



Flashpoints

[Barbara Boncek](#)

Editor's Note: This is the first of a series of columns in which Barbara Boncek and guest writers explore the range of small-press limited-edition books and chapbooks. In this column, Boncek discusses books by three distinctly different poets from presses with very divergent aims and ambitions.

Capt's Dreaming Chair (Eddie Bell) is a very personal first book produced by CRS: Outloud, a small press with a strong regional focus, publishing Catskill-Mountain and Hudson-Valley authors whose work is resonant with the universals of human experience.

Field Guide to the Ineffable: Poems on Marcel Duchamp is poet Grace Bauer's fourth book. Playful, learned, idiosyncratic, witty, ironic, it speaks to savvy readers who are at home with paradox. With its exquisitely colored Duchamp cover and its careful and extensive notes, this amuse-geule by a major poet has been published by Snail's Pace Press for a discerning audience of connoisseurs.

Poems From Cave 17 (Dorothea Grossman) was not published under any imprint. Although it bears the author's copyright and has been produced carefully, on good quality paper, the book has no ISBN number or price. Without the identifiers that make serious distribution possible, Poems from Cave 17 cannot be spoken of as the product of a "press." We must assume that the book is self-published — or virtually so — in the long tradition of poets who create their poems and their books for an audience of friends and friends' friends.

Frigate salutes the care and the commitment of small-press publishers of all stripes; the books of their diverse authors will regularly be reviewed in "Flashpoints." In addition, the special-order page of our Frigate shop will permit interested readers to write directly to the publishers of books that are not available through ordinary commercial channels.

— Patricia Eakins

Barbara Boncek's reviews of:

[Capt's Dreaming Chair](#) (Eddie Bell)
[Field Guide to the Ineffable](#) (Grace Bauer)
[Poems from Cave 17](#) (Dorothea Grossman)

Capt's Dreaming Chair

by Eddie Bell

Claryville, NY: CRS Outloud Books

Paper, 76 pp., \$12.00.

In *Capt's Dreaming Chair*, his first collection of poetry, Eddie Bell writes with sharpness and clarity, evoking strong emotions with vibrant imagery.

In "Guilty By Presumption," the poet immediately grabs the reader's attention with the opening line, "I am a racial profile." He goes on to describe a family that overcomes the indignities of segregation and racism and in so doing, becomes a strong, solid unit, a sustaining force from which Bell, himself, has gathered his strength.

Bell's family poems about his grandmother and his father are some of the most powerful poems in this collection. In the long narrative "Juanita Carpenter Robinson Bell" the poet draws a detailed portrait of a well-educated woman who was too black for clerking but not too black for running the elevator. She was a somewhat peevish woman, hard-boiled, a piece of work. She grew flowers in the summertime and wrote poetry in the winter. She even joined the Love's Park Poetry Society and sat around with "them country ladies-of-the-other- persuasion." The ladies may not have appreciated her poems but her grandson listened, took them in, and was inspired by them to poetry of his own.

In the three poems "Groomin," "Just Keep Wringing Your Rag Dry," and "Capt's Dreaming Chair," Bell gives us a complete picture of his father, Captain Carl Bell, Sr. In "Groomin," we have the

intimate details of a man who appreciates orderliness and cleanliness, a man poised inches from his magnifying glass, plucking out hair bumps. "Just Keep Wringing Your Rag Dry" presents the disciplined soldier, the man who loved all six of his wives, yet who, like many military men, had learned to suppress emotion.

Even strong, powerful men need a place to reflect and dream. In "Capt's Dreaming Chair," from which the title of the book is taken, Bell writes that for his father the dreaming chair — the chair in which he sat while day-dreaming — was his freedom chair, a portable sanctuary of judgment and peace.

Bell speaks directly and emotionally to his readers in "Michael's Mother" (when he takes on the persona of a mother who has lost her only child) and in "Good Bye Captain?" the story of his father's hard, lonely death.

Not all of the poems in this collection are family poems. There are some pithy four-to-six-line gems like "Debts" and "Perseverance" as well as some beautiful nature poems like "Rain Talk" and "Looking out the Window and Seeing Rain."

Capt's Dreaming Chair by Eddie Bell is a collection of poems which skillfully blends reality, compassion, and love, richly portraying the lives of African-Americans struggling to achieve and sustain hope.

