

IN MEMORIAM

Heartbreak Hotel: In Memoriam Stephen Rodefer (1940–2015)

Though he gets the lyric wrong in titling his 1978 Figures book *The Bell Clerk's Tears Keep Flowing* (it's bell *hop* not *clerk*), Stephen Rodefer chose a great analog in Elvis: as handsome as the head on a Greek coin, sexy as all get out, charming, mean, an old-school asshole with great moves—all stolen, yet somehow all his. How I will miss him. Born in the hiccup between the New American and Language poets, Stephen Rodefer was itinerant and ironic, bohemian and academic. The magazine publications of the poems that would make up *Four Lectures* (The Figures, 1982) provide evidence of this straddling: “Words in Works in Russian” appeared in Robert Bertholf’s Buffalo-based *Credences*, “Pretext” and “Codex” in Barrett Watten’s *This*.

His life in poetry is often talked about in terms of cities: Buffalo (he studies with Charles Olson); Albuquerque (secures first academic job); San Francisco (meets Ben Friedlander and others); San Diego (gets another academic job); Cambridge, UK; New York; and so on. He was constantly on the move before coming to rest in Paris. Though that was the end, from the beginning there was Frenchness, inspired by Frank O’Hara’s mid-century francophilia, by Jean Cocteau, and by the Nouvelle Vague. During one of his periodic visits to Providence in the 90s, he insisted that my husband Steve Evans and I watch Louis Malle’s *The Lovers*: “This came out in 1958, when I was 18,” he told us, sipping from his customary glass of red. The lesson he took from the film: “don’t be the husband or the ridiculous lover, be the mysterious stranger.”

However much he espoused this credo, or tried to live it, it didn’t fit him. Unlike many of his literary heroes—Villon, Baudelaire, O’Hara—Rodefer was domestic. Unaffected and loving descriptions of home life and family are at the heart of the most vivid and moving moments in his work, and longing for the lost hearth makes up the most wrenching. “I prefer to be at home more when a child is sleeping on the couch. / That’s the meaning of contentment,” he wrote in “The Heavenly Bodies That Go By” (*Emergency Measures* [1987]). And nothing better captures the swoony heaven of post-coital married bliss than the opening poem of *One or Two Love Poems from the White World* (1976): “Smell the sweet narcotic of human flesh upon the bed. / We are rotting apples, sinking deeper in the ground. / Nestled in the pillows where the hair is spread / the warmer, browner flesh drowns into its slow collapse.” This, believe it or not, is a single-family dwelling poem: it has a garage.

It was Rodefer who told me, in my twenties, to buy a house as soon as possible. “Invest in property,” he said. “It is a source of income, and you’ll always have somewhere to go back to.” Some bohemian. For years he owned a tiny gingerbread house in Berkeley on Raymond Street (for all I know, he never sold it), and even after being thrown out on his heel by another wife in San Diego, he managed to avoid apartment living, somehow locating a small home to rent and fill. I remember it well: the walls hung with vintage dresses (a lifelong custom) and oil paintings in a room containing books, papers, wine, warmth, and a beautiful three-paneled, hand-painted dressing screen that I covet to this day. This man with a reputation for burning bridges was always also settling down. Fanny Howe wrote that she “associated him with fathering,” but unlike many father-poets who never write about their kids, all of Rodefer’s boys—Jesse, Felix, Benjamin, and Dewey—are vital presences in his books.

I bridle at Wikipedia’s description of him as “one of the original Language poets.” He was nothing of the kind. Only dumb luck could allow such a misnomer to seem credible: *Four Lectures* (the title a nod to Stein’s 1935 *Narration* lectures in Chicago) inhabited the prose-y reference-filled anti-lyric zeitgeist of the 1980s—and then won an award. In that climate of Russian formalist-nostalgia meets poststructuralist linguistics, reams of paratactic prose were produced; lines like, “The magazine language / of the magazine L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E” became, for a moment, pure pleasure. *Four Lectures* has now been annotated, which makes sense. How else could readers born after Madonna was popular decipher so many in-jokes? I, for one, will never forget this line: “Sky rains plane debris.” I saw that PSA Flight burst into flames and nose dive into San Diego’s residential North Park from the window of my junior-high art class. A grisly historical event returns out of context in *Four Lectures*, followed by a flippant retort: “If I am to be killed by a piece / of falling wing, or drenched in jettison, I’m game.” It’s great fun, but the humor here lacks the heart that in earlier books had been its strength.

