

REMEMBERING HAROLD NORSE

Contributed by Eddie Woods

Beat Hotel plaque commemorative

"Hello, I'm home!"

It was Harold, calling so loudly from just inside the front door of the Ins & Outs Press building, his voice ringing with pure glee, that I could hear him clearly from my apartment three floors up; which itself was immediately below the two-floor suite I'd given over to him for his couple of weeks stay with me.

It was early winter 1984 and Harold had just returned to Amsterdam from a brief reading tour somewhere in Germany. Prior to that he'd made his second appearance at an annual Benn Posset-organized One World Poetry Festival (the previous having been P78 six years earlier, when Hal and I first met). Shortly after the festival, and before he'd moved into I&O, we performed together at an auxiliary event Benn had arranged at the de Melkweg (Milky Way) multi-media center. Harold was casually clad (tight brown leather, I seem to recall), in keeping with Amsterdam's easygoing artistic temperament. Whereas I--in suit, tie and city-slicker Stetson--was dressed way beyond merely to the nines.

"Aren't you overdoing it?" Harold finally asked, his sideways glance at my outfit betraying confusion rather than anything remotely judgmental.

I simply smiled and kept walking.

Following our reading, however, and over drinks at the bar, Harold patted me on the shoulder and said: "I take it back. That get-up is perfect for you. You're the gangster poet, after all."

It would be years later till I used the moniker professionally. When I emerged from a lengthy hibernation to give a series of 'comeback performances,' including at the 1992 North Sea Jazz Festival. Although not long after Harold's anointment I did refer to myself thus in the prose-poem Bloody Mary: "But I am the gangster poet of this age. And I have enough fucking ammunition to wipe out as much opposition as will ever come up against me. And every fucking bullet will hit the mark, because I am a good shot." Yes, well...

No sooner was Harold back from his German sojourn than we began planning for a Prince Hal reading at Ins & Outs. The Press staged readings only occasionally, but whenever we did they were memorable. Jack Micheline's in 1982 was particularly outstanding. And was (as Harold's would be) recorded for eventual audio release. As the reading date approached, Harold grew increasingly nervous. Not about how well he would do, he was too accomplished a performer for that. But instead over the audience, namely whether there'd even be one!

"Do you really think people will come?" he continually asked. "Apart from a few poets?"

I assured him they would. Assurances that fell on deaf ears. He'd survey the downstairs and envision an empty house. Thankfully we had a testy distraction to deal with, one that kept his fidgety mind-set from going into overdrive for a spell. Since we were also a gallery, I'd slated an exhibition opening to coincide with Hal's reading. Photographs taken by myself and the Dutch artist Peter Edel. And (for reasons too complicated to go into here) attributed to Kali, Inc. Allen Ginsberg was there, as were Ira Cohen, William Levy, Benn Posset, Micheline, and several others. Among whom Brion Gysin. Whose framed visage Peter and I had hung close to where Harold would be standing.

"No!" Harold shouted, pointing an indicting index finger at Brion's vexatiously calm countenance. "I don't want him here. Take that photo down. Now!"

"Forget it," I replied. "Brion belongs and you know it. Nor is it for you to dictate who's in the exhibit. Sorry, but Brion stays. Deal with it."

"Humph. I suppose. But not so near to me! Stick him somewhere else. Like at end, by the door."

Compromise ruled and Brion got shifted. To well out of Harold's sight. More photos were juggled around, landing a smiling Ira Cohen where Brion had been.

"Oh God, must I really have him peering over my shoulder?"

"Stop it, Harold," I said in a mock scolding tone. "You had your way with Brion. And you like Ira! Case closed."

"Hmmm." With which Ira stayed put.

