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Transcending Mediocrity

Brett Ruthford

Nearly four years ago, at a salon-style poetry reading on Manhattan's Lower East Side, I first encountered Barbara A. Holland. My reaction?

Describe her as the eye of a tornado. Above her, lightning splayed through rents in black clouds. Rock-hewn by an interior wind, she brought the promise of a buffeting storm—the blast, updraft, and blast again of a prairie twister.

In more human terms, she looked like a cross between a wiry New England aristocrat and an urban shopping-bag lady. All nerves. She was herself a seamless neuron ending in sparks.

She was reading a tirade of vengeance against an imaginary rival, "Apples of Sodom and Gomorrah," which includes the strangulation of her rivals' infants. *Infants*, mind you, in the plural: "Three have already ben extinguished, one more means nothing."

A rhapsodic tribute to Ray Bradbury followed, titled "Autumn Wizard." Her Medea became an admiring Yankee transcendentalist. Bradbury's own poems, "unusual leaves," give him no peace. When they get loose, "the room is brawl/of burst October when the crush/crumbles and the whole belch of it charges/the dining room door. Then he burrows/through the heap of his poems for air/while his house leans on the wind."

* * *

This range from the black to the transcendent, is all Barbara Holland's territory. Too many of her early listeners were willing to let her twist slowly in the wind in Salem, while she was a citizen of Concord, too, and entitled to recognition for her full talent—as a powerful romantic, a wry humorist, and a transcendentalist *par excellence.*

In much of the poetry scene, and to all of the literary establishment, Barbara Holland remained an outcast. "A witch." "Too emotional, too verbose—not modern at all."

Small press editors thought otherwise—and published her 1200 times in the decade 1965-75. Somerone aptly called her "America's most widely published unknown poet." Yet recognition of the kind easily gained by lesser poets elude her: book editors found her too difficult, not the stuff of the college circuit; august poetry societies returned her mail (unopened!); and several would-be small press publishers of her work successively closed their doors and/or absconded with advance order sales.

While all these vexations raged, this rugged lady went on with her writing, a full-time poet. She composed a massive, 90-poem cycle called *Crises of Rejuvenation,* dedicated to the on-going spirit of Rene Magritte.

Lest there by any confusion here, her use of Magritte's imagery as a take-off point implies no *literary* surrealism. Barbara Holland would as soon drink a cocktail of ground glass as emulate the principles of that canard of a movement. Instead, she writes vivid first-person narratives of what it's like to live in the kind of universe Magritte suggested in his paintings. Some of the poems admittedly, verge on mere explication, an inherently second-hand experience—many more, however, are so original as to transcend even their inspiration to become dazzling flights of fantasy on their own.

In mid-1973, I published a sampler volume of this cycle, called *Autumn Wizard*, under the Poet's Press aegis. Two printings later, we knew that the entire work had to be published. In October 1974, a new imprint was created to published the works of Ms. Holland and other romantics—Grim Reaper Books. Appropriately, the first title was Volume One of *Crises of Rejuvenation,* followed by the second half a few months later.

At the same time we were struggling to issue Barbara Holland's poems in print, audiences at poetry readings finally caught on to what this whirling dervish of ideas was up to. Familiarity bred respect. Reactions changed from "not her again" to the hush of anticipation. For Barbara A. Holland's performances of her work achieved the dedicatory aim of her *Crises* cycle, to achieve, "the privileged moments . . . that transcend mediocrity."

Why has her work, so accessible after one or two visual readings, been so difficult at times for audiences? I believe *word choice* and *syntax* are at the root.

A Holland poem can resemble a Brittany field—covered with hard-edged *menhirs*—gritty, Anglo-Saxon words. They *can* distract from the flow of the poem to the soft, Latinate ear, just as those oversize salt crystals obscure the taste of a street vendor's pretzel. Not unfamiliar words, no more than salt is unfamiliar, but precise words piled neatly together like a New England fence. No mortar, just the glue of the poem's intent; there is not a pebble out of place.

The structure of some of the poems is problematic at first. Enormous breath phrases—one is tempted to call them operatic gasps—are strung out, straddling lines and even stanzas.

The flow of the poem is often a single strand—don't dare stop in the middle or you're lost. On first hearing, the experience is akin to an attempt to read the lettering on a fast-moving train: you can scan the motion of it from horizon to horizon, make out the broadest contours of meaning, but the rest may escape you.

On the second hearing, the listener has already acquired some of the train's motion for himself—you can keep up. The train grabs you as it goes by and takes you as a passenger, not a spectator. You are whisked along to the final terminus effortlessly.

And what a trip! Barbara Holland's gondolas take a flying saucer flight through a Magritte canvas to Bradbury's October Country. It's hard not to catalog the curious denizens of her poems:vampire roses; attentive fungi; crumbling rock visages; hapless sorcerers who manufacture excess tentacles and clouds; airborn fish; and that pair of unpeopled crutches out for a stroll.

* * *

If audiences have learned to relish the sparkling imagination in her *Crises* poems, neither have they failed, at last, to appreciate her darkest utterances as sublime performing pieces. Her jealous strangler, once rejected as a psychopathic wish fulfilment, is now in demand as she reads all over the northeastern U.S., in coffeehouses, workshops, campuses and on radio.

Barbara Holland's most powerful and Gothic cants have now been captured in print. "Apples of Sodom and Gomorrah," appears in Bantam's anthology *We Become New.* "Not Now, Wanderer," the most passionate of her works (and the most spine-chilling in performance), crowns *Crises of Rejuvena-*

tion. Her "Black Sabbat," and "Medusa," along with "Apples" again, are represented in Grim Reaper's 1975 offering, *May Eve: A Festival of Supernatural Poetry.*

I will not venture here to comment on these individual works. These proven and effective thrillers could each be the subject of an exhaustive essay.

For Terror and Wonder are the two sides of Holland's coin—the mint of her realm. Her anguish is delicious, timeless; as the Briton David Cunliffe wrote of her, she "wanders through the bleakest wastes of terror and loneliness without a dram of self-pity."

That's the way it is in the eye of the tornado. •

[*Brett Rutherford currently heads three poetry ventures in New York City: The Poet's Press, founded in 1965, Grim Reaper Books and the National Index of Literary Periodicals. As an editor, book designer and printer, he has brought more than 50 poets into print in small press editions.*]