

I Heard It
Through the
Grapevine

SAMPLER

Selected Publications by Jeremy Reed

Poetry

Isthmus of Samuel Greenberg (1976)
Bleecker Street (1980)
By The Fisheries (1984)
Nero (1985)
Selected Poems (1987)
Engaging Form (1988)
Nineties (1990)
Red Haired Android (1992)
Kicks (1994)
Pop Stars, with Mick Rock (1995)
Sweet Sister Lyric (1996)
Saint Billie (2000)
Patron Saint of Eyeliner (2000)
Heartbreak Hotel (2002)
Duck and Sally Inside (2006)
Orange Sunshine (2006)
This Is How You Disappear (2007)
West End Survival Kit (2009)
Bona Drag (2009)
Black Russian: Out-takes from the Airmen's Club 1978-9 (2010)
Piccadilly Bongo (with Marc Almond) (2010)
Bona Vada (2011)
Whitehall Jackals (with Chris McCabe) (2013)
The Glamour Poet vs. Francis Bacon, Rent and Eyelinered Pussycat Dolls (2014)
Sooner or Later Frank (2014)

Novels

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Blue Rock (1987)
Red Eclipse (1989)
Inhabiting Shadows (1990)
Isidore (1991)
When the Whip Comes Down (1992)
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The Pleasure Chateau (1994)
Diamond Nebula (1995)
Red Hot Lipstick (1996)
Sister Midnight (1997)
Dorian (1998)
Boy Caesar (2004)
The Grid (2008)
Here Comes the Nice (2011)

I Heard It Through the Grapevine

—Asa Benveniste and Trigram Press—

JEREMY REED
SAMPLER

WITH UNCOLLECTED WORK BY

ASA BENVENISTE

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*For John Robinson, Mark Jackson and Tony Frazer
for continuing Asa's work.*

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The Man in Black

Asa Benveniste's poetry, a submerged cult to those in the know, takes as its resources a US-inflected tone and brokers an image-packed line as individual as any you'll get in the blue transitioning air-miles of seventies trans-Atlantic poetry.

Dressed in a black shirt, black jeans and black boots, thin as the Camel cigarette that was the natural extension of a hand signatred by foggy moonstones, intensely energised within a framework of quietly phrased cool, Asa first came into my life as a disaffected teenager, visiting me in Jersey with copies of his *AtoZ Formula*, Tom Raworth's *Big Green Day* and Nathaniel Tarn's *October*, as significant pointers opening a pathway into new poetry. Visiting Jersey to meet a potential backer for Trigram Press, and having read some of my early poetry that John Robinson's Joe Di Maggio Press had placed his way, Asa astonished me by requesting a book of mine for Trigram, something I felt unable to meet at the time, while beginning the process of regularly sending him poems and receiving enthused letters by way of return. My early, densely image-layered poems in which a charged impacted language compensated for imagined rather than real experience were largely the result of overdosing on Hart Crane. Crane as a boozed-up, Sophie Tucker and sailors-addicted gay maverick, who binged himself into writing state-altering hallucinated poetry in which language was often compressed to shattering, quickly became my prototype for writing urban poems saturated in marine colours and imagery. Asa, who shared Crane's brand choice of Cutty Sark whisky, was also an admirer of Hart's ability to torch-up language right to the fractional edge of the possible.

From that first grey sea-foggy day that he broke into my life Asa has been consistently my poetic avatar, my ideal of the poet as the thin man burning intense energies like a verbal contrail. Submerged in, and often concealed behind, the poets he published, initially printing the books letterpress, assisted by his stepson Paul Vaughan at the Trigram base, 148 King's Cross Road, London WC1, Asa masked his own identity as a poet behind his recognition as one of the most innovative publishers of the late sixties – together with Cape Goliard and Fulcrum Press. While Asa to my mind always wrote significantly ahead of his contemporaries, he lacked all incentive to go public, preferring instead to remain underground, treating the process of writing as something concealed, like laundering cash in a cellar.

Asa's poetry involves the real work of making language physical, something he was acutely aware of as a printer. You can feel the textural quality of his words, the chunky solidity of how they sit on the page occupying typographic space. A typical Benveniste poem, with its disruptively fractured narrative, takes as its starting point a domestic moment, often a randomised visual image that in turn leads directly to another by way of association. Usually shared with a few interested friends, or placed in small magazines, Asa kept his poems back as work-in-progress: a neglected, because there was no one to find it, and carefully maintained secret. And because of his cutting-edge reputation as a publisher with Trigram Press he tended to be invariably the recipient of other's people's solicited or unsolicited poems – poets wanted his attention – and didn't give him theirs. Asa tended to work in secret, and during the years I visited him at 22 Leverton Street, the open-plan conversion he occupied in London's Kentish Town, he was writing and rarely showing, breaking silence only with the group of poems published in *Dense Lens* (1975) and arguably with his best book *Edge* (1975), one permeated by a Chinese aesthetic, published by John Robinson's Joe Di Maggio Press, with John mimeographing the stapled A4 book in his bedroom at 23 Fairmead Road and Pip Benveniste supplying the out-of-focus photo of Asa, silkscreened on the front cover. *Edge*, largely published to be given away to friends and sold at outlets like Compendium, was published in an edition of 350 copies, with Asa characteristically and self-deprecatingly telling John to keep most of the copies submerged in his back room. And of course that's how most significant non-mainstream poetry circulates – by a process of filtering copies to sympathetic friends.