— Barbara Boncek

Field Guide to the Ineffable: Poems on Marcel Duchamp,

Grace Bauer

Cambridge, NY: Snail's Pace Press

Paper, 30 pages, \$6.00

Marcel Duchamp, employing chance, would drop bits and pieces of string onto a canvas to produce ready-made art. Grace Bauer, in a series of poems on Duchamp, incorporates this same technique in "Readymade # 2: Fat Chance" and "Readymade #3: Drawing On Chance." But instead of dropping string, Bauer drops fragments of quotations from Duchamp onto the page. She uses the same three fragments in both poems: "I don't want to destroy art for anyone but myself," "a little game between I & me," and "a mechanized mind against a machine." These fragments, along with several other quotes, are dropped randomly to produce two entirely different ready-made poems.

Duchamp took ubiquitous objects such as an inverted urinal and transformed them into transgressive artforms. His *Mona Lisa (La Joconde)* showed his sense of humor and his penchant for puns and other wordplay. He took a postcard of DaVinci's *Mona Lisa*, drew a mustache over her lips and a goatee on her chin, entitled it L.H.O.O.Q., signed it, and declared it a work of art. When read aloud with French pronunciation L.H.O.O.Q. sounds like "elle a chaud au cul" (she has a hot ass). In "The Joke On *La Joconde*," Bauer again captures the humor of Duchamp and uses his play on words to poke fun at the *Mona Lisa*.

Humor is also present in "Marcel Does Lunch With Andy Warhol: A Script For The Blink Of An Eye." Here Bauer creates a one-page script describing Duchamp seated in a chair (Warhol once made a short film of Duchamp sitting in a chair) watching Warhol expound on the virtues of soup as Warhol methodically opens can after can of Campbell soup while a naked anonymous woman videotapes the scene. Perhaps because both men used unconventional artistic procedures to poke fun at society, Bauer ends her stage directions with, "Marcel applauds appreciatively, laughing."

Rose Selavy, a play on *c'est la vie*, was an integral part of Duchamp's life. She was his alter ego, and he often signed her name to his art. His friend the photographer Man Ray took a photograph of Duchamp impersonating her. In the poem, "Rose Selavy No Longer Sings *La Vie En Rose*," Bauer writes "& I tell you my heart may belong to da-da, but even an alter ego needs l'amour."

Though *Field Guide to the Ineffable: Poems on Marcel Duchamp* has a narrow focus, its appeal is wide. Readers who enjoy unconventional puns, creative formal strategies, and rich humor will appreciate this series of poems which won the 1999 Snail's Pace Press Poetry Competition for previously published poets.

— Barbara Boncek

Poems From Cave 17: Selected Poems 1989 - 1996

by Dorothea Grossman

Self-published. No price.

Poems From Cave 17, Dorothea Grossman's second "compilation," looks with gentleness at love, home, nature, and the Jewish comedian Henny Youngman. Some of these poems are untitled and many are one- or two-sentence metaphors or similes. "The city is a puddle of sequins at my feet; I want to slurp it, idiotically like Godzilla." Others show Grossman's talent for looking at, through, and beyond the ordinary, which is made vivid through fresh descriptions and unusual adjectives: "On a navy-blue night/ in this eccentric climate, " say, or "In vowel-rich Balboa."

Grossman was born and raised in Philadelphia and has spent time on both the east and west coasts. "Facing Steel Pier" begins in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in 1931 and ends in Santa Monica, California, in 1993. The following untitled poem was written in California and has the quality and resonance of a haiku but not its prescribed form. "Falling asleep, I think of the switchbacks at Big Sur meandering under the same moon with nobody watching".

In the last section of the book (Grossman's second) we meet Henny Youngman, one of the poet's favorite comedians. Many of "The Henny Youngman Poems" are short, sharp, and humorous. "Henny Youngman gave up wearing fur/ to become a man of the cloth."

Another poem lists Henny Youngman's five kinds of Jews:

Orthodox
Conservative
Reform
Reconstructionist
Buddhist.

Poems from Cave 17 is a gentle, easy book with no East Coast anger or West Coast *angst*. Those attuned to unusual description, good metaphor, and humorous observation will find these poems soothing, especially after a hard day. The poem "My Audience" perhaps summarizes the feeling Dorothea Grossman has for her readers:

There they are
spread out in front of me,
like flowers.
If I wore a kimono,
I would gather them up
in my sleeve.

— Barbara Boncek

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