

City Lights: Booksellers & Publishers

Bill Wolak

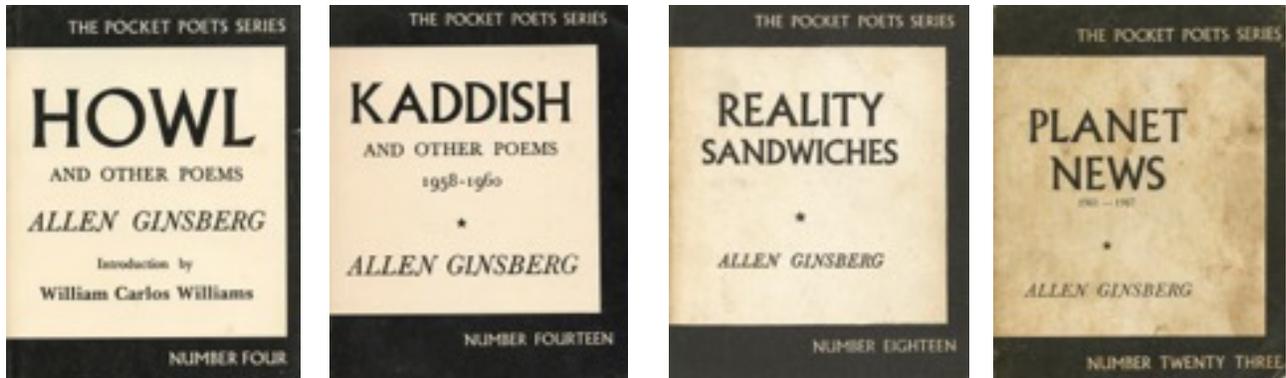
City Lights Bookstore is so much more than a mere purveyor of books; it's also a landmark publishing house that has decisively influenced American poetry. In addition, it's a sacred pilgrimage site for anyone interested in the Beats. I remember the first time I made it there. It was an overwhelming experience. I spent hours perusing the poetry shelves and left with a huge bag full of books. My friends had to abandon me there and come back for me hours later. Even then I had to be cajoled out of the store.



CITY LIGHTS BOOKSTORE Photo by Mel Solomon

When I was growing up in the 60s, contemporary poetry was revealed to me through The City Lights Bookstore's main publishing venture City Lights Pocket Poet Series. Within those familiar covers, for the first time I encountered a group of iconoclastic poets who would change my life: Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Patchen, Michael McClure, Philip Lamantia, Bob Kaufman, and Jack Keroac. I was a young man desperately searching for a pathway into poetry. Robert Frost, Hart Crane, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Charles Olson, and the early Robert Bly were too

cold, intellectual, and unemotional for me. So I began with E. E. Cummings, and I just kept opening poetry books in bookstores until I could search out something that was accessible to me.



Then I discovered the City Lights Pocket Poets Series. Their editions were compact, serviceable, and above all affordable (most cost \$1.00 in those days!). Ginsberg opened the doorway to a type of poetry I could never have imagined. I found astonishing, ecstatic, celebratory sexuality in Ginsberg’s “Howl” published remember in 1954:

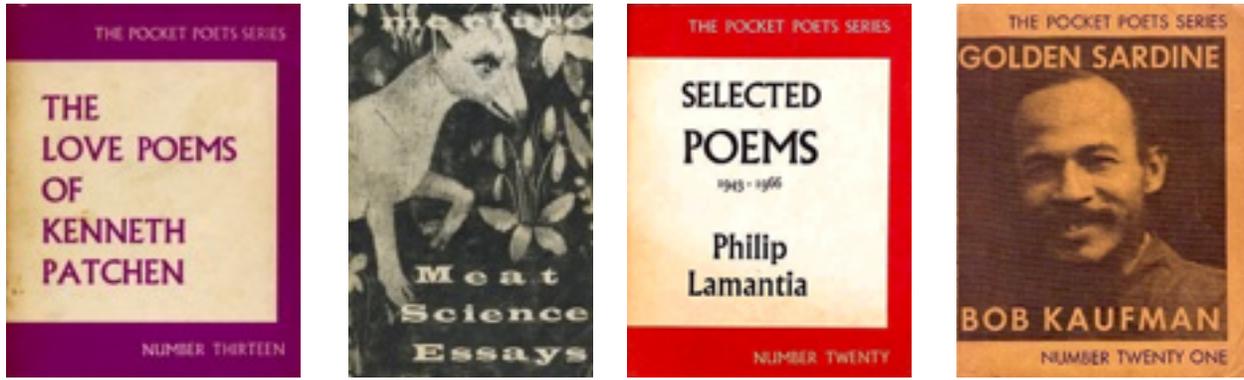
who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy,
who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caressers of Atlantic
and Caribbean love,
who balled in the morning in the evenings in rose gardens and the grass of public parks
and cemeteries scattering their semen freely to whomever come who may . . .