Now to flash forward for a moment. Then forward again. Before getting back to the Harold Norse Of Course reading. And its lively aftermath. When I was tidying up Harold's temporary quarters after his departure (not that there was much to tidy, unlike in the wake of Micheline's week-long maelstrom residency in '82!), I discovered a scrap of notepaper filled with seemingly random yet fevered jottings in Harold's hand. Unfortunately I neglected to make a photocopy of said scribbling before sending it off to Stanford University with the rest of my archive. And thus have to paraphrase from memory. But clear memory as to the essence, so penetrating was the impression it left. It went something like: 'Never acknowledged me. Didn't give me credit. The cut-ups. Everything else. My role in his book...' But what mostly stood out was a name: 'Brion.'

Six years later, in *Memoirs of a Bastard Angel*, Harold would elaborate on this lingering resentment toward an individual for whom he'd initially had warm and admiring feelings:

"Without my prodding and editing, as he admitted, Gysin would not have produced his first writings on cut-ups, which have now become the handbook for the method. It also resulted in his novel *The Process*. In his writings and interviews no mention is made of this indebtedness...

"If, at Burroughs' insistence, I had not moved into the Beat Hotel, if I hadn't hounded Gysin to write about cut-ups and edited them and gotten them published, would he have written at all?...Would Brion have had a Dreamachine? Or his

Permutations (poems) recorded by the BBC, and so on?

"Only you ever encouraged me to the point of bullying, Harold' [Brion later wrote me]. 'You're responsible for THE PROCESS. It grew out of that time you set me to writing something and I obeyed you...I summon you to stir up a controversy and save me on this writing course you set me on, Harold Norse, when you were sitting down there in Room Nine on your rotting vegetables."

Harold goes on to detail the history of his collaboration with Gysin. How he urged Brion to write about his relationship with Bill Burroughs and cut-ups. His dogged persistence finally paying off, despite Brion's despondent doubts about his own worth as both a painter and a writer. Within a month a bulky manuscript was plunged into Harold's hands. Accompanied by a demand that Harold "clean up the mess" that Brion held him responsible for. A task Harold dove into with unbridled eagerness. Blue-pencilling, deleting, slashing, revising, condensing, rewriting. The works. Then doing it again and again after Brion had done his own rewrites. "It was major surgery," Harold writes, "a Caesarean. This was our baby." Brion christened the offspring "Cut-Ups: Project for a Disastrous Success." Whereupon Harold arranged for its partial publication in Evergreen Review; and also in Ira Cohen's magazine Gnaoua, where it appeared alongside excerpts from Burroughs' *The Soft Machine*, Ian Sommerville's permuted photo experiment "Mr and Mrs D," and Harold's own cut-up fiction "Sniffing Keyholes." Joy all around. Until some years later. After vowing that were any book of the writings Harold had midwived someday compiled it would be dedicated to him, Brion reneged on his pledge. Even telling Harold to his face: "My novel, *The Process*, is being published by Doubleday, but I am not dedicating it to you."

"I didn't ask why," Harold continues his narrative. "I already knew. No good deed goes unpunished. He was editing me out. The same way he treated his mother. When she arrived [in London] he said, 'I can't wait for her to go.' I was surprised to meet a gentle old woman whose diction was perfect. She was a drama coach. Brion was a drama queen. She had sent him to the best schools, but he hated her. When she died he said, 'I'm glad the old bitch is dead at last.' I was horrified."

"It's empty!"

"What is?" I asked a panicked Harold, who'd just come scampering up from the gallery and was now charging into my office.

"Downstairs. No one's there!"

"They'll come, Harold. It's another 45 minutes till the reading's meant to start. And won't until at least half an hour after that. I gave us a time cushion, baba. I'm the only person I know who's anything like punctual. Most people wear watches that run backwards. And I don't even own a watch! Go amuse yourself somewhere else, will you? I'm still busy working the phones. You'll just get in the way."

Deaf ears syndrome again.

"Anything else happening in town tonight?" he insisted on knowing.

"There's always something happening in Amsterdam. But not poetry this evening. Except for you. Only Rotterdam could maybe compete."

