

## Thirteen Scraps \*

Robert Bohm, Bio Statements

*I ain't got no home  
ain't got no retreat  
an' all's I got fer food  
is raw mouse meat*

– from “*Song for Mickey Bykov to be Sung by the Iron City House Rockers*”

1. Basic Facts. Born in Queens, NY (1943). Arrested and thrown in psychiatric hospital after alcohol- and drug-related fight with cop (1965). BA (1966). US army (1967-68). MA (1972).

2. 1976-1982. Published one poetry chapbook (Lynx House Press), one full-length poetry volume (Panache Press) and one nonfiction book on India (South End Press). The poetry volume, “In the Americas,” won the 1980 Great Lakes Colleges Association Award for best book of poems by a new U.S. writer.

3. By 1985, had developed a sense of poetry’s irrelevance. Saw U.S. poetry’s withdrawal from daily life into the universities as a catastrophe to be avoided at all costs since poetry derives its strength, if it has any, from daily life and not from poets reveling in ingroup self-absorption. Came to conclusion that dominant US poetry was little more than an elite form of melodramatics. As a result, turned my back on the traditional advancement paths available to emerging writers and decided to hone poetry and other writing skills as far away as possible from readings, creative writing programs, literary gatherings of all types, and publishers. This commitment to write in isolation from US poetry culture lasted for approximately 16 years. I viewed this time as an apprenticeship to (a) the immediate and (b) what I called (and still call) “the moment’s teemingness.”

4. The immediate. One must return to basics in order to find the strength to see creatively. As the Chandogya Upanishad says, “The mind, after wandering in every direction, must settle down on its life.” The home location is where the beat is, the pulse, the drumming that turns the ordinary into music. Poet Gloria Vando discovers this pulse in the “old woman *jesusiendo*” whose face is “parched like the land she is condemned to till.” The artist Gerald Hawkes finds it in the most meaningless of throwaways: used wooden matchsticks, out of which he creates amazing masks and sculptures. And listen to reggae musician Augustus Pablo, the way he skanks in the fullness of the here and now, blowing – on the lowly melodica, that “child’s toy” of an instrument – a melody so simple that its simplicity is eerie, yet also blissful, evoking in the listener an Edenic mellowness that lies (in Pablo’s words) “east of the river Nile.” . . . What’s nearest to us, that’s where the beat, our vision’s rhythm, springs from.

5. The moment’s teemingness, part one. Every moment teems in the sense that it is the site of simultaneities, multiple realities. Example: in July 1992 when Anthony “Fat Tony” Salerno was buried in a St. Raymond’s Cemetery mausoleum near the corner of Balcom and Whitmore Avenues in the Bronx, I sat two hundred miles away on a broken brick wall along the Delaware River and ate a ham sandwich as mourners grieved for the dead man only a few feet from where years earlier baldheaded Uncle Alfred, Lydia’s husband, once bet Mr. Irrgang that Jackie Robinson, then a rookie, wouldn’t survive the racial pressure and would only last a year or

two in the big leagues. Meanwhile, as Fat Tony went bye-bye, discussions occurred on Capitol Hill about Iraq's refusal, less than a year and a half after Desert Storm's conclusion, to give a UN inspection team access to the Iraqi Ministry of Agriculture. At this same time, a Florida woman wrote her congressman about the massacre of Muslims at a Hebron mosque a few months previous. She stated, "I don't understand why there isn't more of an uproar about this."

6. The moment's teemingness, part two. Every moment also teems in the sense that it is the open doorway between "I" and "that," the space where each floods into the other. This doorway is the site of dualism's collapse. As such, it's the source of statements like Whitman's claim that the "I" is not only its apparent self but is also that which it apparently is *not* ("There is that in me... I do not know what it is... but I know it is in me."). Such a worldview, in which the traditional ego's division between *I am* and *I am not* is destabilized and replaced by a less borders-obsessed psychology, is also expressed in the Chandogya Upanishad's assertion, "Tat tvam asi" ("that art thou") as well as in the Svetasvatara Upanishad's statement that the self's connection to the world is such that the self is both itself as well as "the blue bird and the green parrot with red eyes." It is important to realize that such proclamations have nothing to do with any sort of dreamy mysticism. Instead, they represent, in the broadest possible sense, a knack for ecological vision and the unearthing of interconnections. Seeing things and identities in this way, i.e., not in isolation but as aspects of the living systems of which they are a part, doesn't rob them of their singularity but merely guarantees that they are grasped as both (a) things-in-themselves and (b) locations/crossroads of interactivity. Chaos theorist Edward Lorenz's 1972 statement that a butterfly wings' movements in Brazil could conceivably start a chain reaction that results in a Texas tornado hints at the texture of what I mean by "crossroads of interactivity." So do grassroots people's movements when they declare that "an injury to one is an injury to all."