Asa's beginnings in poetry, the densely oblique *Poems of the Mouth* (1966) and *The AtoZ Formula* (1969), both published by Trigram, were essentially hermetic shape-shifting language games with Kabbala and the *I Ching* as their image resources, and the poet working with language as a sort of code-breaking process on the secrets it both conceals and reveals about reality. Asa in fact omitted both books from his *Selected Poems*, *Throw Out the Life Line Lay Out the Corse: Poems 1965-1985*, substituting his early kabbalistic preoccupations with the marginally more accessible *The Alchemical Cupboard*, as representative of the mystic soup he was linguistically cooking in the sixties. Asa regarded most post-1950s mainstream British poetry as obdurately resistant to US experimentation via Black Mountain and the O'Hara/Ashbery bouncy New York influence vitally energising subcultures like pop, sex, drugs, and the whole urban

streetwise dynamic that was the signposting of modern life, and the breaking-up of formal poetics into edgier reconfigured patterns.

In London Asa largely lived on plain yoghurts, cheese and biscuits, brutally aromatic black Turkish coffee, purchasing the beans from a store on South Moulton Street, periodic pizza forays, whiskey, sunrise-red bloody marys, red wine and American toasted cigarettes like softpack non-filter Lucky Strike and Camel. A poet's individual choice of nutrition and stimulants is a key factor affecting the protein syntheses and neural gateways into the work, and Asa's emphasis on food was ascetically minimal, and on booze, fags and joints optimal. When he wasn't in London he got away to his flatland village hideaway, Blue Tile House in Fakenham, Norfolk, where I visited him one colour-drenched October, and where his enmity with Pip was visible in their frozen relations, even apparent to a stranger. Asa appeared cut-off, detached and morosely preoccupied, with his own constant sense of inner disquiet. His periodic getaways only served to enhance his mystique, as though the man in black needed occult rehabilitation before re-immersing himself in big city affairs. What he had though was an unparalleled facility for design, fonts, the visually quirky and the accidental risk that became a book's personality and which so distinguished him as top of the game as a brilliant, one-off, maverick publisher. Asa was spontaneous in his likes and accepted Paul Gogarty's *Snap Box* (1972), a small rectangular book printed on blue paper and brimming with fragmented pop hooks, within hours of the poet randomly hand-delivering the manuscript to Asa in person. There was no systemised formula to Trigram Press, Asa picked up what he published on his own quirky crypto-allusive radar.

I come back again to language, and how for Asa its process as the building blocks of imagery in a poem, were engineered to open up big interactive space-times through associated inner states, as the poem's rich cultural signposting.

What can he do with all that dust?
there are so many American poets
(I mean pilots) just waiting
on the back of tomorrow's tortoise
in jasmine corridors who question
after question

There's so much connotative space and time-travel in Asa's poetry, and in *Language: Enemy, Pursuit* (1980) he tells us in a rare confessional admission that his qualifiers for a poem are 'it must have no beginning or conclusion. If it's about anything it must be language. That's the only kind of poem that will keep its divinity. It must have 600,000 meanings and in the end be meaningless.' Asa's poetic signifiers, coming in part from a long immersion in the Torah place him radically outside contemporary mainstream poets programmed in the belief that a poem must find an apparent resolution to its inception. Asa on the contrary deals possibilities that aren't solutions but alternative readings to his theme, rather in the way that Pound's *Cantos* don't subscribe to anything but their own personalised content.