"Why, what's going on there?"

"Oh, The Fugs," I sort of muttered.

"The Fugs?! That's it, we're dead. No one's coming here. They'll all be in...where'd you say?"

"Rotterdam."

"Yeah, Rotterdam. Oh, God!"

"Hey, Harold! Got all your poems together? Your lipstick on? Maybe fix yourself that honey and water you've been on about. But please shoo! See you in an hour."

Harold an hour later: "Oh my God!" (It was a big day for the Deity.)

"Now what?"

"It's packed! If more people try and get in, we'll have to turn them away. Incredible!"

And it was. Every second of it. Both the sixty-minute reading, throughout which the entire audience remained spellbound; and the hour or so of mingling and chatting that ensued. I'd provided no chairs or stools. People sat on either the two cushioned banks that ran along the side walls or on the floor. Or they stood, at the back near the front door and the inside paneling of the show window. As I had done for the Micheline gig, and would do four years hence for Herbert Huncke, I brought in several cases of a good dry Italian house wine, vino rosso, for passing the bottles around. No glasses (well, there was this one lady; the same grande dame who later commented on how "sexually charged" she found the atmosphere!) and certainly no plastic cups. You wanted to drink, then you quaffed and shared. Yo, like they did in San Francisco in the Beat days. (Putting aside Amsterdam's lack of hills, there are many aspects of the Dutch capital, cultural and otherwise, that bear a marked resemblance to SF. In the same way that basically laid-back Am*dam has an undercurrent of adrenaline coursing through it that easily rivals New York's.)

And The Fugs...? Once the crowd had dispersed into the cold November air, a handful of us removed to the office for more drinks (by then Remy Martin and Jack Daniel's), intermittent lines of the white lady, and relaxed but nonetheless animated discussions. In the midst of which Benn Posset rang the intercom bell and came up to join us.

"Sorry I had to miss the reading," he said while pulling a chair over next to Harold's. "But Ed Sanders and Tuli were expecting me, and they're leaving the country tomorrow. I hadn't seen them in ages. How'd it go?"

"Fantastic," either Harold or I replied. Quickly adding, "How was Rotterdam? Full house, I guess."

"Ho-ho!" Soyo Benn practically roared. (And that's exactly how he always uttered this exclamation. Ho-ho. One of his three favorite verbalisms, together with 'so-so' and 'otto'.)

"Ho-ho?"

"Well, they were great, for sure. Pure Fugs."

"But...?"

"But only ten people showed up. No, eleven. And eight of those were on the guest list."

"We did it, we did it!" yelled a delighted Harold. "We beat The Fugs!"

Yes we did. And notwithstanding whatever credit I might take for enticing a whole bunch of folks to come and listen to Harold, I cannot help but feel that Hal's nervous energy, even his near-manic uncertainties, played an almost equal role. Created a curious kind of telekinetic field, if you will, that drew people hither. Just as (and of this I'm convinced) his often irritating hypochondria helped keep him alive and pretty much kicking right up to a mere month short of his 93rd birthday. That and stubbing his cigarettes out halfway, lest they burned too close to the filter. Real health freak, Harold was.

"Why'd you do it?" Harold inquired.

We were having dinner the night before the reading, at Marrakech on the Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal, across the road from the original Ins & Outs office (launch pad of Ins & Outs magazine's first three issues), where in 1978 Harold would pop by to chat and make long-distance telephone calls. The cuisine, Harold readily agreed, was authentic Moroccan.

"Do what?" I replied, still concentrating on my tajine.

"Put up the money for me to come here."

Harold's eyes had gone wide with amazement on the opening day of P84, when Soyo Benn nonchalantly informed him, in my presence, that he had Eddie to thank for his round-trip plane fare.

"Why shouldn't I have?" I answered, now looking straight at him. "Benn was running low on cash, he wanted you over, and asked me to cover the flight. I can afford it, so I said yes. I'd done it for others; so why not you?"

