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POESY #3

POESY INTERVIEWS POET AND PUBLISHER BRETT RUTHERFORD

BRIAN MORRISEY: Tell the readers of *Poesy* a little bit about yourself.

BRETT RUTHERFORD. I was born in Southwestern Pennsylvania amidst coal mines and coke ovens--hardcore Appalachia. A setting more stifling and terrifying than any urban locale--moonshine drunks, incestuous rednecks, arrogant stupidity. Even as a small child I knew there was another world that I belonged to--not *this* one. I got a hint of it from television--early science fiction adventures on Saturdays, *Superman*, food for the brain.

When I was five, my mother took me to see my first movie: *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. Captain Nemo instantly became my hero--the first of many "outsiders" I would adopt as role models.

I lived in a house where there were no books. The town I went to high school in didn't even have a library--I had to hitchhike to Pittsburgh to get to roam the open stacks of a really stupendous library. So I found other heroes--The Count of Monte Cristo, Dracula, Faust. I was already marked for weirdness. Probably my most persistent childhood fantasy was the wish that aliens from space would come in a flying saucer, kill my parents, and carry me off.

BRIAN: How did you start writing poetry?

BRETT: I discovered Edgar Allan Poe when I was about 13. This is the age when I seriously considered killing myself. Then I had a brush with death--wound up in the hospital after losing four-fifths of my blood--and had three weeks convalescing in a hospital. The window overlooked a graveyard. The radio one night was playing classical music, which I had just discovered, and I heard the Berlioz *Fantastic Symphony* that includes a March to the Gallows and a Witches' Sabbath--music so bizarre that even though written in 1829, is still weird today. I wrote a poem to try to describe the impression the music made on me. Then there was no stopping me--I was writing Poe-style

poems, short stories, plays and even novels. Seeing all the old Universal horror films on late night TV also warped me for life.

BRIAN: How has poetry influenced your life?

BRETT: I think of myself as a writer, and poetry is one special kind of writing. It's a telegraphed, highly intense, very formal kind of writing that I only do when "the spirit moves me." Sometimes almost a year will pass with no poems, and then I'll write a dozen one after another. As for how it shaped my life, I guess I would say that poetry defines my role as an "outsider." You cannot write poems--not good ones, anyway--unless you are an outlaw of sorts. You have to rise above and remain aloof from the rest of the herd. It doesn't mean that you don't have passions--just that you're always transforming your experiences and emotions into works of art.

BRIAN: Do you correspond with other poets?

BRETT: As time permits. I lived in New York City for 16 years so I've known hundreds of poets in person. I went to poetry readings three or four nights a week for many years, ran readings, and started my press, The Poet's Press, to publish little known poets. I've published 136 books so far, so, yes, I would say I'm in contact with quite a few. Some of these poets send me their new work and we send comments back and forth. This is especially helpful for poets who may not be able to go where they can try their work out on audiences.

BRIAN: I've noticed there's quite a lot of poetry coming out of Providence. Can you elaborate on that?

BRETT: There are lots of poets all over. You're probably seeing two things. First, a fair number of artists and writers are moving to Providence, because it's a reasonably safe, civilized city (at least around the Brown/RISD campuses) where the rents are affordable. That's exactly why I moved here from New York. You also see Provi-

dence mentioned a lot because of all the colleges, but, personally, I wouldn't cross the street to hear most of the academic poets read their work.

BRIAN: Did you write in high school? If so, how did your peers react to your interest in poetry?

BRETT: I don't think anybody ever paid any attention to my poetry when I was in high school. I knew it was the most important stuff, but only a couple of my teachers ever read it. The rest of the time I wrote horror and science fiction stories, and other students loved it. I had a lot of friends who enjoyed my juvenile stuff. If you had asked them about poetry, though, they would have said that only perverts write poetry.

BRIAN: What are your short and long term goals as a poet?

BRETT: My long term goal is to be an immortal poet. If my work isn't read a hundred years from now, it's all a waste of time. As for short term goals, I'm a realist. Poetry is hated and scorned in our culture. Anyone who tries to make a living as a poet will starve. All I can do is to write as much poetry as my life permits, and do everything I can to see to it that the stuff gets into print. Just as I help other poets on the immortality track by publishing their work, now and then I get a new book of mine produced.

BRIAN: Some feel poetry should be kept to yourself. Where do you stand on this?