I've been a lifelong AB addict, reading his poems often on a daily basis, not only for the visually compelling imagery they throw up, but for their instantly refreshing sense of making poetry new and staying that way. There are so many ways of reading a Benveniste poem, that yes in his signifying terms, you have 600,000 alternative pathways as access. There's nothing difficult about Asa's poetry, not in the way of Louis Zukofsky's crunched linguistics or J.H. Prynne's emotionless postmodernism, or for that matter down, although he often appeared that, rather, there's an exhilarating upward curve to the writing, working language into the domestic zone in which we mostly live. It's significant that when Asa gave up printing Trigram Press books in 1974, largely for health reasons and the poisoning he periodically experienced on account of the toxicity of working with metals – having instead to job the work out and meticulously oversee design – the nature of his poetry turned more lyrical, as though liberated from the exacting self-conscious process of setting print he was personally freed into a less constrained medium. The work collected in *Pommes Poems* (1988) being amongst the most beautiful he achieved in letting go that little extra into sustained lyric focus. Printing, the hard physical graft of it wore Asa out and in *Language: Enemy, Pursuit* he speaks forcibly of his shattering. 'Vile metal: the worst, intractable element for anyone, a poet most of all, to deal with every day of his life. I recognise the metal men now, the calipers men, when I pass them in the street. They have burn marks on their skin, singed hair, their eyes opaque, black, they've lost the ability to listen. Their hands are like cities, one has to walk around them as one would walk around mangled cars, and I surrendered to those razor sharp edges too long.'

Asa's reasons for writing poetry were equally integrated into his frustrations in realising that poetry is largely impotent to change reality, even if its expression creates the illusion that it can and will alter the social context given time. All good writing occupies the present that is of course the future. To stay in poetry you need to accept you're going nowhere but making it happen in the real-time exciting specifics of the journey. It's a difficult one to take on, as the pursuit implies an edgy mental alienation and in Asa's case dejection, heavy drinking, marital discord – Pip would complain that nothing alleviated his disparaged sense of occupying the edge – and Asa invariably stayed there as the state he best knew. His later poems, written after crawling out of the exploded debris of his marriage to Pip and relocating with his new partner Agneta Falk to Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire, are altogether more celebratory in tone and winning in their lyrically nuanced windows.

The sky lowers itself to my book
and your reading of it as blue,
Materia prima, are, as if the touch
was perfectly defined, the terminal
occurrence when ceiling plaster floated
along the surface of crepes normandes
steeped in biting calvados. I thought of you
on the channel boat speculating on your arrival
at Honfleur to research Boudin mysteries,
such light, the blue wind bleaching shingle
to an almost undefinable white.

This is as good as you'll get optimal blue lyricism, and all of Pommes Poems constitutes a progressive breakthrough in spontaneity, as though Asa was better committed to the poem's autonomous momentum, rather than its fractured splintering. Asa worked characteristically slowly, building the image connectivity of each poem like the stages of a clinical drugs trial, his last poems accumulating in a dull grey portfolio, lacking previous publication in small magazines and ultimately designed to outstrip his body and go on speaking for the last stages of his life. Liver-damaged and acutely undermined by diabetes brought on by heavy drinking, he worked the line for the first time against real rather than imagined death. In his letters to me at the time he spoke of being unable to give up drinking red wine, even after the amputation of his left leg due to diabetes-related gangrene; and of

his empathetic association with Arthur Rimbaud who, on returning from Aden to the Hôpital de la Conception, in Marseilles, on 20 May 1891, and diagnosed with aggressive bone cancer, became an amputee with a wooden leg on 27 May, before dying of complications on November 10 of the same year. The near-death crisis and irreversible loss of a leg drove Asa forward, as though writing which had once been a reluctant concession on his part to liberate the poem onto the page was now a charged necessity. Driven in on himself and facing his mutilated body there was no other option. The poems collected in *Invisible Ink* (1989), are amongst the most incisively personal he wrote, without ever abandoning his idiosyncratic formula of placing language in the frontline of poetic investigation. And of course the figure of Arthur Rimbaud remains the subtext spook to Asa's difficult rehabilitation to accepting his irreparably altered body.

It rubs away keening flesh
to the thinnest blade of shin
and knee, and are my weapons,
my cutting pen on paper
I cannot reach for
without invoking the surgeon's
pulsing blade and rasp,
who has amputated his own
heart, as Rimbaud described,
citing my own loving act.
Loving? Can it be true?

In 'Falling' Asa refers to 'the vulnerable drag on my leg/ blood falling like pollinous sap through the bandages' as he attempted to orientate to having a stump instead of a functional leg. His last small collection has amputation as its central focus, co-opting Rimbaud in as an underwritten spook to poems that don't emotionally compensate for harrowing physical loss and living with it. In 'Cut' Asa establishes the verb as an incision as much applied to language as to flesh.

It has never been so important to cut
into dreams the right words,
like an insane collage where the scalpel
is language expunged by sight loss
and often has no connection with acts

that pass for theatre: a marble head,
a lion's bleeding mouth, the dawn black
with cross-hatchings incised on steel.

