

National Poetry Month Featured Poet: Rosebud Ben-Oni

written by Entropy | April 8, 2014



In honor of [National Poetry Month](#), we're interviewing several poets and asking them a few questions about poetry. Our third featured poet is Rosebud Ben-Oni! Stay tuned all month for more featured poets.

1) Do you think poetry is still important, relevant, and vibrant in today's culture?

Yes; I especially believe this after Split this Rock this past March. I had put together a Transgressive/Divine Feminism group reading, and it was a transformative experience. Because Metta Sama (who was in the reading) is a force so great that I call her the Mettasphere. Because there was Eduardo Corral yet again offering advice to a journalist/poet looking for community. Because I came home after the festival to reread books like R. Erica Doyle's Proxy, Carmen Giménez Smith's Milk & Filth, and Jason Koo's America's Favorite Poem. And I found new things in each book. Look, nothing in these kinds of poems is ever platonic. We are less remote to each other when we read each other, and poetry requires your total engagement.

2) What makes you want to write poetry?

Transgression. Retraining, rather than retelling, narratives. Inventing new lives for common things. I was telling a friend recently that I wish I could leave alone an apple, and let it be an apple. But, no: I have to turn into a planet and give it problems. Maybe that's a line for a poem too— see? There I go again.

3) Tell us about one poet who has greatly influenced you as a writer and thinker.

That's hard. Only one? I'd say Pat Mora. Even though my school in San Antonio had a sizeable Hispanic population, I read most Anglo male authors in AP English. One of my aunts took it into her own hands; she had gone back to school herself, later in life, and was a longtime Chicana activist when she'd left the Rio Grande Valley for Chula Vista, just outside San Diego. She mailed me a few of Mora's poetry books and her *Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle*. Suddenly there was Spanish alongside English. There was magic realism. There was an emphasis on the traditions and landscape of the Southwest, on being Mexican-American, which I'd been taught in school was "regional" and wouldn't get me into a "good" college. This is not to say that one should limit one's self to only their experience or ethnicity; however, through Mora, I found I could write from the foundations of my own experience, which is important when you are 18. More importantly, I found

that I could create worlds, and not have them be less vital than the dominant discourse taught in my school. That discourse, by the way, is not set in stone; things like that rarely are. It's evolving right now as we speak. I find that idea to be very alive in Mora's work.

4) Tell us about one poet whom you'd like more people to know about.

I really love the Israeli poet Rachel (Rahel Bluwstein Sel); she's very well-known in Israel, but not so much in the U.S. She was one of the first Modern Hebrew poets, and though her life was short, the longing and isolation of her lyrical poems reflects the many landscapes— especially the pastoral and sexual— that inspired her. There's an English translation of her work by Robert Friend, *Flowers of Perhaps: Selected Poems of Ra'hel*; I'd start there.

5) How do you feel about poetry in the age of social media?

I feel Kate Durbin about it. (Translation: it's wonderful). With social media, poetry reaches more people via Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr. It's easier to learn about new work in journals. New languages, slangs, reactions are forming. For instance, Twitter, with its character limit, forces brevity; this can be a very good thing, when you are struggling to find the central idea. That said, taking a day or two—or a week—away from social media is also necessary. Even in a city there is sudden quiet space when you step away it; we all need time to process, to commune with where we are. There are nights I don't take my phone when I go out; I want to be in the moment. When I was at the CantoMundo retreat last years, the founders asked the fellows to not Facebook or Tweet, but to live in the moment. It was excellent advice.

6) Share with us one of your recent poems and tell us a little bit about its context.

I'd like to share "Despite Their Best Efforts" that was published in *The American Poetry Review's* January/February 2014 issue. The poem incorporates the Last Supper and The Tower of Babel; the latter tells a story in which people all spoke one language and gathered to build a city until God "confound[ed] their language" and scattered them across the world. These narratives are set against the 90s "Benetton" ideal of multiculturalism, and the taking down of the ideal by a child who cannot and does not harmonize the various bloods running through her veins. There is no blame here; she owns her rage, refusing to play a given role, arming herself against the very multitudes she herself contains.

Despite Their Best Efforts

I was little more

than a bottle cap of whiskey

More than once

I was rebozo slung

over a sleepy mouthed junkie

for CK one

Mira the everyday people baby

Mira like opening fire with candy

Mira my matted hair so model

off duty

While others donned tiaras

worldpeace and bikinis

I was sizing up

cops and clergy

At seven I ravaged a nativity

sullied the feet of baby jesus

so he wouldn't be so trusting

Mira if we are the world

then I was a test of levees

I saw to it all my dolls

were potty-trained

and waterboarded each

on a gurney

At dawn when they came home

exhausted from the double shift

another follower

dozed in an ice bath

with one less kidney

I was but the cliffhanger

from the great flood

babbling to a broken city

I am the future

the crumbling bricks
and overcrowding
I am the first language
no one is speaking
Mira a different world
This is my blood and this
my body
This time
you won't betray me
I am your kingdom come
the barricades
giving way mira even
the liquor stores are closing

✘ Born to a Mexican mother and Jewish father, **Rosebud Ben-Oni** is a 2013 CantoMundo Fellow and the author of *SOLECISM* (Virtual Artists Collective, 2013). A Leopold Schepp Scholar at New York University, she won the Seth Barkas Prize for Best Short Story and The Thomas Wolfe/Phi Beta Kappa Prize for Best Poetry Collection. She was a Rackham Merit Fellow at the University of Michigan where she earned her MFA in Poetry, and was a Horace Goldsmith Scholar at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Recently, her story "A Way out of the Colonia" won the Editor's Prize for Best Short Story in *Camera Obscura: A Journal of Contemporary Literature and Photography*. A graduate of the 2010 Women's Work Lab at New Perspectives Theater, her plays have been produced in New York City, Washington DC and Toronto. Her work appears in *The American Poetry Review*, *Arts & Letters*, *Bayou*, *Puerto del Sol*, among others. Rosebud is an Editorial Advisor for *VIDA: Women in Literary Arts* (vidaweb.org). Find out more about her at 7TrainLove.org