

John Yamrus

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS



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Some of these poems have also appeared in the following books: SHOOT THE MOON, BLUE COLLAR, ONE STEP AT A TIME, 78 RPM and NEW AND USED.

Cover Art:

Mu, the Chinese character for the ultimate answer, SILENCE or NOTHING.

Also by John Yamrus

Shoot The Moon

Blue Collar

One Step at a Time

78 RPM

Keep The Change

New And Used

Start To Finish

Someone Else's Dreams (novel)

Something

Poems

Those

Coming Home

American Night

15 Poems

Heartsongs

Lovely Youth (novel)

I Love

Author's note

Please bear in mind that this book is nothing more and nothing less than exactly what the title implies. It is NOT to be looked at as a “career overview.” It’s simply a collection of old and new poems that go back only as far as 1985 (my first poems were published in 1970). The vast majority of the poems in this volume were written and published mainly in the last decade. It’s just stuff that I wanted to see together all in one volume. To keep it fresh, there are 16 new poems scattered through the book. I hope you like it.

For Kathy

Introduction

BLIND GENIUS AND WILD LUCK: THE POETRY OF JOHN YAMRUS

—*Todd Moore*

A few years ago a guy who worked off and on at prospecting came to one of my readings and at the end asked me, how come you write poetry when you know there's no money in it? I gave him my best kiss my ass smile and said, how come you dig for gold in a mountain when you know that no gold is there. The guy said point taken and retreated toward the wine and cheese table where the wine was cheap ripple and the cheese had gone bad.

The trick is you're not in it for the gold in the mountain. You're in it for the gold in the poem and there is plenty of gold in a John Yamrus poem. According to one of Yamrus' bios, he's been working the line since 1970 and that is just about the same time that I got my start in the poetry game. When I look at a Yamrus poem, I know that I am reading a poem that appears to be almost too simple. And, I am sure that there are twenty something wannabes who glance at his work and say I can do that. Only the thing is most poets can't do that, young or old. And, the cost for doing that is beyond estimate. Only death can tell you the true cost of a poem.

Yamrus would be the first to admit he has learned from the best. In an earlier essay, I pointed out that Charles Bukowski was almost certainly an influence. And, Gerald Locklin's poetry has also worked its magic on the Yamrus line. Locklin's poetry is riddled with a strange lacerating restraint, a feeling of laconic self effacement. In a sense, it operates almost like a lament except for the jazz poems where the idea of jazz momentarily liberates Locklin, takes him to another place, frees him for the existential moment of the intoxicating riff.

The important thing to keep in mind is that Yamrus knows he can never be Charles Bukowski. Nobody can. Bukowski came up from underneath the floorboards of America at a time when most poets wouldn't even admit that those floorboards were there or that there were denizens who lived down under. Bukowski fought his way out and changed the way that we see things. The impact of Bukowski's poetry is particularly evident in this Yamrus poem.

Bukowski's property

this poem
isn't mine these
thoughts aren't
mine these

sentences aren't
mine these
cadences
aren't
mine these
lines aren't
mine.
nothing
i do
or think
or write
is mine.
it's all filtered down
through you
Mr. Bukowski...
and i wish
you'd
come here
and
take it back.

I need to make a sidebar observation right here. I wish I'd written this poem. Not that I have been directly influenced by Mr. Bukowski because I know I haven't. I'd like to think that I was his major competition but it's the kind of thought I'd get after my third highball and my cheeks would get a little warm and my expectations for everything went right through the roof. In my prime drinking days, I knew I could out-write any poet alive and I also knew at the same time that the odds were I was terminally done for.

Other poems I'd wished I'd written are Waiting For The Barbarians by Cavafy, Things I Didn't Know I Loved by Nazim Hikmet, The Day Lady Died by Frank O'Hara, The Bells Of Cherokee Ponies by d. a. levy, The Gunfighter by Kell Robertson, The Play and Theory Of The Duende by Federico Garcia Lorca which isn't a poem except that it really is a poem, Mayakovsky's A Cloud In Pants, and Tony Moffeit's Luminous Animal. There are also many others, too numerous to mention.

