

AMOR FATI. New and Selected Poems. Jack Mueller. (Colorado: Lithic Press, 2013; 174 pp., 5fx10, \$17.00).

Reviewed by Richard Hack

Amor fati is love of destiny. Call it love of life. Call it love. Words are freeing, he says, words confine.

Here is a long-awaited and substantial collection by one of San Francisco's best poets of the last fifty years. He is known in North Beach and has a long history well beyond the city limits. Here's a book of work whose persona stands out from the rest. The diversity of its forms wide-ranging, with philosophical fullness and beauty of expression. It often has the conversational directness of the moderns, and demands thoughtful attention. As a whole it reads like a key part of the continual discussion of important matters by celebratory and critical poets and thinkers and servants of the world. We have lots to ponder and argue upon in this unusual writing accomplished with a sure hand.

Drift or no drift

my eco-niche

is here:

a signal hill

on the side of San Francisco

(from "Boxwork," a poem in 13 parts)

He used to live on a very high part of the old northeast corner of town. If you go straight up Montgomery St. from Broadway, you can almost pull g's before you make the little turns you need to get to Jack's former building. The poet Eugene Lesser and his wife, Pamela Nittolo, lived there, too. A good percentage of the country's poets lived right in the neighborhood, or downtown or in the Mission district or the Fillmore, in Manilatown and Chinatown and Japantown, or just across the Bay in Berkeley, Oakland, and Marin County.

Slope of Americus

what convections

what cycle of erosion

what rejuvenation

At almost any stage

uplift can occur

& reduce the relief of the continent.

....

The city is quartz
prismatic
a lens that curves
our sedimentation

We are so numerous
we stand within
compression of towers
civilized and tense

....

By what right what symmetry
do you strike
without an offering
great walls
hanging inside the Earth
make many gashes in the folds
of your prevailing ground

Why do you
fight the green
beat the air
drain the blue

....

I will not decompose to coal
or be a tar pit
holding fauna
from an age more innocent than mine

I will obey the spiral in my blood
I will converse with everything. (from "Boxwork")

He has that link to language, the poetic touch that can move with literary tradition or into a jazz beat and drop words into the living matrix of poetry off spontaneous lips (and then revise, of course, respecting the original vitality in what you keep). Or he can move words to different parts of the page and see them take on a life of their own as the game almost plays itself. Transnational subjects and new idioms were part of what made postwar poetry stand out. Each one went deep with what engaged them. Jack Mueller is part of this, a member of a generation of

poets and artists that followed a more famous one that is still around, that is still inspiring newcomers, more of them coming here every month. He caught the free, new styles and learned how to use them in his own way, and he has helped fertilize newer productive generations who aspire to the same common and rarefied heights. Using short lines and long—two, three, four, and five beats to a line—sometimes iambic pentameter, sometimes other meters or free verse or inspired prose—all of which has the beat, the sound, the feel of real poetry.

Epigrammatic, philosophic, steady-eyed romantic poetry. Prose in the midst of poetry. Prose with a beat, the subtle beat of highly developed natural reasoning and wide experience. Life is always fruitful and rich to one with a heart for beauty, who keeps on seeking, who finds duality and paradox, disgust and imprecation.

The poet leads by example, by courageous perception—like others he has known, for he believes he is never alone. Mueller deftly describes his own surroundings and projects what he knows and feels about other lives like Li Po and Pico della Mirandola, St. John of the Cross (“John’s poetry was deep/Clear and beautiful,” almost extirpated by censoring authorities and fearful fans, but still here), Gouverneur Morris (giver of “seven mighty verbs” to the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution for a republic that doesn’t seem to care), and with homage to Black Mountain with a notey poem on Charles Olson, then North Beach in his memorial to Eugene Ruggles, who has many friends still in the Little City and the big world.

“Art means making— / we are craftsmen,” says Marcel Duchamp in Mueller’s poem “Black Coffee,” a grouping of short quotations by that challenging and entertaining painter and chess master (who represented France in the chess olympics).

In the context of getting a hesitant lover to bed in another composition, he refers to self-idolatry and the nag of uncertain self-esteem:

Let the poem find its own life
& lives to live in
Other than our own

Why should we stare
at what we make
As if hoping
One perfect offspring
Will appear (from “No Small Reason”)

Consider a few more examples:

& when I ceased
With prayer
I still believed

Not God
But love's power
& what was possible

To say (from "Proximities")

There Is Nothing To Do But Come In

There is nothing to do but come in
consult your own book and go back out,

alone again, original as sin, the written act.
Between sex, wilderness and hunger

Earth has all of us by the word. My throat
is dry, my skilled autonomy is nothing.

Assume a unanimous root
Dear love dear love

Dear love do (Pt. 4 of "Gnomes & Aphorisms")

Continuous work: no apology.
Effort speaks to itself
adds material
comes to the end of the page
turns it over
MORE PAGES!
Pleasures of work
measure defining a round life

bent from the beginning by utterance.

.....

Life doesn't work.
It doesn't have to.
More is life
and more is ridiculous.

My object
is the oxymoron
understood.

(I put the kiss in my hand
And offered it to the little girl
the world calls mine.
She did not pick it up—
wanted the real thing.
I kissed her trout lips
And walked away from the bedroom
blessed by the nonliterate work.)