"But after those things I'd said..."

He was referring to Barcelona, the winter of '78-'79. Where to my friend Jane Harvey and I had decamped in the wake of Ins & Outs' first incarnation. And shortly thereafter bumped into Harold and his then lover-cum-traveling companion David Wentworth. For two months the four of us more or less hung out, mainly in and around the Plaza Real. Harold angrily checking out of one hotel that looked directly onto the Plaza and moving into another further along the Ramblas. Left on my account, after the establishment's hard-nosed dueña refused to let me set foot on the premises. My hair was too long, too wild, I outraged and frightened her more than the most outrageous Spanish hippies did. (Harold related all this in a letter to his German translator, Carl Weissner. And then advised me to get my locks cut. For my own safety. "If you were a youngster it wouldn't matter. But when your hair is both grey and outlandish, they know you're serious and it scares the shit out of them." Plus he'd seen too many drunken American sailors eyeing me warily in the Gut, swinging their beer bottles like convenient weapons...maybe for smashing my head in with! I took his advice, snip-snip-snip, while Jane, Harold and David watched and grinned.)

A lot of conversing went on down there in Barcelona, especially during the early days and weeks. Mostly Harold and I, with me (uncustomarily, some might say) doing more listening than talking. To Harold's various tales, intriguing anecdotal fragments drawn from his abundantly rich life and times. Many of these, suitably expanded, subsequently appeared in his autobiography. Where interestingly enough there is no mention of the wealthy South American patron who upon reading (and presumably not all of) Harold's marvelous gay poetry collection, Carnivorous Saint, instantly stopped sending checks. Before the book, he'd apparently not realized that Harold was homosexual!

We also spoke of poetry. Or again, Harold mainly did. Telling me, for instance, about a poems cycle he'd begun working on (without yet reciting any passages from it), tentatively titled "Life and Death on the Plaza Real." But after a while a disturbing counterforce began to surface. One that ultimately turned Harold's growing affinity for me on its head. For starters, Jane and I were flat broke. And until Jane landed a job teaching English, barely scraping by selling stuff: a small stock of the badges (or buttons) we used to deal in (and had the foresight to cram into our shoulder bags), a wad of dirhams a friend had laid on us in Paris, coins, stamps; whatever. This at a time when Harold was feeling intensely paranoid about his and David's money possibly vanishing. There was talk of them heading for Guatemala soon. Then the talking ended. Harold mostly stayed in their room and we saw only David. And him not very often. We understood that Harold felt embarrassed by not being able to invite us for meals, or even pick up the tab for our midday coffees. And so made a point of frequenting cafés and eateries where we were unlikely to be. Which is precisely when I made a frightful blunder.

One of the bulkier items I'd opted to schlep along was a thick spring binder containing typescripts of all my poems to date: the good, the great (oh hell, a few of 'em were and still are!), the reasonably okay...and the godawful. To weed through in due course. And this, in a moment of madness, I decided to put in David's hands for showing to Harold. But why? To cheer him up?! Gulp.

I can only imagine (were I inclined to have a waking nightmare) what pages Harold opened to before slamming the binder shut in disgust. And then instructing David to give it back to me p.d.q. What I do know, having been duly apprised of the remark once I'd returned to Amsterdam (I think by Ira Cohen--who years afterwards, fresh from a visit to the West Coast, told me with astonishment: "Harold really loves you!"), is that in a rambling letter to the Dutch writer Simon Vinkenoog, Harold complained about how "that terrible poet Eddie Woods is becoming a pain in the ass." An assessment that struck me as sufficiently amusing to quote it in my 1979 Other World Poetry Newsletter.

"Oh that," I said, wiping my lips and taking another sip of wine. "What's that got to do with anything? You could call me any number of names and it wouldn't make you less of a poet. I like you, I like your work, and that's all that counts. Besides, you weren't wrong. You'd hit a rough patch and wanted to be left alone, not pestered. My insensitivity to that got what it deserved. As for the poems..."