The miracle is that we make do with what we have and by making do, by being honest about Bukowski's influence on his work, John Yamrus suddenly and with a certain amount of blind genius and wild luck wrote Bukowski's property which somehow transcends the whole idea of being enslaved to Bukowski's language. In fact, what Yamrus does in this one simple poem which could almost be spoken in a kind of shaking whisper is that he somehow invented a stripped bare language which is all his own.

At the end of Bukowski's property, Yamrus writes, it's all filtered down/
through you/ Mr. Bukowski.../and i wish/
you'd/come here/and/take it back. By denying his own language, by asking Bukowski to appear and take it all back, Yamrus gambles with an all or nothing

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gesture to make the poem and the language his own. Which is why I love this poem so much. It dances right at the edge where all great poetry dances. That's why this poem belongs in the ranks of poems by Hikmet, O'Hara, Lorca, Mayakovsky, d. a. levy, Tony Mofeit, and Kell Robertson. Great poetry takes great risks, sometimes at the top of the voice as in the case of Mayakovsky, sometimes quietly as in the case of a Cavafy or a John Yamrus. The poetry of John Yamrus demands more attention. There is real blood in this man's work.

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contrary

to
popular opinion,

the
internet

has ruined
poetry

for
the world.

it has
fooled

too many
people

into
thinking

they
can do

this.

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hemorrhoids

this time it's
hemorrhoids,
and they've been
bleeding since Sunday.

the doctor
wants me to have
surgery,
but i've been
putting it off.

needless to say,
it's a real
pain in the ass.

i've even resorted
to shopping in the
women's section
in the pharmacy...
buying pads
for the blood.

with not one
single
shred of dignity left
i take my
prescription,
the preparation H
and the pads
up to the counter
to pay.

the girl looks at me
and smiles.

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i can't tell
if she's just
being polite
or
has already figured out
that i'm useless
and old
and have
hemorrhoids.

unable to look her in the eye,
i pay,
walk out
and drive home,
sitting on a cushion,

thinking about her...

thinking:
it's okay, kid...
it's all yours, now.

every bit of it.

but don't worry...
sooner or later
it catches up with you.

it always does..

eventually...

inevitably...

life
always gets you
in the end.

did i ever tell you

about the time
Linda said i was good,
but that i'd never be
Bukowski?

Linda was a poet.

one of Bukowski's
girlfriends
in the '70s.

for a while
she edited and published
a pretty decent little magazine.

she wrote to me saying
that she loved my poems...

actually, it's been so long now
i really don't remember
if she loved them
or liked them,
but it doesn't matter...

she said that i was good,
but i would never be great...

because i wasn't
mad.

Bukowski (she said) was mad...
and he was
great.

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i wrote back
saying that she was right...
Bukowski IS mad
and Bukowski IS great,
but if one of the qualifications
for being mad
and being great
was having to put up with the likes of her,
then i'd be more than happy
to settle for what i am
and what i'm
going to be.

that was 30 years ago,
and do you know what?

i'm still not mad
and i'm still not
great...

but, every now and then,
when the moon's just right
i'm not
half bad.

and all the sick, perverted

bastards of the world
deserve to die an awful,
bloody death...

i was picking my dog up
at the vet
today
and while i was
waiting for them
to bring her out
i looked over
at the big white dog on my right
and was shocked to see
it had an ear missing
and part of its skull was gone.

it looked like an old wound
that had healed over
and i nodded at the owner
and asked:

“what happened
to your pooch? she
get hit by a car
or something?”

“nah”, he said, “she’s
a rescued dog.”

“rescued?”

“yeah, we found her in
the road, thrown out,
with her ear gone
and her head half torn away.”

“what happened?”

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“the cop said
they see it all the time.
they figure she was raised
by people who fight pit bulls
and you can tell by looking at her
that she’s real sweet
and i guess
when she wouldn’t fight
she was
probably just
used.”

“used?

for what?”