7. Occasionally (but only very rarely), out of restlessness and an egocentric desire to prove to myself that I could still "do" it, I published poems in journals during this 16-year period (Negative Capability, Nimrod, Minnesota Review and one or two others). Mostly, though, I remained true to my commitment and worked privately in the poetic boondocks in an effort to develop a voice/voices capable of covering a wide range of topics from a horse nettle petal to one moment in the life of an Italian housewife in Brooklyn to war on the Kashmir border to the look of Red the car mechanic's hands to racism to the rain's sound in the maple outside my window.

8. "The boondocks" are of course boondocks only from a certain perspective. Just as in Blake's the "Marriage of Heaven and Hell" Satan is the true Jesus and vice versa, so in today's United States the uncouth are often more couth than the couth and the places from which poetry is absent are often more poetic than the poetry of the universities, literary presses and poetry boards.

9. Also during this apprenticeship period, although apparently nonexistent as a prose author, I persisted invisibly as a ghostwriter of anti-establishment cultural analyses, political essays, op-ed pieces, foreign policy critiques, and speeches.

10. In 2001, in my late 50s and knowing that whatever lessons I had hoped to learn by writing anonymously had finally come to an end, I decided to try publishing poetry again. As editors at journals like MiPo, Stirring, Wired Art from Wired Hearts, Black Bear Review, Naked Poetry, Melic, Red Booth Review and other publications began to accept my work, I simultaneously started organizing my poems into book manuscripts.

11. One point that I haven't made yet but that is central to my writing concerns the cross-cultural vision that feeds my work. Since half my extended family lives in India and I've spent much time there with my immediate family, I live, psychologically speaking, in a place of intersecting histories. Constantly viewing the world from multiple angles of cultural perception

inevitably affects the imagination. A year and a half ago, during the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan as I sat sick and covered with blankets in the Pune train station in southern India at 3 in the morning, a poem came to me. Two of its lines pertained to a woman I know: “under her burkha Mumtaz writes poems / with an eyelash on dark cloth.” I’m not a fan of veils or burkhas, but we in the west make a mistake if we think we understand everything that goes on in the minds behind those veils and burkhas. We’re also mistaken if we assume that our solutions to non-western problems are necessarily the right solutions. It is even possible that we have more to learn from the Muslim women of Afghanistan and India than they have to learn from us – for instance, about poverty, survival techniques and tragedy. As the exiled Afghanistani poet Lida Abdullah writes in one of her works

The lights always flicker in the mosque. My feet are cold this evening from the muddy streets and rain. The inside of the mosque throbs with the shadows the candles throw on the walls. The air is fragrant with the smell of burning candles. With the smell of the war outside.

12. I remain unconvinced that poetry in itself has any general value. What does possess value, though, I think, is the effort to expand language, reach out, say, see, be, remember. To the extent that poetry incarnates such efforts and is led by them, it has value – the fragmented value of our fragmented attempts to live decently.

13. Poem . . .

### **Yes I Do**

I stepped out of the mangrove swamp, legs dripping more than water in the grass. The leeches on my calves pulsed like complicated words stuck to a page. I felt useless, lugging the M16 into sunlight there. Nearby, a bamboo thicket, a place, later, to sleep.

In the morning, pagoda bells tinkled while I drank rice wine as a water buffalo, maneuvering at a slow gait down a path through elephant grass, taught me how poems should move: bulky with life.

Years later, my M16 still comes in handy. A mercenary specializing in the overthrow of poems too useless to be good, I kill, at last, without regret. "Do you really?" sometimes people ask. "Yes I do," I reply, "why not?"

\* Note: This piece was written after receiving a note from Didi Menendez requesting that I send MiPo "an exclusive bio . . . and not the one that every other magazine has." I usually use just a short note ("Robert Bohm is a poet. He was born in Queens, NY.") because bio-wise I don't feel a need to say anything else. However, I wanted to honor Menendez request because she made it in good faith and also because I thought I might use the request as an opportunity to deviate from the norm by combining the usual bio fare (e.g., publications, etc.) with some statements about the vision that feeds my work.