(from "Life")

Dragonfly

Shy to me
arrives the day,
a blackwing
blue metallic lady,
standing on
the sunfed platform
of a leaf,
standing off
her thin blue lucent
belly, ripe with light.
She stands,
all looking,
as I go
and fall into
the windless facets
of her eyes,

believing all
I see
to be,
that moment,
true.

Here and abroad, he's been a university lecturer and highly respected arts administrator, a curator and museum director, and he spent many a season as an M.C. and core member of the brain trust that annually produced National Poetry Week in San Francisco, which presented an entertaining array of headliners, supporting actors, and grassroots.

People in the S.F. art world today know Mueller's quickness, his jazz-like flexibility and joie de vivre—know him as a thinker, a funny guy who always enjoys sharp double-edged facts, the beauty of animals and things, the humor of daily articulation, and the pleasures of conviviality. A force of nature, he can be a joy to be around, or a curmudgeon who challenges some fond conceptions. Overall, his work is a felicitous mixture of hard-edged realism and soft power, endless interest in things, and a hearty strength of reasoning that is clear in its admission “I don't know” or “I know.”

Today Mueller's pen also devotes itself to little drawings, sharp or whimsical, of what's above and below the horizontal axis of land and water. They bubble with laughter, exasperation, squiggles, and sharp points. There are a few of these in *Amor Fati*, and more in self-published booklets like *Who Said Hawaii?* They are somewhat in the line of his neighbor Kristen Wetterhahn's wild-line portraits on heavy paper and quick drawings on paper napkins.

Once there was a hardening of poetry's arteries that required a postwar rebellion to aerate the ground of literature. Operating in San Francisco were Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, Jack Spicer, William Everson, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Diane di Prima, Kaye McDonough, Kerouac and Ginsberg and Jack Micheline from New York, Carolyn Cassady, Joyce Johnson, Jack Marshall, Kirby Doyle, Jack Hirschman, Eugene Ruggles, and many others. A good survey would let you call Jack Mueller one of the top six people of a whole period now in its seventh decade or beginning its eighth. Mueller is one of many in North Beach who have combined their efforts to produce art and work and life that is more dynamic, more independent than what we were used to and what we may have thought art and poetry were supposed to be. There were Beats, Pre-Beats and something else like Kenneth Rexroth, and there were Baby Beats—labels that are ultimately journalistic flapjacks or useful shorthand. There have been lots of people drawn to

this urban land; some produce and compete well, some can't.

Today we have two other forces holding poetry back—to generalize uncharitably, these are the tepid, mannered, almost predictable MFAs and some in the lower depths who think poetry should be just a formulaic political leaflet or any kind of prose account that is deeply felt, no matter how clichéd and boringly written.

Mueller has more formal education, artfulness, leadership experience, and philosophic understanding than most of the MFAs, and as a freethinker and free citizen of a rather backward but self-congratulating republic, does not share anyone's possessive desire to control literary reputations and output. He also values the entire grassroots system of reading venues as a regular town hall, music hall, and theater, a natural breeding ground for poets and writers without the absurd belief that all poetry is equal. Educated and enlightened (though possibly too humble to say so), he speaks as a commoner above all.

If you are an educator, here is someone to put in your curriculum right now. Poetry is the stream he's on, and he navigates well. John Mueller is a top-rank literary artist whose living pages think in spirited sensory words with respect and amazing range. His highly developed idiom soulfully and logically shapes and cuts, embodies and reflects.

While he ponders, confronts, and engages the paradoxical and the stupefying, he celebrates with sharp observation as a laughing philosopher. He has his own cross moments, and a couple minor hobbyhorses, but who doesn't. Like Henry Miller and the people who followed him, like some of the people to come, a sage and ironic receiver and shaper and transmitter, with a kind of universal faith in the roll of time, and the blessing of time to enjoy your efforts.

Why does the need come round again
why do multitudes sing in my head
how does the shepherd's tune come to me here
fixed in the straight lines of the city
from what hemisphere
does this angel appetite appear
to speak & sing
to draw sweet water
from what hidden well (from "What Can I Say")

Blissful and Irritated

Like clouds, we take what comes
And make our shape from that

Long cylinders of wind
Shoot unseen forces into the mind

Until we have within us
Thunder, thunder, tongues of light

Torrential rain with no design,
life, a tendency to forgive.

About the Reviewer:

Richard Hack's reviews and opinion pieces have appeared in the *San Francisco Examiner* (Hearst Corp.), *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *The San Francisco Review of Books*, *Fiction International*, *The Redwood Coast Review*, the *Mendocino Outlook*, et al. His poetry has been published in *North Coast Literary Review* and many other magazines, as well as the *Beatitude Golden Anniversary* anthology (San Francisco, 2009). He graduated from the University of Chicago, where he edited *Chicago Review*. In San Francisco he founded *Oxygen* (1991-2002), one of the city's longest-running and most respected magazines of creative writing. He has also worked for McGraw-Hill and The University of Chicago Press. He published a long piece on great World Series comebacks in the magazine *Sports History*, and wrote on the NFL's most consistent contenders for the Pro Football Researchers Association, winning first prize in their annual competition.