poets for the Official Poetry World. Others, we have heard, saw it as loud-mouthed, aggressive, ignorant, smart-alecky and some other bad stuff. Oh yeah, and despicable. [Despicable us.](#)

But hey, speak your mind and someone's always going to get pissed at you. Count on it. Point out that the Emperor is, well, a two-bit sell-out Emperor, and not some avant-garde warrior, and he won't be happy with you. But so what? You'll never make anything interesting happen if you let that bug you. That's what Autonomous in TAZ means. These days, formations marketing themselves as "avant-garde" have capitulated to Institutional authority. The Training Centers for Surveillance Capitalism (Universities) are nothing if not endlessly co-opting, and The English Department of the Spirit, as Jack Spicer noted, is always quite happy to recuperate another "oppositional" poetics into its hallowed halls as long as the erstwhile radicals are not opposed to integrating themselves into the schmoozing system of prizes, awards, grants, jobs, prestige publishers, and whatnots that have corrupted poetry and left it an instrument of ambition. These poets, by and large, can only speak what's allowed, hiding behind the duplicitous notion of *decorum* which seems perfectly *natural* to them. It's what they used to call Ideology.

At *Dispatches* we wanted to be free of all that. We are not invoking some metaphysics of *freedom* here, but simply the desire to speak our minds without having to answer to anyone but ourselves and without being obligated to any truths other than the ones that strike us today. *Dispatches* has not been perfect by a long shot. In hindsight, its judgement at times was flawed or just plain wrong, and it may have been too willing to flog a dead horse, which is always a sad sight, even if the horse is begging to be flogged. Even with the excellent advice and moral counsel of Ammiel, André, Margie, Andrew, Sharon, Patrick, Miriam (and, in the very beginning, our much missed comrade, Ben Hollander) *Dispatches* managed to occasionally put a foot in its metaphorical mouth or trip over its own often-untied laces.

But it also gave you the long-purloined Duncan/Watten tape; Ms. Emily Post-Avant; the PoBiz Stock Index Updates; Etienne D'Abattoir; Justice Poeticus; Mark Scroggin's Poetry Fashion reports; Keith Tuma's AWP reports; the glorious OBU; various chapbooks and portfolios of significant poets; variegated interviews; strange, sometimes forgotten videos; lots of stunning visual poetry; translations from across the globe galore; treasures from archival rediscoveries (not least vital and virtually unknown documents by Charles Olson, Robert Creeley and Joanne Kyger); Dispatches Editions books; and an avalanche of new, quirky writing, across the spectrum, aesthetic tendencies be damned. Oh, yes, *Dispatches* also opened its second year by organizing and publishing *Resist Much/Obey Little*, the largest and most diverse anthology of poetic resistance ever. And it closed its last year with *Ecopoetics: Poetics for the More than Human World*, likewise the largest and most diverse gathering of ecological poetry and poetics to date. But actually, we didn't give all that writing to you—you gave it to us once you realized a place existed for its thinking. For that enthusiastic response, we are deeply grateful to you.

Back in April 2016, when *Dispatches* first showed up, a much missed friend, just mentioned above, wrote to us. Joanne Kyger, in her typically complex simplicity, asked, "What are you doing?" "We don't know," we responded honestly, "but we thought we'd try anyway." "Well in that case, alright then," Joanne replied, "get on with it." We never did quite figure out what we were doing, and we'd like to break camp and move on before we get tired of trying. Other adventures await. New forms of resistance: "the imagination strains / after deer / going by fields of goldenrod . . ."

As we do, we thank our many readers and contributors, from the heart, for accompanying us along this temporary way. All that we have accomplished together, however, will mean nothing if others don't come forward to create more temporary autonomous zones, if all of us don't continually find ways

to renew ourselves and our endeavors in Poetry's spirit. Continue the resistance. Never be afraid to speak what is righteous to cynical power, no matter how entrenched that power is, no matter how "progressive" it purports to be. In fact, the more entrenched "polite normality" seems, the more that quixotic righteousness is called for. Follow your whims. Laugh at power. We sign off for the moment amidst the devastation of the Virus, but with great faith that Poetry continues to find a home with those who nurture and defend it against The Institution and its sycophants, functionaries, and cops. When we put up the current photo on our masthead, we never imagined that three plus years on we would be saying "Hasta la vista," wearing our own masks. Be strong, be well.

Poetry is the living Word. Fight for it and it will take root in your *heartmind*, where it will blossom and renew the world.

--*Eric and Frac*

*May, 2020*