BRETT: About 95% of all poetry should be kept in the desk drawer. People who write just to exorcise their demons and "express themselves" get too much attention--the "creative writing" syndrome. Poems, like stories, are works of art intended to be read by others. If you don't write for an audience, and strive to make sense to the average reader, then don't publish the stuff.

There's another part of your question, though, that needs to be answered separately. No one should ever be *ashamed* of writing poetry. In many other cultures, poets are honored. In Russia and Eastern Europe, poetry is regarded as dangerous stuff and 5,000 people will turn up for a poetry reading. Poetry books in Russia sell hundreds of thousands of copies. England has always treated its poets with veneration. Poets

are special and their gift is the highest and best of all writing.

BRIAN: Is poetry getting too serious and too depressing?

BRETT: Yes, and that's because it's too personal and subjective. Poets write too much about their boring, everyday lives--boring even if they do have lots of weird sex. And they read too much poetry, when they should be studying the universe around them--animals, geology, astronomy, science, history, biography. Most poetry is blah because poets don't have anything to say. I read very little poetry any more--you don't need to once your own style is settled--but I read a lot of science, history, philosophy, mythology--stuff that gives me something to hang a poem on.

Another reason why many new, young poets are depressing is that they have no exposure to the larger, European culture from which America sprang. They're now being taught that white, European culture is bad and third world culture is good. That's baloney. We inherit a gigantic, rich European tradition that begins with Greek myth and is one incredible intellectual roller coaster ride up till the American Revolution. You have to learn about that stuff because if your poetry is going to survive it has to be piled on top of that heap of European/English/American writing. You have to know about Beowulf and the monster Grendel, about King Lear and Othello, about Shelley and Byron, about Napoleon and Goethe and The French Revolution. If you cut yourself off from these things, you disinherit yourself from the greatest free treasure ever offered a human being.

BRIAN: Can you list a few of your recent books?

BRETT: There's *Poems from Providence*. That's the big book of all the poems I wrote from 1985 to 1988. It has everything from Greek mythology to vampire poems and is intended as a real demonstration of just the thing I was talking about: how poets should look *outside themselves* for subject matter. I also have a little book called *In Chill November*, which is stuff written since the big collection was closed off.

More graveyard poems, and a big fantasy about pianos coming to life in Poland and driving the Russians out. Then I have two novels published by Zebra Books: *Piper* and *The Lost Children*. They're both horror novels.

BRIAN: What is your favorite book you've written? Favorite poem?

BRETT: That's a tough one. I'm updating my book of 25 annual autumn poems, called *Anniversarium*. Taken as a whole, the crumbly leaf graveyard autumn poems are probably my best work. My single favorite poem is one called *Fete*, which is about a sorcerer who falls in love with you and who, when you reject him, sends a giant bat to kidnap you for a very special ritual in a moonlit grove. I say "you" because the poem is written so that the reader thinks the poem is written to him or her. It really makes people squirm when I read it to audiences--it's an incantation and a revenge poem. Another recent favorite is my play, *Night Gaunts*, a biography of horror writer H.P. Lovecraft, performed here in Providence for the writer's recent centennial.

BRIAN: *Poems from Providence*--how do you feel about it?

BRETT: Proud. It represents the best three year period I've ever had for my poetry. And frustrated, because it's been completely ignored locally. The newspapers did not review it and the local bookstores will not be bothered to carry it. The book is also not welcome at the local colleges because their professors are mostly Marxists and my stuff is very anti-Marxist and anti-authoritarian. The local bigots also don't like my kind of writing since I make fun of religion and sexual repression.

I guess the really depressing part is that I know the book contains many controversial and striking ideas--things that should make some people hopping mad. But because it's *poetry* they will simply ignore it. Consider that *Poems from Providence* includes necrophilia, ghouls, sex with wood nymphs and water sprites, vampires, Jehovah turning into a jellyfish, anti-Marxist tirades, anti-Fundamentalist tirades, orgies of flowers, Zeus having sex with a teenaged boy, and me eating flowers off the graves of young cadets. If I wrote about those

things in prose I'd be picketed!

BRIAN: Is coffee a main source of nutrition for you?

BRETT: You came pretty close to the mark. For me, the drug of choice is tea. I keep about 30 different kinds of caffeine teas around the house, as well as many herbals. I *hate* coffee. On the topic of stimulants, I hasten to add that after a long time of hanging out with writers, I don't know any who have in any way benefited from using any kinds of drugs. If you value your consciousness, you want to enhance it, not distort or deaden it. There's a silly myth that art and drugs go together, and that comes from the fact that about 70% of all artists suffer from clinical depression. They turn to drugs because they can't handle the emotional turmoil that comes with the territory. I find that vitamins--and a good grip on reality--work just fine.