I can still remember my excitement when I first read these lines; the electric thrill of someone speaking honestly and authentically about desire and sex. And I found the same honesty later in much of Walt Whitman, as Ginsberg had suggested. And I found tenderness too in Ginsberg’s poems like “Who Be Kind To”:

Be kind to your self, it is only one
and perishable
of many on the planet, thou art that
one that wishes a soft finger tracing the
line of feeling from nipple to pubes—
one that wishes a tongue to kiss your armpit,
a lip to kiss your cheek inside your
whiteness thigh—

The spontaneity and irrepressible force of his lines opened me to different kind of poetry, a poetry of immediacy that mixed both delight and despair with mind-blowing juxtapositions. It

was an incantatory poetry filled with blessings and prophesies that managed to return verse to the depth and dignity of prayer.



In *The Love Poems of Kenneth Patchen*, I discovered the template for much of my future writing as a poet. For what I encountered there, I would always cherish: simple emotional intimacy presented through dazzling imagery:

As we are so wonderfully done with each other
We can walk into our separate sleep
On floors of music where the milkwhite cloak of
childhood lies

Oh my love, my golden lark, my soft long doll!
Your lips have splashed my dull house with print of
flowers
My hands are crooked where they spill over your
dear curving

It is good to be weary from the brilliant work
It is being God to feel your breathing beneath me

A waterglass on the bureau fills with morning . . .
Don't let anyone in to wake us

Patchen's poetry is poignant and heart-rending as in his poem entitled "Creation":

Any person who loves another person
Wherever in the world, is with us in this room—

Even though there are battlefields.

In fact, I've used two of Kenneth Patchen's lines as an epigraph for my latest book of poetry: "Her breasts grow roses under my hands / Her shoulders have the mark of my teeth on them . . ." His words still resonate in me with a timeless freshness, with an unrivaled gentleness.

Michael McClure I had the good fortune to discover in a local bookstore while I was a high school student in New Jersey. There I first opened McClure's *The New Book / A Book of Torture*. His poetry intrigued me as I wondered at his wild, sweeping lines, but it wasn't until I read his *Dark Brown* with its irresistible celebration of hallucinated sexuality that he became one of my favorite poets. His *Meat Science Essays*, published by City Lights in 1963, fundamentally transformed my view of the body and its relationship to poetry. In his essay "PHI UPSILON KAPPA," a plea to free language from its constraints—especially language considered obscene like the word fuck—McClure writes:

A man knows what he is by how he names his states. If I do not name my condition I am less defined and lack sureness. Speech cannot be censored without loss. Words are part of physiology. Lost parts of body are losses of spirit. There are men and women in honest suffering blaming themselves for misery when the name or word of their torment will assuage them. The mention of it is the first step to relief or cure—but it is denied them by their social company who are joined in a fear to use a word or hear it spoken.

