

Stalking Writers

A Writer Searches for the Literary Life of Williamsburg

by Suzanne Wise

Past the angular bartender, past the red tin-ceiling, past the rows of vodka, I stalk to the back of Pete's Candy Store (709 Lorimer St., 302-3770; petescandystore.com). I am on a mission. I am looking for the literary life of Williamsburg.

And tonight, in this speakeasy-like space just north of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, I have perhaps found it. I sit down in the back row of a narrow room full of chairs. Poet Matthea Harvey perches on the edge of a stool, on a small stage, beneath an archway of a little round light bulbs. She reads a poem from her book, *Pity the Bathtub Its Forced Embrace of the Human Form*, and the crowd erupts in applause.

So, this is where the writers are, I think. After the reading, Matthea introduces me to a sculptor and a painter. We gossip for a minute about a poet that the sculptor once met and I go off and sit down at the bar with my date, who is a painter. We argue about Henry Miller, who grew up in Williamsburg, and so I forget to eavesdrop on the conversations of others to see if there are indeed writers here. When the Miller discussion peters out – we agree to disagree – I glance around. The couple next to us stares blankly at me. Collections of young people carouse around the room.

I realize I wouldn't know a writer if I saw one. In desperation, I introduce myself to Alison and Mira, curators of Pete's series every other Thursday night (a schedule is available on their web site). They are both fiction writers with Mira also working in the nonfiction arena. Where is the writing scene? I ask. They've got a few ideas, listing off a couple writers they've heard live here, a few places to hear people give readings. They are forthright and unperturbed about the relative dearth (relative to Manhattan that is, or Park Slope, Brooklyn) and I start to wonder if I am perhaps tilting at windmills with a giant pen.

But some part of me still thinks there's some hidden truths to unearth. I shove my pen and paper into my bag, and head for the door. Walking south toward my home, my date and I pass building after building with lit windows that reveal studio spaces: painters, sculptors, designers, photographers and dot-comers who've ostentatiously installed themselves all over town. Real estate reveals the truth: the visual mediums owns Williamsburg ... at least for the time being.

"At least I cook," says my date, by way of compensating for his views on Henry Miller. He thinks I am still brooding about our discussion. Yeah, I think to myself, but you're still an artist.

Being Special

When I started visiting Williamsburg about ten years ago, I'd go to parties and I'd be the only writer for miles. I was a novelty. Artist friends would introduce me to other artists as The Poet I Told You About, or simply, The Poet. I was special, and I liked that.

When I moved to Williamsburg in November, 2000, I assumed I'd continue to enjoy the special attention. I also thought I'd continue to feed off the inspiration that comes from being

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around creatives that do more than write down words and/or delete them. As Matthea, who has three sculptor roommates, says, "It's nice being around someone who, at the end of the day, has something concrete to show ... like an embalmed Barbie."

But lately I've found myself wishing there were more people who could relate to the woes and wonders of installing punctuation or slashing apart a paragraph. Mónica de La Torre, author (with Terrence Gower) of the satiric *Appendices, Illustrations and Notes*, translator of Mexican poet Gerardo Deniz, and editor of the forthcoming *Reversible Monuments*, an anthology of contemporary Mexican poetry, concurs: She goes to lots of art functions with her boyfriend painter Bruce Pearson and sometimes finds it frustrating to be the only word person. "You just end up wanting to talk about different things," she says.

But La Torre believes that's changing. She knows of five other writers who live in the neighborhood ("well, two in Greenpoint," she amends) and she sometimes runs into them on the street. On the other hand, La Torre questions the assumption that there are literary communities affixed to neighborhoods anyway. "It's not like there's Manhattan poets versus Brooklyn poets," she points out. But she adds that Williamsburg, because of its small size, could become a neighborhood-driven community of writers if they continue to migrate here. "It's more bound to happen here than anywhere else," she affirms.

If I was writer where would I hide?

Artists are easy to spot. They walk the streets in paint-splattered pants. They are in the hardware store buying sculpture supplies or high-wattage light bulbs. In restaurants, cafe, stores, and bodegas, they recognize and greet each other. They converse loudly about their studios, their art shows, their crappy day jobs.

Maybe the problem is there are no office supply stores for writers to linger around in. And with computer technology, nobody's walking around with ink-splattered trousers or typewriter-ribbon smudges on their foreheads.

So, I go to bookstores and hope I'll get lucky. At Spoonbill & Sugartown (www.spoonbillbooks.com; 218 Bedford Ave., 387-7322), most people seem to be browsing through the broad display tables of art books despite the fact that the poetry section has been recently expanded. And at the more cluttered Cloves Press (229 Bedford Ave., 302-3751) people come in to visit the staff (I've heard talk about upcoming music gigs) or to mill about silently, and I spend my time pouring over the truly impressive selection of literary mags. At The Read (158 Bedford Ave., 599-3032), I sidle along the tables of coffee-sippers to get to the used books. I feel intrusive as I bend down to look at the bottom shelf and get in the way of the waitstaff. But, stashed beyond a wide display of cheesy fashion magazines, there are some truly great finds.

All three of these bookstores have hosted readings at one time or another. There's usually no official schedule so you have to stop in periodically to find out about them. Spoonbill has had big name writers, like Nikki Giovanni and Eileen Myles, as well as local small-name people. Likewise with Clovis Press, which has also hosted publication readings for magazines.

There are also readings at bars like Pete's Candy Store. Black Betty (366 Metropolitan Ave., 599-0243) has a festive and popular open mic series and Art Land (609 Grand St., 384-9802) has a reading series but a press time the curatorial position was in flux. Galapagos (70 N. 6th St., 782-5188) has hosted readings for *Pierogi Press*, memoirist Dave Eggers and mixed media events that bring together writers, filmmakers, and other types of artists. Perhaps bars

throughout Williamsburg are quietly or not so quietly doing tributes to language without lots of advertising.

Brian Kim Stefans, an experimental poet (*Angry Penguins*, *Gulf*, and *Free Space Comix*) and editor of the online poetics magazine *Arras*, feels like there's actually a great deal of behind-the-scenes literary activity. He describes going to a reading at a loft that included the famous Russian writer Arkadi Dragomoschenko. He adds that a lot of his poet friends live in the neighborhood, and all of them turn out to be the authors of books I already know and admire: Heather Ramsdell (*Lost Wax*, a national poetry series winner chosen by James Tate), Lisa Jarnot (*Some Other Kind of Mission* and *Ring of Fire*), and Edmund and Anselm Berrigan (children of legendary New York poets Alice Notley and Ted Berrigan and authors of *Disarming Matter* and *Integrity and Dramatic Life*, respectively). "Of course," Stefans adds, "I don't usually see them around Williamsburg. We meet up in the city."

Print Matters

Maybe the best place to find writers is not in any embodied way but in their words. Unfortunately, it's hard to find the work of Williamsburg writers in Williamsburg. On the other hand, Williamsburg is the home of a number of smart and ambitious literary publications and presses that can be found at both Spoonbill and Clovis Press. These publishers include the work of those who live outside the boundaries of the neighborhood but seem to me to express a bit of an outlaw vision that could only come from an outer borough.

For example: Autonomedia (www.autonomedia.org) publishes playfully subversive books, including *Grass*, which is about the politics of pot; *Why Different?*, about gender, by poetic feminist Luce Irigaray; *Teaching Yourself Fucking* with cartoons by Tuli Kupferberg, founder of the Fugs; and the *2001 Sheroes and Womyn Warriors Wall Calendar*. Edited by poet Susan Swenson, *Pierogi Press* (see Wburg.com, Issue 1) features experimental prose and poetry, art, and silk-screened covers by artists. The sleekly designed *Cabinet* magazine (www.immaterial.net/cabinet) features art, and writing on culture and literature; the first issue also included a CD of sound poetry. And *Arras.net* offers visual poetry, links to cyberpoetry sites, notes on small-press mags, and essays.

Insurance, born in June of 2000, is my latest favorite magazine, to go along with *Pierogi* and *Cabinet*. Unlike the other mags, *Insurance* unapologetically focuses solely on experimental poetry in a traditional printed format. Still the product is beautiful ... in a mod-insurance salesman kind of way: brown cover, brown type and stylish design. According to co-editor Kostas Anagnopoulos, "We wanted to make the magazine seductive to someone with a strong aesthetic instinct, but who might not normally read poetry." Kostas goes on to reveal the impetus for the journal in a way that makes me feel like I've found the magic grail at last. The reason for *Insurance*, says Kostas, is "create a community, not necessarily one that participates in readings and parties, but a silent community (but by no means passive) which participates by reading and writing."

Ghosts

Eileen Myles, author of numerous books (*School of Fish*, *Maxfield Parrish*, *Chelsea Girls*) and member of the spoken word band Sister Spit, begins the national tour of her latest oeuvre (the novel *Cool for You*) in Williamsburg. In front of a packed house at Spoonbill late in the

year 2000, she ponders, Why here? She thinks it has something to do with the fact that Henry Miller, one of her favorite writers, lived in Williamsburg.

I've always been turned off by Miller's writing because of its misogyny and antisemitism. But I love Eileen Myles. (Not to mention my date.) So I think maybe I'm not giving Miller his due. I do a little research: Miller moved to Williamsburg with his German immigrant parents in the first year of his life, 1891, 110 years ago. He spent eight years formative years at 662 Driggs Avenue, and apparently in the first five of them he heard little or no English. (Then the family moved to the Bushwick section of Brooklyn.) So, the bulk of Miller's Williamsburg experience must have been processed in baby German.

Another famous writer is from Williamsburg too: Betty Smith, who wrote *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, a tale of a young girl and her tenement life told with plucky determination. Smith was born in 1896, just five years after Miller, to German immigrant parents.

Miller hung out in Greenwich Village, then Paris, then Big Sur, California. Smith escaped to the South. Her book was made into a feature film and a theatrical play. Her vision of Williamsburg kept her company throughout her life, whereas Miller morphed his into settings found other shores.

These two sides of the writing ancestry of Williamsburg make me think that a writing life consists of equal parts evasion/escape and investment/connection. For Miller and Smith, Williamsburg was a truly foreign land. English must have been at first an unforgiving desert (Miller is credited with "irrigating the American sentence") then, as language assimilation ensued, a rubble-strewn ghetto. Each had to meet the barriers of cultural alienation and poverty in their own way. Williamsburg was a muse they needed to leave behind to tap into.

Those who come to Williamsburg in search of a muse have the privilege of choice: I came here because I inherited a cheap apartment from an artist friend and more globally to get away from my roots. My parents, the offspring of German and Irish immigrants in New York, left the city to create a quiet existence in Vermont. Eleven years ago, I chose to leave the rural and return to their roots in New York City, roots that don't really exist anymore, that have sunken into the pavement and been replaced by other forms of life.

And so I spend most of my Williamsburg days alone in my apartment. I write accompanied by salsa music from the Dominican family downstairs. There isn't much of a sense of community between my neighbors and I, as I don't speak Spanish.

Some days I go to the Verb cafe, where everyone speaks English, and tap away at my laptop. Once or twice I have seen someone scribbling in a notebook. Sometimes somebody leans over and asks me about my computer. The interested party is usually an artist or a designer who turns out to own a much more powerful computer than I do. One day, a young man introduces himself as a musician (when he's not at his day job). Maybe he understands about being an outsider, I think. "You know, I used to think about being a writer" I smile encouragingly. He goes on, "And I know if I had pursued it, good things would have come of it. I'm sure I would have been a success. ... But somehow I never got around to it."

The confident stranger reminds me that while I've never imagined being a musician, successful or otherwise, I've always fantasized about being an artist. For a while I even drew a series of cartoons called *The Writer's Life*, and in one I depicted a dream in which Paula Cooper of the Paula Cooper gallery called me up and wanted to give me a show. The catch was she needed to see slides of my work, just as a formality. The dream ends with me not being able to find a photographer to take pictures of my art and so I decide to bag the show. The last frame of the cartoon depicts my return to my writer's life: me sulking in a closet.

A part of me, I realize, is attached to my closet even as I envy those who live outside it. And part of what I like about being a writer in Williamsburg is feeling like I'm left alone, irrelevant to the scene. Because there's a certain freedom in the fact that no one's watching me spy on them.

But sometimes I notice somebody peering back and that's when the walls between potential communities get holes kicked in them. For example: I open the door of my home to the boy of the downstairs Dominican household. He is sitting on the landing outside my apartment, his feet on the step below but his little body is twisted around so he faces me. Perched on one of his hands is a huge white dove. They both stare at me calmly. The dove is silent. The boy, who is maybe eight years old, speaks to me in fluent English. He tells me of the other three doves that live in a cage in his apartment below now. He's had the doves for four months, he says.

Since then, when I get up early to write or stay up late at night reading, I hear the guttural cooing of the doves. Even though the doves had been living down there for four months, I had never heard them before. Now the animal sounds, reassure me: I am not alone in my closet. Or I am alone, but so are the birds in their cages, the kids in their English, the parents in their Spanish, and, of course, the artists in their studios.

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