Poetry from the Margins

A Poetry Reading

Poets: Alan Catlin, Bunkong Tuon, and Tony Gloeggler

Where and When: Feb. 15, 5-6 PM, Karp Hall 105, Union College

What do Schenectady, rice gruel, and Mercy House have in common? These are some of the subjects explored by poets whose works examine stories from the margins of society, giving voice to the working class and the dispossessed, the immigrant and refugee, and the developmentally disabled. Please join us to hear the diverse voices of contemporary America.

About the Poets

Alan Catlin has been publishing poetry in small presses, literary magazines, and university journals since the seventies. Among his many chapbooks and full-length books are the recently published Last Man Standing, a book of narrative poetry about Schenectady from Lummox Press, Near Death in the Afternoon on Becker Street from March Street Press, and a chapbook of narratives set in Albany from sunnyoutside, Only the Dead Know Albany. Forthcoming is American Odyssey, a full-length book of mostly ekphrastic poems from Future Cycle Press. He is currently the poetry editor of the online poetry magazine, misfitmagazine.net.


Tony Gloeggler is a life-long resident of NYC. His work has been published recently in Rattle, Paterson Literary Review, The Raleigh Review, Nerve Cowboy, The Chiron Review and Misfit. His first chapbook, One on One, won the Pearl Poetry Prize. His full-length books include One Wish Left with Pavement Saw Press and The Last Lie with NYQ Books. At the end of 2015 two new books were released: a collaboration with the photographer Marco North from Bittersweet Editions, Tony Come Back August, and Until the Last Light Leaves, a full-length collection with NYQ Books focusing on the 35 years he has worked in group homes for the developmentally disabled and his relationship with an ex-girlfriend’s autistic son.

This Event is Co-Sponsored by the English Department and the American Studies Program at Union College.
A Boy, a Dog and a Mortar

This is not the end of the earth
for war refugees, the end lies a few
miles down the mined highway,
or in a ditch nearby, an overturned
vehicle or in a sudden cross-fire
between dissidents and government
troops or in a strafing run, carpet
bombing exercise, co-ordinates called in
by in-advance-of-a-mission scouts,
or by non-existent spook soldiers,
on a run through the jungle to nowhere
using non-existent frequencies, dead air,
to broadcast positions of another life;
this is not the end for a young boy,
holding a malnourished dog to his chest,
the animal’s discontent, resignation, no-use-
in-struggling look, mirrored in the boy’s
thousand yard staring, into an endless
jungle, look, the boy’s down turned lips
signifying that another move means more
of the same, more loading onto troop
carrier trucks, just another illusion of
mobility and escape, the mortar propped
on the family’s meager luggage the essential
component, to taking the next giant step
toward what lies just beyond the end.
(Near) Death in the Afternoon on Becker Street

Even critically wounded
he knows enough to lie:

The car wasn’t his
He does not know the shooters
or why they shoot
Gives two false names
Neither match the name on his ID’s

At first he seemed more
surprised than hurt

says, “It hurts, it really hurts!”

The woman with no front teeth
a six o’clock shadow at noon
filthy house dress reeking of smoke and beer
first on the scene look straight into his eyes

says, “It would, you know.
You’ve been shot who knows how many times.”

He wonders, afraid to ask, “Am I dead?”
Is that what happened?”

She says, “Yes, it is.”
My grandmother and I had this ritual. Whenever I visited, I drove her to the local state park off of Rt. One. Her left hand gripped a walking stick, while the other held on to me. Bikers and joggers flew past us with “good morning” or “good afternoon.” On these walks we talked about Grandpa, who didn’t raise his voice at her until the very end, or her only living sibling, the younger sister in Cambodia she would never see again. Then she asked about my job, a professor at a private college. She wanted to know how students and colleagues were treating me. My aunts said that these walks were good. They got her to leave the house.