BRIAN: Where do you find the best place to write is?

BRETT: Since I do other kinds of writing and editing for a living, I work at home all day. As a result, I often need to get out to do some poetry. I sit in the woods in warm weather. I write a lot on trains, since I go to New York a couple of times a month. Long trips are great for poetry.

BRIAN: Is your occupation a poet?

BRETT: I do not know a single person who makes a living as a poet. Poets have to teach or hold other jobs to pay the bills. A few manage to get grants or position as "poets in residence" at a school, but these are short term things with many years in between where there is no money. I knew one woman poet who tried--she lived in poverty and died a couple of years ago. If you saw her on the street, you would have mistaken her for a shopping bag lady. I like good food and electronic gadgets and toys too much to starve for poetry. I make my living as a freelance writer, and as a consultant on computers. This lets me stay home in Carfax Abbey all day and go forth by night.

BRIAN: What are some bands you listen to?

BRETT: You may be surprised to hear this, but I do not listen to rock music. I have hated it all my life--even hated it as a teenager. I love music--it is a passion that moves me even more than poetry--but that dictates that the music must be the highest, noblest, most intense, most gigantic experience possible. And *that* means classical music. That brings us back to the "here and now" low culture versus the European tradition. Classical music--although most young people don't realize it--includes powerful works that can be emotionally shattering, as well as other pieces that are unforgettable just because their rhythms and melodies and orchestration are devastating. I recently heard someone condemn classical music as "a bunch of yuppies in suits and ties sitting around listening to string quartets." Yes, there is shallow classical music and there are phonies who only skim the surface--but REAL classical music--Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Berlioz, Mahler--is the ultimate emotional and sometimes even hallucinogenic experience. If you know good music, listening to bad music becomes painful.

BRIAN: You're really down on sex and drugs and rock and roll!

BRETT: No, just two of the three. You should have as much sex as possible.

BRIAN: How do you occupy your spare time?

BRETT: I don't have any. Life is so short, and there are so many things to do, write and experience... In a literal sense, if you ask what I do when I am not writing, I would say: I write music (piano), bicycle around Providence, explore woods, collect horror books and videos, and attempt to corrupt the minds and morals of youth.

BRIAN: Who is your favorite author?

BRETT: I couldn't even begin to answer that. I could tell what writers most influenced my flight to intellectual freedom: Jules Verne, Ayn Rand, H.P. Lovecraft, Colin Wilson, Robert A. Heinlein, Ray Bradbury. As for poets, the ones I most admire are Poe, Shelley, Whitman, Robinson Jeffers, Anna Akhmatova, Frost, Ginsberg

and Rilke. If you asked me who is the most important writer alive today, I'd probably have to say Solzhenitsyn. The best story writers: Ray Bradbury and Isaac Singer. As you can see, it's a real mixed bag. I am an outsider molded by outsiders.

BRIAN: Any advice to give 'zine publishers?

BRETT: Get into desktop publishing as fast as possible, because the minimum standards for a professional 'zine are rising fast. If you want to be taken seriously, produce something that looks like type. Raise your standards and publish the best stuff you can find. Forget about whether something has been in another magazine--find the best and publish it. (If Poe's "The Raven" hadn't been copied in newspapers all over America, we wouldn't even know the poem today.) Do a small, professional looking book rather than a big, sloppy one. Proofread, proofread, proofread. Be kind to your authors and readers and resist temptations to wield the editorial pen to smash someone, no matter how obnoxious they are. Try to create a coherent theme for each issue--something that holds the issue together. Above all, be kind to fellow publishers--none of you are rivals and you can all help one another.

BRIAN: Any closing comments?

BRETT: It's hard for anyone to bear up as a poet with year after year of neglect, scorn and rejection. Nonetheless, poets and the editors of the little 'zines who support them must maintain perspective. No one ordered us to be poets. No one promised us fame or fortune. No other poet's fleeting "success" was at our expense. And there is no political "fix" that will make poetry admired, poets rich or magazines profitable. When the stakes are small, as they are in poetry, many people get more petty and jealous when in fact they need to be benevolent. The world owes no one a living, least of all a poet. The greatest songbird in the rain forest does not exact a tax on the other birds for his song: he gives it freely for all who will hear. Love and honor the great poets; be kind to the good ones who are struggling toward the light; and pass by in silence the bad ones who only write to please themselves.