In what was his last letter to me from 68 Bridge Lanes, Hebden Bridge, dated mid-November 1989, Asa spoke of his total inactivity, mentally and physically, almost the abandonment of his art, concurrent with his approaching death in April 1990. 'Your book came yesterday, and I've begun to read it. Very exciting. Bless you for writing it and for sending it to me. I don't know why I haven't written sooner, except to say that I haven't written anything in the past two months, even letters piling up on my desk like a dust storm. I am facing the black screen. Aggie keeps telling me to work, work, and if only I had your facility to make books dance. I know I must, but I can't bear it. I listen to the radio occasionally, see whoever comes to my room, otherwise I stare at the fire when it's on and remember. Sleep catches me at odd moments during the day, and at night when I need it it eludes me. I can't do anything except wait for it to pass. It's terrible as you know, as you can guess.'

Uncomplaining, Asa who'd always had a dread of physical illness, invariably imagining covert symptoms secreting undercover in his body without becoming physicalised, was now faced with what he called the black screen that didn't even lend itself to his facility with language. His move to Yorkshire, where he partly ran a second-hand bookshop, had removed him from his London friends, and geographical isolation after big city busyness only enhanced his sense of alienation. There's something about the stupendous momentum of London's energies that locks you into capital affairs, and my hectic day to day agenda of writing and social activities prevented me seeing Asa after he left London, despite repeated intentions to do so, as it did our mutual friend John Robinson, who also remained constrained by work in town, despite our periodically raised joint plans to drive to Hebden Bridge together.

On 15 April 1990 I received a short note in Aggie's hand telling me "Asa died Friday night. I will tell you later why and how, but for now I find it difficult to speak. I'm in such pain that I can barely hold this pen. You must forgive me for not writing more at this moment. I will let you know when he is going to be buried. Perhaps you would like to read something?" Asa's house on Leverton Street outlives him in London's continuously reconstructed upmarket present in which all central property is zoned into high-end, and going back there I'm left to imagine Asa as residual

identity, a sort of post-human download substituting for the thin figure in a charcoal crew neck lambswool jumper and dark blue jeans, dragging intensely on a Marlboro Lite's loopy blue smoke, as he threw shapes with his quietly inflected voice. I remember his enthusiasm on discovering the Canadian language poet Christopher Dewdney's seminal collections, *A Palaeozoic Geology of London, Ontario* (1973), and *Fovea Centralis* (1975), and recommending them to me, and the delight he took in Barry MacSweeney's extravagantly phrased and dope-hallucinated *Six Odes*, in the typographical outlay of a randomly chanced-on ad in a magazine, or whatever impacted visually on his retina and could be used as a detail in his acutely individual sense of book design for Trigram Press.

Asa's sympathetic understanding of life, and how one's inner direction was so often contrary to systems opposing the individual, made him a deeply valued friend. In my case he got me away from the suffocating cultural restrictions of my birthplace, Jersey C.I., to registering as an undergraduate at Essex University, studying American Literature, with an emphasis on Black Mountain poetry, as seminal to my development as a poet. Asa's one visit to Jersey and his apprehension over my simply not belonging there precipitated my coming to live in London and finding acceptance amongst my chosen milieu, as well as explosively available highways for my writing. If you were in trouble he'd sit with you and talk aspects of problems, and he'd be in them too, only he was trying to show you possible ways through or out the tunnel. If his own poetic preoccupations often focused on the correlation between language and death, 'Even in death it's language first,' then counterpointing the downward pull of gravity was a sensual aesthetic that correspondingly eroticised the poem into figurative expression. He taught all of us who were Trigram poets that the image came first as the poem's drive-unit, and that a poem without polyvalent imagery is like a pop song without a hook, it doesn't stick.

Even today I test what I write against his imagined approval or disapproval. If it isn't weird enough then push it out further to the edge and saturate the image. Always write like you're inventing tomorrow, that's my reason for doing poetry, unlike mainstream poets who are frozen into a largely redundant past.

That Asa's poems haven't to date been assembled into a *Collected*, as a rich comprehensive overview of his life's work, is a serious omission, given that most of his contemporaries have been better rewarded. I imagine, given his incurable self-deprecation, that that's what he would have expected, the indomitable exclusion factor that inexplicably counts some poets in and

others out. There's no poet I read so often and with such personal gain as Asa Benveniste, and partly because a single poem of his opens out into a rich library of personal associations that collapse the distance between text and reader, and in the literal sense of the word, fascinate by their not being like anyone else's poetry. Asa's advice to me right from the start was US influence, in other words bypass the British modality of reported social realism and focus on everything that isn't usually acceptable subject matter for poetry – what's right in front of you and what you shouldn't be doing at the time, but admit to.

The dossiers that make up this interactive book, my poems about Asa and anecdotal commentaries on him and his work, together with a selection of his 1970s poetry only available in small press booklets is aimed at some sort of restorative faculty for a poet waiting to surprise readers by his overextended absence.

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