The Language poetry handle would come to be a bane. He would waste some precious years launching mini-campaigns against its leading proponents, who became more and more assimilated into the academic machine of value production while he became more and more of a pariah. His essay “The Age in its Cage” and his decision to mimic the design of Charles Bernstein’s website were both acts of defiance that obscured his talent—even if they were understandable. That was back when it seemed as if “conquering” the academy with your theory-influenced Marxist-inflected poetry was a sure-fire way to immortality. Rodefer, Olsonian to the core, was more interested in wrecking the academy than winning it.

With structuralism came bitterness. Once everything was politics, pleasure vanished. “Suicide: An Ode” (*Emergency Measures*) reads like a grim Reagan

and Bush-era death mask placed over O'Hara's face: "Given and great to be born and frankly various.... Misanthropy misogyny this / varying gender for the same sample." It's like that turn in the film *Boogie Nights* when the innocent super-8 porn of the 1970s is replaced by the cocaine-smuggling drug lords of 1980s hardcore. In *One or Two Love Poems* he'd written: "I want what is to be said / to smell like a finger stuck / in an asscrack, to bring up / that absolute and inevitable scent / to the face." Rabelaisian vividness, but not in the spirit of any nihilistic *fuck you, this is shit*; rather, in the spirit O'Hara's "I want to be / at least as alive as the vulgar," to be as open as your asshole is to me: "Into the anus of the other the cock nudges / like a green thumb." A nudge, not a thrust. I have a particular fondness for "Old Times Now," the second-to-last poem in that book. It describes making love with his wife in the car while the kids are in the back seat. By the time they get to Arizona she's had five orgasms. As a twenty-something reading this I wondered at the world it conjured. Was there such a domesticity? Was there such a man? One hoped!

Also signaling his allegiance to the ribald and the rude were his translations of the fifteenth-century convict poet François Villon, published in 1968 under the name Jean Calais with a preface and hoax footnotes à la Spicer. In Villon, the profane occasions word play. Signs—bodily and linguistic—titillate from come-hither surfaces to the depths of double entendre. It is joyful and naughty at once. Here's how he renders part of the "Ballade de dames du temps jadis": "Where is Echo, who parlayed / her clamor from rivers and streams / at hand, and whose beauty flowed / far beyond what we know now. / But then where is all of last year's snow?" "Obviously," the footnote reads, "where the snows of last year are is here." At the end of his life, Rodefer would return to this sort of semi-serious pseudo-translation of French literature with *Fever Flowers: les fleurs du val* (2008), his part-homophonic, part-histrionic versions of Baudelaire. In these poems, however, the wordplay is deployed less in the spirit of delight, and more in a kind of Nimrodean nonsense curse against poetry: "O objects of repulsive things we treasure like repasts / upchuck the verse which denvers us to kindred oompas / across horrid sands to traverse this putrid fen."

In his late forties Rodefer was fired from his job at UC San Diego (where our paths had crossed) and would never again hold a steady academic position. He made the rounds of the art colonies (including Yaddoo and MacDowell) and was given "rooms" in perpetuity at Cambridge after holding the Judith E. Wilson Fellowship in Poetry. Throughout this semi-homeless period he kept writing, the culmination of which was the book *Mon Canard* (The Figures, 2000). By this time, his exile from family life had come to an end. In his fifties he met a French woman, Katrine LeGallou, and with her had a fourth son, Dewey. *Mon Canard* is dedicated to them both. In it we see youthful bravado turned middle-aged enervation, former feats of Olympic

love-making now affirmations of tenderness. *Mon Canard* includes the long poem *Erasers*. I remember when he handed it to me in the Equipage chapbook (1994): “It’s erasers,” he said, “not erasures.” Some twelve years after his *Four Lectures* fame, this poem returns to the familial. The “new sentence” has been abandoned in favor of William Carlos Williams’s triadic foot. *Erasers* also echoes Williams’s tone and language: “Forgive me,” Rodefer writes, “I know / dogslife // when I see it / and the cur / or bitch / must have work / or her and his / trade will perish.” Ever citational and allusive, he includes quotes not only from Williams but also from Wyatt, Yeats, Creeley, and others. These dot the poem like tidbits of earnestness, as if in searching to recover the language of the heart he found the language of poetry. Through it, love is affirmed: “But love does not / die, that is / the fathomless question. // And the answer / is simply / it does not.”

In addition to his sons and the women in his life, Rodefer loved his male friends. Two in particular deserve mention, for both the intensity and the longevity of their friendships. They are Geoffrey Young, whose independent press The Figures published many of Rodefer’s most memorable works, and Benjamin Friedlander, who collaborated with him on the chapbook *Oriflamme Day* (1984) and shared his fondness for satire and literary hijinks. Young and Friedlander’s poems in the 2001 Equipage chapbook *Accomplices: Poems for Stephen Rodefer* attest to the emotional complexities of staying close to him: “how many frustrations go / into the snap / before the yelling begins / and the person stands before you / hated, a horrid / spector, pummelled with // every brutal thing you / can say” (Young, “The Break”); “You, / reading from your / coffin. Me / with my cadaverous face- /saving device, also / known as a smile” (Friedlander, “I Died of Shame”).

Though some say his poetry has suffered neglect (meaning not enough academics have written about it), it has always had its passionate enthusiasts. Many of his books are also beautiful objects that knowingly wink at you. I can remember how these “objects” initiated me into an underground world of literary value. Both *Villon* and *One or Two Love Poems* came out through the “Pick Pocket Series,” the design of which mimics (mocks?) City Lights’s square little volumes. The back of the latter is bordered by a series of head shots of the young Rodefer with his eyes closed, a direct quote of André Breton’s 1929 *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*. Instead of the naked-woman centerpiece, however, we get a blurb (alleged) by Charles Olson: “Where did Rodefer go? Youthful what. I’ll bet anybody a lobster!” None of his books have ever come *from* or pointed *toward* that center some call the “mainstream,” a term I take to mean what the evanescent present values as immortal verse. I don’t know how younger readers today find their way to Rodefer’s work, but as a teacher I have benefitted from them having done so. Two exceptional alumni of the University of Maine’s poetics program, Justin Andrews and

Jason Mitchell, consider him one of the finest. They granted me instant credit just for having known him.

In the 1990s Steve and I sublet Rodefer's Paris apartment (more properly, the apartment of his girlfriend Katrine) for a year while he and his new French family moved temporarily to Brooklyn. Most of Rodefer's personal effects had been cleared out before we arrived, but there was, sitting on a small bookshelf in the corner of the main room, an old-fashioned ketchup bottle made of heavy greenish glass bearing the name "RODEFER." A humble relic of the poet's heritage as the son of an Ohio factory owner, just like another great American poet, Hart Crane.

After the Brooklyn sojourn Rodefer returned to Paris for the remainder of his life. He bought a drafty *maison particulière* without plumbing and filled it with his vintage dresses. He took up painting. He drank red wine. The last time I saw him was when we brought him to Maine to give a reading in 2004. It was April Fool's Day. He won the hearts of all the undergraduates when he walked into the institutional room carrying a six-pack and then proceeded to project his text over images of (very) soft porn. Steve, with filmmaker Jim Sharkey, made a videotape during that visit of Rodefer reading and talking about his poems. How glad I am we have that document.

There is more to say. But let Jean Calais have the last word, for he captures much better than I can the fever that drove Stephen Rodefer, and with which, I'll admit, he infected me: "The astonishment that comes on first reading great poetry and getting it is always exhilarating and basically that's all I'm after."

Jennifer Moxley



Left to right: Bill Luoma, Steve Evans, and Stephen Rodefer in San Francisco, 1993. Courtesy of Jennifer Moxley.