"Forget the poems, I didn't even read them. And quit with that 'terrible poet' crap! I actually think you're a damn good poet. That book of yours...Sale or Return, right?...is knockout. 'Ode to the Clap,' wow! Latter-day Cendrars, if you ask me."

"Oh, goody. For once I'm not being compared to Allen Ginsberg! You know what's crazy-driving? Critics making me out to be a Beat. Or any-thing! I'm me, period. I hate labels."

"Me, too," Harold chimed in. "Here's to no labels," he toasted as we clinked glasses.

"But the Cendrars bit I like. And yet, dear Harold," I couldn't resist tacking on, given how buddy-buddy we were getting, "I don't agree with all your poetry views. Like what you said in Barcelona about Marie Ponsot, that Ferlinghetti ought never to have published her in the Pocket Poets series. And therefore made the correct call in not reprinting True Minds. Nothing to do with my knowing her; those poems are exquisite. What's more, her next book was even better. Admit Impediments."

"Nonsense."

"Yeah, yeah. À votre santé! You having desert?"

Although there were occasional hiatuses, Harold and I did stay in touch over the succeeding two decades-plus. With our correspondence (punctuated by irregular phone calls) sprouting new wings as soon as we both had email. Harold wondered if we'd ever see one another again. We never did. My only trip to the States after our last meeting was in 1999; and that was to New York and Florida, not California, where Harold was staying put. In mid-2007 he moved from his house on Albion Street, in San Francisco's Mission district, to the Hayes Valley Care rest home, where he no longer had internet access. I wrote him letters and cards, and kept tabs via mutual friends: the poet Jim Nawrocki, later on Tate Swindell. And thought of him often. I loved him too, you see.

Among the more prominent notes I'd made in my calendar diary already a month before heading down to Paris at the end of June to participate in a big William Burroughs symposium, Naked Lunch@50, was to send Harold an oversized postcard in time to reach him for his 2009 birthday on July 6th. Alas, a reminder I had to cross out upon learning, no more than 12 hours after it occurred, of Harold's death. From Tate Swindell, who a week earlier wrote me that Harold had suddenly stopped eating. His email immediately brought tears to my eyes: "Eddie, With a heavy heart I must [tell you] that Harold passed away early this morning, June 8th. A nurse checked on him last night and he spoke a few words. He was saying that it is time to go and he wants to go. He said, 'The end is the beginning.' Beautiful. I will be in touch. -Tate."

The sad news traveled fast. In certain circles, even like a proverbial wildfire. As part of the 3-day Burroughs homage, an afternoon commemoration had been scheduled at 9, rue Gît-le-Coeur, site of the old Beat Hotel (and currently the four-star Relais Hôtel Vieux Paris). Where none other than Jean-Jacques Lebel would unveil a large tablet permanently hammered onto the outside wall reading BEAT HOTEL and naming its seven most famous occupants: B. Gysin, H. Norse, G. Corso, A. Ginsberg, P. Orlovsky, I. Somerville, W. Burroughs. To this event the conference organizers, Oliver Harris and Ian MacFadyen, wasted nary a minute appending a special Harold Norse tribute. A joyous memorial that it was a privilege to take part in. One that only amplified the undeniable significance of the overall Burroughs gathering. An enormously erudite and entertaining affair hosted by the University of London Institute and the British Council.

The hotel proprietors were exceedingly gracious, providing an ongoing champagne reception in the foyer and at two inside bars. Readings were out in the street, most of them preceding Lebel's uncovering of the plaque commemorative. Sinclair Beiles was remembered, the Scottish artist Elliot Rudie offered Beat Hotel reminiscences, Neeli Cherkovski's recent poem for Harold, "Hydra Waterfront," was recited. Undeterred by the 35-degree heat and scorching sun, the assemblage of onlookers and listeners soon grew to a veritable throng. The readers were experiencing difficulty being heard. Poetess Nina Zivancevic expressed reservations about doing anything. "They won't hear a word," she said during a brief pause for glasses to get refilled, her lips leaning against my ear, "not with all that chattering and drinking."