McClure astounded me by drawing attention to the intrinsic interconnection between body and language. He asserted that "The free man only desires to make himself whole." And that language was the tool for making one's self whole. Like Ginsberg, he simply refused to accept censorship of any kind:

Cynicism, denial, and censorship create corporal bulkheads and walls that dam the human spirit. We live in a vision, but only experience is true life. For a man to make his spirit whole he must smash up the terms of his own vision before the edges of it freeze and become unshifting. What we say and do creates the real actuality of our bodies. Our meat calls for that. If we are hung up in our existent visions or confined by another's, we freeze to a solitary and unchanging idea of ourselves. Then our universe of possibilities, our human universe, is dead. We must make love. We must constantly move and seek without denials or censorship or rigid fantasies. We are creatures enchained if we freeze up our vision to inflexibility. Locked words make closed men

The obscenity barrier is raised by censorship and fear. It is built by a fear of the natural and the idea that nature is obscene.

McClure declared that the word fuck was a mantra and should be repeated as a path to liberation:

Is there any more personal creative act than fucking? Fuck does not mean merely the act of copulation but all ramifications, doings, and movements that give sexual delight to the spiritbeast who is lonely and cold and in need of touch and warmth in his separateness. He joins with a woman to make a citadelheavenjungle of conjoined pleasure clearing the accumulated weight from senses. He gives ease and openness by aiding another. Is there a more *personal and creative* gesture? When copulation is earthly it is fucking. Fuck is the old deep word. *Copulation* and *intercourse* are words made up from a dead language. To have intercourse or to copulate is not to fuck. To fuck is to give moments of ease and warmth to another and to accept the same from a loved one, and to join bodies and clear the spirit of its heaviness. After FUCKING we relax. The exalted pair are made more free by their generous act and are in a state of natural ease. They see freshness in one another and the world.

McClure's poetry, plays—especially *The Beard*, which ends with an act of cunnilingus between Billy the Kid and Jean Harlow on stage, novels, and essays were my main reading material during the 60s and 70s.

Ginsberg and McClure inspired the warrior in me, the desire to push the limits of language, and the instinct to spit at what most considered “verse.” But it was *The Selected Poems of Philip Lamantia* that set me on the course towards surrealism. Lamantia's imagery was and still is breathtaking. Take, for example, these lines:

The mermaids have come to the desert
they are setting up a boudoir next to the camel
who lies at their feet of roses

A wall of alabaster is drawn over our heads
by four rainbow men
whose naked figures give off a light
that slowly wriggles upon the sands

I am touched by the marvelous
as the mermaids' nimble fingers
go through my hair
that has come down forever from my head
to cover my body
the savage fruit of lunacy

Behold, the boudoir is flying away
And I am holding onto the leg of the lovely one
Called beneath the sea
BIANCA
She is turning

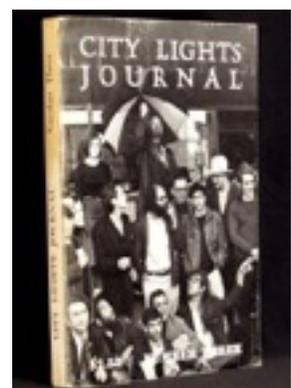
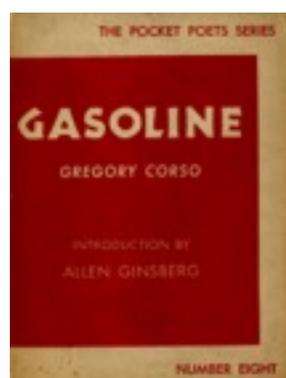
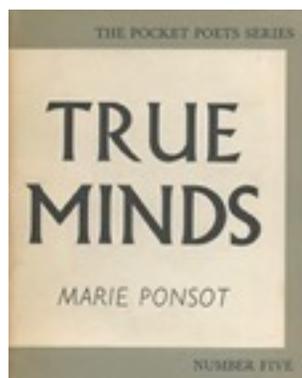
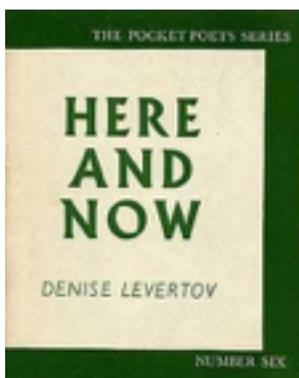
With the charm of a bird
Into two giant lips
As I drink from the goblet of suicide

She is the angelic doll turned black
She is the child of broken elevators
She is the curtain of holes you never want to throw away
She is the first woman and the first man
And I am lost to have her

I am looking for the region
Where the smoke of your hair is black
Where you are again climbing over the white wall
Where your eardrums play music
To the cat that crawls in my eyes
I am recalling memories of you BIANCA

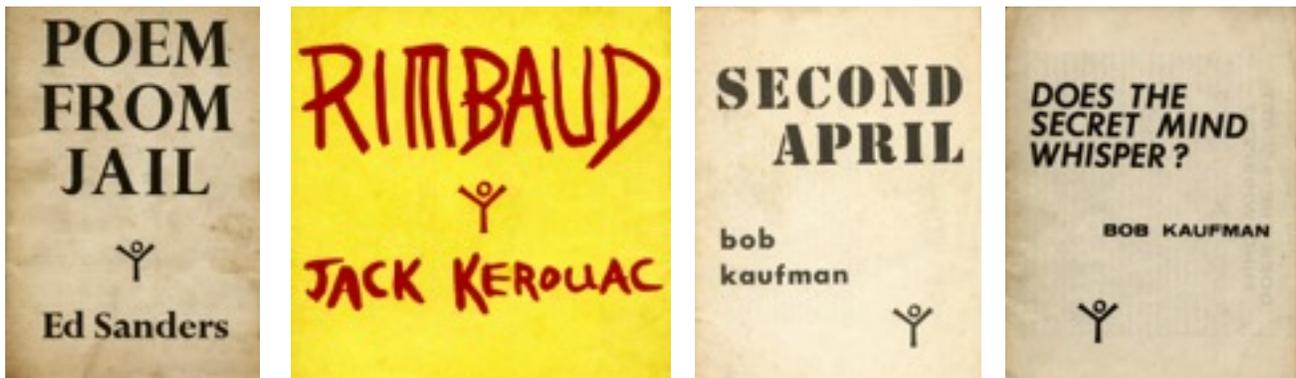
I am looking beyond the hour and the day
To find you BIANCA

Few in American poetry in the 60s wrote like that. Indeed, Philip Lamantia, along with Charles Henri Ford, Ted Joans, and Franklin Rosemont—all of whom I read later—were the transmitters who brought Surrealism into American poetry. Likewise, Bob Kaufman's *Golden Sardine* offered up oneiric ravings unlike anything I had ever read in lines like "My face is moonburned." or "In one ear a spider spins its web of eyes" or "His wounds become inflammatory beacons, ignited by Nebraska's matchbooks." Bob Kaufman's poems left my head spinning.



City Lights Pocket Poets Series introduced me to a plethora of American poets such as Denise Levertov, Marie Ponsot, Kenneth Rexroth, Gregory Corso, and Carol Solomon. In addition, there were translations of Antiunion Artaud, Henri Michaux, and Jacques Prévert. Then

there were the seemingly endless stream of pamphlets that flooded the bookstores during the heyday of the mimeograph revolution. Among these, I read for the first time Ed Sanders, who later would be one of the founding members of the Fugs and the owner of the famous Peace Eye Bookstore in the East Village. Also, there were longer foldouts like Jack Kerouac's *Rimbaud*, and Bob Kaufman's *Second April* and *Does the Secret Mind Whisper?* And as if these weren't enough publications, there were always new voices being introduced in City Lights Journal, where you could find the likes of Gary Snyder, William S. Burroughs, Charles Bukowski, Julian Beck, Mary Beach, Claude Pelieu, Jeff Nuttall, Charles Plymell, Alan Ansen, Neal Cassady, Alexander Trocchi, Guillaume Apollinaire, Pablo Neruda, and Blaise Cendars.