Then one afternoon in spring a group of teenagers saw us walking. “Hey,” one of the kids yelled. “I had Chinese food last week.” His girl told him to stop, but he kept insisting that he loved it. Not a violent slur, but enough to drag up things said and done to me at that age: something about coming from a country so poor we had to eat dogs and use leaves to wipe our asses, about being pushed around and spat at walking home from school. But I was now a professor, in my thirties, with a doctorate in literature. My body shook. Grandmother squeezed my right hand and said, “Don’t pay them any attention. Let’s keep walking. We’re almost near our spot where the boulder overlooks the still water of the lake. Look, the trout swims below us.”
Fishing for *Trey Platoo*

You might have seen them
fishing on the shores of the Cape Cod Canal:

My uncle in his fisherman’s hat
pulling in a one-foot scup, my aunt in her pajama-like
pants walking backward up the bike path,
snapping a line that’s got stuck between the rocks,

my other aunt reeling in a sea bass
her husband by her side directing.

Bikers, joggers, teenagers and their dates,
families with their children look curiously on.

Or maybe you have seen them
lining up all three sides of a pier in Salem,

their wrists jerking in a language
that bewitches the squids below.

They are not the only ones.
Other Cambodians and Vietnamese, once enemies,

fish side by side on the same American pier.
Other immigrants, Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese

speaking languages that I can’t understand, come together
on this spot: sacred rods in hands, beckoning the squid.

Or maybe you have seen them
under a bridge fishing the Providence River,

looking for *trey platoo*, a type of mackerel
like they used to eat in the refugee camps in Thailand.

Sometimes, my aunts and uncles run into an old friend
from those long ago days. They talk about the lack

of food, of sneaking out at night to fish, and of running,
always running, from the Thai police.

They exchange phone numbers, share fishing secrets,
and set up a time and place where they’ll fish together again.
When they get home, my aunts gut the fish, clean them, fry them, and put them in boiling stew of galangal, lemongrass, and kaffir leaves. My uncles and aunts sit in a circle on the floor, eat, and tell stories of how this fish got away or how one of them got caught by the Thai police.

No matter how hard they try, they can never understand why my cousin and I ever bother with fishing—

Why we catch and release food, as if it’s some sport.
My brother enlisted
in the winter. I pitched
for the sixth-grade Indians
and coach said
I was almost as good
as Johnny. My mother
fingered rosary beads,
watched Cronkite say
and that’s the way it is.
I smoked my first
and last cigarette. My father
kept his promise,
washed Johnny’s Mustang
every weekend. Brenda Whitson
taught me how to French kiss
in her basement. Sundays
we went to ten o’clock Mass,
dipped hands in holy water,
genuflected, walked down
the aisle and received
Communion. Cleon Jones
got down on one knee, caught
the last out and the Mets
won the World Series.
Two white-gloved Marines
rang the bell, stood
on our stoop. My father
watched their car
pull away, then locked
the wooden door. I went
to our room, climbed
into the top bunk,
pounded a hard ball
into his pillow. My mother
found her Bible, took
out my brother's letters,
put them in the pocket
of her blue robe. My father
started Johnny’s car,
revved the engine
until every tool
hanging in the garage
shook.
MAGNITUDE

My friend’s wife has a niece who is autistic. He doesn’t seem to believe that I never wish Joshua was different. He talks about missing the big things like proms and graduations. I joke about the perks, not worrying about Joshua using nonprescription drugs, driving drunk on weekends, paying for college, pretending to like the woman he wants to marry. I tell him I take Joshua as he is and I know what not to expect, how every new tiny thing he does grows in magnitude: the first time he ran to me, grabbed my hand when I picked him up at school, the first morning he walked into our Brooklyn bedroom to cuddle between us, that one time he scavenged through his cluttered sensations, strung four words together and told me clearly ‘Tony come back August.’ I explain I am one of the chosen few that Joshua invites into his world and it helps me imagine I am special with unique super powers. But yes, I am lying a bit. I’ve always wanted to lift him on my shoulders, six years old and singing that he believes in the promise land at a Springsteen show, play some one on one in a schoolyard, keeping it close and never letting him win until he beat me on his own. And yes, this past weekend in Vermont, I wish he watched television. We would have sat and argued when Girardi benched A-Rod, ate salty snacks as the Yanks played the Orioles
in the deciding fifth game.
Instead, I sat on a kitchen stool,
listening to the radio broadcast
while Joshua was happy in his room
tearing pages of picture books
into piles of thin paper strips.