"Ready to do your thing, Eddie?" Oliver Harris asked, just when the din was at its loudest.

"You bet," I said. And jumped right to it. Literally screaming at the top of my lungs: "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE. WE'VE GOT MORE READINGS FOR YOU."

Pin drop time. Dead silence. All eyes riveted on the speaker. Yet I knew I had to keep it short. If they were to take in all of what I had to say, to lay on them; and then stay nailed to their spots for when Nina followed on. So sans preamble, I held forth with two succinct pieces by "the lately-departed great American poet Harold Norse." Beginning with his poem on Krishnamurti, "Follow No Leader":

Eddie Woods reads Harold Norse on the Rue Gît-le-Coeur, Paris.

Photo by Phil Wood

they followed the leader into the mountains
sat at his feet in a Swiss canton
as they decayed
like rotting fish

and he looked at them
and said:

turn off the ventriloquist's voice
flush out the snakeoil in the blood
your bible
your gita
your gems
your guns
your flags

your death

and at night they went to the nite clubs gobbling and soaking
 up the suds
 while that thing
 between the legs
 became
 more urgent
 they dished up the cold turkey
 of what he had said
 and nobody felt too good
 nobody felt

so they took the train the limousine the rucksack
 and went back home

 next year
 they followed him to India
 and again he looked at them
 and said:
 follow no leader
 guru
 nobody is living
 everybody is dead
 and again he told them
 told them

and again that thing
 between the legs
 and between the ears
 got in the way

And concluding with the most apropos tribute to both the occasion and the setting I could think of. An excerpt from Harold's cut-up novella *Beat Hotel*. Written in 1963, first published in German in 1973, and which did not see the light of publication day in any English-language edition until ten years after that. Speak of a prophet not being honored in his own country! The opening section of "Postscript 1963: The Death of 9 Rue Gît-le-Coeur":

Sitting in Paris Gît-le-Coeur at my table writing. A bat flies in thru the window at 3 in the afternoon, slides under the table & disappears. A postcard from Chinatown, SF, simultaneously drops from the ceiling out of nowhere. Everything is normal. Nothing is strange. Black bat flits slow-motion to the table's bottom where it vanishes. Everything is possible...

Dream description of the Beat Hotel on the Street-Where-Lies-The-Heart: An Indo-Chinese lady in silk pants parts bamboo curtains & slips downstairs...a giant black from French Guiana as if walking thru mirrors disappears into a room...turns on...an aging Sicilian gangster knocks up mother & daughter in one room...dreamachine spins round & round opening hash visions & colors as it crashes sight barrier & changes cells of the brain...a great American writer receives whole episodes in his sleep for the novel of the century...prophetic utterances, agonized Christs, poems, quotations, huge genitals on cracked walls...a poem like a BOMB goes off...

Then it is over, a dream. Finished. The hotel has changed hands. Workmen hammer & plaster, halls full of tools & bags of cement, old spiral staircase white with dust. No more all night jam sessions under ceilings about to fall, cats on the floor in sleeping-bags, eight or nine to a pad. No more guitars & horns. Silence. The old Café is "fermé pour travaux." Beer & wine bottles off the shelves. Ghostly espresso machine: no more watery coffee. The chairs gape. Nobody there now where we used to gather & talk--only the new propriétaire, a dumb prick businessman, and a hardfaced bitch, who already confide that they don't dig sloppy wiggy foreigners with hash-brown beards, chicks in blue jeans & Army Surplus parkas. They gotta go, she says. The Café will be a reception room with somebody, probably her, haunting a desk, around the clock. Surveillance...respectability...

Long live American poetry's bastard angel. Harold Norse, of course!