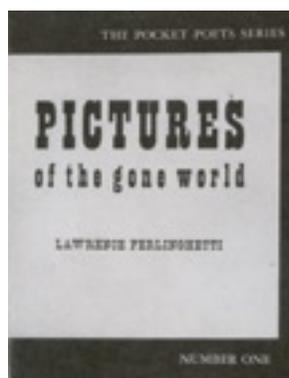
Finally, I'd like to say a few words about Lawrence Ferlinghetti who's responsible for both the bookstore and its never-ending stream of publications. To begin with, it's inconceivable to me that he was able to run a bookstore, publish all the aforementioned literature, and still have time to be one of America's greatest writers. Yet Ferlinghetti, like many of the other poets I have mentioned, played a central role in my development as a poet. His poetry embodies a characteristic restlessness and curiosity about life and love. One of his early poems "The Situation in the West Followed by a Holy Proposal" begins with these two lines: "Dreaming of utopias / where everyone's a lover . . ." These lines about sum up the aspirations for a different type of existence felt by many in the 60s. But Ferlinghetti's imaginings produce an even more radical proposal:

. . . so let's get together on this
 let's get down to bare essentials
 and have a mass exchange fuck
 a fucking real exchange program
 an enormous international hardcore Fuck Corps
 And never mind the protocol
 and never mind the quotas
 We've all got our own passe-partout
 if to fuck is to love again . . .

Lovemaking was also a recurrent sequence in Ferlinghetti's surrealistic novel *Her*. Set in Paris, a *flâneur* who is a struggling artist wanders the streets and passes in and out of the intimate embraces of women with whom he is obsessed:

I saw her as a creature entirely alone, her naked body not strange and classic in its unrelieveable loneliness, but simply unfinished, incomplete. Spring shook wings in me, a cool perfume clung to her, drawing me down to her with the force of a physical gesture, and I had only, I had only to fully awaken her, had only to bring her to a new awareness, to an ecstasy she had not yet known, and her eyes closed as I came over her, her arms went about me, her lips opened under mine, her tongue came hot in my mouth, and wind whirred at a window, two candles guttered and went out, and I had not heard the music stop, and she pressed my head down, down, as I kissed her throat, the hollows at the base of it, the swelling where her breasts began, and still she pressed me down, pressed her breast to my lips, moaning, still pressed me down, and I kissed her thighs, but she wanted my lips again, drew me upward again, and she, and she a sweet strange vessel, she an anonymous vessel, an anonymous receptacle into which I could pour myself, pour the history of myself without words, the act of love its own adequate eloquence, and yet, and yet somewhere, and yet somewhere near the memory of the unimaginable, a wood cross guarded the passes, the free sea-slucices.

The breathlessness of the scene draws you into a world that is neither completely real nor unreal, nevertheless, a sensual world that constantly mixes the inner world through the outer with hallucinatory perspectives. All in all, it creates a timeless pause in which action both happens and yet seems impossible. Perhaps this strange time displacement is the reason that the French title for the novel is *La Quatrième Personne du Singulier*. Because of all that Ferlinghetti has written and published, his shadow looms large over all of the contemporary American scene.



When I was teaching a course on the Beats at William Paterson University, one of the books my students loved the best was Ferlinghetti's *Poetry as Insurgent Art*, so I'd like to conclude with some of the unforgettable advice he offers to poets in that text:

Write beyond time.

Your poems must be more than want-ads for broken hearts.

Your images in a poem should be jamais vu, not déjà vu.

Bring together again the telling of a tale and a living voice.

Make your mind learn its way around the heart.

No ideas but in the senses.

If you want to be a great poet, be the conscience of the race.

Stand up for the stupid and the crazy.

Unless you have an urge to sing, don't open your mouth.

Don't ever believe poetry is irrelevant in dark times.

Haunt bookstores.

And if you can't "haunt bookstores" now during the Covid 19 pandemic, please do what you can to support independent booksellers. Like all businesses that rely on foot traffic, bookstores, even famous ones like The Strand and City Lights Bookstore, need our help now. So do what you can. Buy a book on line or a gift card from City Lights Bookstore here:

http://www.citylights.com/bookstore/?fa=books_giftcertificates&src=gmb

Or even better if you can afford it, contribute to the GoFundMe page for City Lights Bookstore here:

<https://www.gofundme.com/f/aeany-keep-city-lights-books-alive>