“bait.”

neither one of us
said a word.

i knelt down
and gave her a hug
and scratched her neck
and when i did
she turned real quick
and gave me a great
big wet sloppy kiss.

right on the face.

and all the sick, perverted
bastards of the world
deserve to die
an awful,
bloody death.

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after a very good month

at the typewriter,
the poems
have finally
slowed down.

but,
that’s okay.

stuff happens.

the glory
comes and goes.

nobody’s
going to give
anything to you.

you’ve got to
go after it
yourself.

the trick of it is
to be there
waiting
at the typewriter
when it happens.

and when it does,
if you
don’t write it down
and show it to someone

then
shame on you.

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imagine Freddy Kreuger

with a dash of Howdy Doody
thrown in.

he almost never sits.

he just stands
and stares at you,
and walks up behind you
silently,
saying nothing,
just staring at the back of yr neck.

he has a collection
of ladies silk panties
which he
pins to a cork board
in his bedroom.

he thinks sylvia plath
is a god.

he cuts his own hair,
trims the sleeves off his shirts
and uses a rope
for a belt.

and hasn't had a beer
ever.
he's afraid it'll
make
him lose
control.

to hear him tell it

he's god's gift to
women
and absolute hell
in a fight.

i don't understand it.

he never goes anywhere.
you never see him
with anyone...
he never does anything
except walk up behind you
and stare.

it's obvious his life is
screwed up
and the parts he tells you about
are fiction.
but, for some strange reason
he thinks he's got
everyone fooled.

and yet,
i want to tell him
it's okay.
we're all screwed in the head...

we've all told our own little fictions...

i just want to tell him
it's okay, pal...
living and dying's
easy...
it's the rest of it
that wears you down.

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so you go ahead and do
whatever you think it takes
to get you through...
only the next time i find you
staring at me like that
i'm going to
poke your eyes out
with a
stick.

dunno

got no answers
got no questions
got no whys
and got no wherefores

all i got
is me

me
and the poem
and this paper sitting in front of me

and what,
my friend,
have
you?

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Miller sat

at the end of the dock,
fishing.

i asked him
if he'd caught anything
and he said
"nah,
the tide
ain't right".

so, i said
"if the tide's not right,
why are you
sitting there,
fishing?"

and he said
"sometimes
the tide's right
and sometimes
it's not.

but,
you always
gotta fish".

they're my teachers, my muse...

the ones who talk about it
and pose.
the ones
writing in
someone else's voice.

they've set the bar high for me.

their arrogance
in the face of their
mediocrity
amazes me.

i want to share the secret with them.
i want to
take them aside
and tell them
as kindly as i can...

listen,
you either have it or you don't.

the trick
is in learning
to lay it all
on the line...

and then
leave.

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now that Bukowski's dead

what are all the
wanna-be's
that never were
going to do?

what are they
going to do
for inspiration?

who
will they
turn to now?

who's going to tell them
how to drink,
think
or write?

who's going to tell them
that Dostoyevsky's cool...

that John Fante
had a way
with words

and that it's
a lot more fun
to stay in bed
and think about it
than it is
to have to
get up
and write about it?

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now,
they'll
pick his bones
like they did
with all the others

and look for reasons
where there were
none...

and explanations
where there are
none...

where (more often
than not) there's just
some slob
who lived his life
and wrote
and loved
and slept
and ate
and died.

there's
no mystery at all...

really...

just
ask
Bukowski.

This is only a sample of the book. If you would
like to see more, visit www.lummoexpress.com

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“...a blade made from smooth honest steel,
with the sharpest of edges.”

Milner Place

“Yamrus gambles with an all or nothing gesture to
make the poem and the language his own.”

Todd Moore (from the Introduction)

Since 1970 John Yamrus has been a fixture on the American poetry scene. He has now published over 1,000 poems in magazines around the world and selections of his poetry have been translated into several languages...most recently, Romanian. He and his wife Kathy live in Sinking Spring, Pennsylvania.

<http://johnyamrus.tripod.com/>

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