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Sarah Daugherty

A Conversation with klipschutz

Born in Indio, CA, klipschutz (pen name of Kurt Lipschutz) left high school early to travel the U.S. by thumb, then lived in Laurel Canyon, Echo Park, and Hollywood, where he wrote stand-up comedy, before a short stint at Naropa. First marriage, San Francisco, Gallup polls (door-to-door), first fruits: *The Erection of Scaffolding for the Re-Painting of Heaven by the Lowest Bidder* (o.p.). Recently, he was shocked to discover that he has published six previous collections. His latest collection is *Pre-meditations* (2019, Hoot n Waddle Press).

As well, he has co-written approximately 100 songs released by Chuck Prophet, whose latest is *The Land That Time Forgot* (2020). With Jeremy Gaulke, between 2014 and 2017, klipschutz edited the collectible mini-mag *Four by Two* through twelve issues. (A complete set resides in the Special Collections Library at U.C. Berkeley.) He lives in San Francisco with Colette Jappy and three tuxedo cats.

SARAH: Tell us about yourself and how creative expression became a necessity to you.

KLIPSCHUTZ: My oldest brother populated his bookshelves with Henry Miller, Bukowski, Celine, and the Beats. Looking back, pretty male, hetero, and white (except for Bob Kaufman and Diane di Prima). But that was the world back then. This was maybe 1969. Add Bob Dylan to the mix and I was off to the races. Where exactly the urge came from and how it has sustained – that I don't want to know, but it came early on. Maybe it's in my DNA, or the fluoride in the water.

SARAH: Given your contacts and collaborations with musicians, what drew you to writing poetry instead of being in the bands?

KLIPSCHUTZ: Well, I have a temperamental bladder, and wouldn't have lasted three gigs in a touring van, so there's that.

Also, poetry came into my orbit before music. Plus, my piano teacher dropped me for abundant cause. Songwriting came when I saw Bone Cootes busking on Haight Street. About four years later, Bone and I wrote a song with Chuck Prophet, and Chuck hasn't been able to shake me since.

SARAH: And what made you focus on writing for and editing small press publications, instead of pursuing mainstream publications?

KLIPSCHUTZ: The mainstream seems to be allergic to me. I had two pieces in *Poetry* (of Chicago) in 1992, but they have not seen fit to repeat their mistake. And Wesleyan University Press toyed with me hard in 1994 before coming to their senses. Ditto City Lights. Overall, I've danced with the ones who would have me.

SARAH: You are one of my favorite small press poets to read. I like the humor and quick pace of your writing; your poems are smart, lively, and always entertaining.

So now, for my question(s): In this era of constant media distraction, what is the significance of a poem? Why do you think there is an upsurge of popular interest in poetry?

KLIPSCHUTZ: Well, thanks and thanks again. Poets crave praise like a dog likes to hear his or her name! Good questions, but you should know that by now – I'm 64 – I don't think about the big topics like 'significance' much. And to tell you the truth, the upsurge you mention I'm not sure I've even noticed. To me, the poetry world is kind of like my neighborhood in San Francisco, the Tenderloin, on the cusp of the Tenderloin and Nob Hill. We get upscale aspects (craft ice cream!), but homeless people still sleep in our doorway. There are tents on the street, and artisanal beer. Both situations are real, side by side. I think that's what Keats called 'negative capability.'

So, I guess the way I think of it is that good and bad things are happening all the time. Are the Instagram Poets a positive development? Is Rupi Kaur 'good' for poetry? It depends who you ask, and since you're asking me, my take is 'no.' It's ersatz. Disposable. Then there's the incursion of Identity Politics into poetry. Since I'm a straight, cisgender white male, and old, I'm part of the demographic that Eileen Myles said in an interview should just shut up and not write or publish anything for the next 50

years. Am I allowed to disagree? It's the poem, isn't it, not the name on it, or the biographical particulars of who wrote it? But, people do seem to be more interested, if not life-changingly so, in my own poems lately. