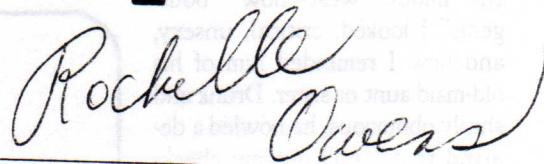

Splendid Examples

Rochelle Owens



During the Eisenhower years, the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit hung suspended over the rapidly growing artistic and political consciousness of the young like a bloated advertising zeppelin ready to explode. It was the beginning of radical artistic experimentation. The poets, playwrights, filmmakers, painters, sculptors, and performing artists were inventing, finding, producing, gathering, analyzing, and selecting the groundwork for those who came later, including the pop culture heroes of the billion-dollar rock music business. The place to be was New York or San Francisco.

In 1956, I was working for the Poetry Society of America and became a member after submitting some poems to the committee of jurors. My work was experimental and reflected even then an important concern of mine, a response to the need for the dynamism of the word, a dynamic charged with evolution and change—those basics to living form. Language, image, movement change themselves according to the multifaceted structure of the world. The smug, entombed “literary club” of the Poetry Society of America was not the environment for an idealistic twenty-year-old who had intuited that art was supposed to be surprise, discovery, and possibly even fulfillment. When I think of that period, it is like a stage set showing several doors: I’m rushing out of one marked the Poetry Society to find myself mysteriously in front of other doors marked in bleeding red paint, Les Deux Megots, St. Marks Poetry Project, Cafe Cino, Hardware Poets Theatre, La-

Mama E.T.C., Judson Poets’ Theatre, and Theatre Genesis. Those seed-beds of aspirations and rebellion on the lower east side of New York.

It was the beginning edge of the sixties, and rampant sexism was valued among the good ole boys. The race of “poets” was male. Open season on women is a venerable literary tradition, and writers such as Joyce Cary and Henry Miller provided role-model qualities to a couple of generations of “brilliant new novelists and poets.” *Woman* as a metaphor took on flesh, blood, and bone when a stumpy, brisquet-of-beef-shaped, breast-fed-till-eighteen-months, Harvard graduate, a genius of course—Norman Mailer—and the snot-glistening-eyed doberman-headed zombie and ikon of proto-punk-culture—William S. Burroughs—stabbed and shot their wives. Burroughs actually killed his. Valerie Solanis’ Charles Bronson shooting spree attack on the seamless tupperware body of Andy Warhol was a blast of revenge from the bowels of clear-eyed Artemis.

In 1958, during the Vietnam War, the trial and execution of a killer named Caryl Chessman, as well as an anxious brief marriage, I wrote my first play, *Futz*. I had been working as a clerk in the accounting department of Sothby-Parke Bernet Galleries. Among the customers were Greta Garbo, Ali Khan, and Katharine Hepburn. The early drafts of the play were typed on lot statements and sheets torn from the daily calendar. Between sales, during the slow periods I would work, secretly, on my play. In the evenings at home I’d

eagerly work for hours, transcending everyday reality with the surprises of artistic creativity.

I had sent some poems to Allen Ginsberg and Kenneth Rexroth, and both had responded with warmth and enthusiasm. Ginsberg put me in touch with the young poet and playwright LeRoi Jones who later changed his name to Amiri Baraka. Jones published a poetry magazine called *Yugen*. I remember how happy I was to be included among its contributors: Charles Olson, Tristan Tzara, Daisy Aldan, Jack Kerouac, Frank O’Hara, and Paul Blackburn, who later became a good friend. In 1961, *Trobar* published my first collection of poems, *Not Be Essence That Cannot Be*, and a new book by Paul Blackburn. Countless friends used to collect in the apartment I shared with George Economou on the upper west side to collate and bind our little reviews and books. Afterward, we usually feasted on French pastry and dessert wine—and occasionally smoked cigars. Jones published a group of my poems in an anthology entitled *Four Young Lady Poets*. It was not surprising that, when I edited the anthology of plays *Spontaneous Combustion* ten years later in 1972, a play of Roi’s was included. Years later I discovered that his dad, like mine, had been a post-office clerk. Roi and his wife Hettie lived in an apartment on the lower east side—where they welcomed writers and artists at anytime, day or night. Occasionally I’d visit them after work.

Enter Fee Dawson, a beer-bellied WASP who was one of the most viper-

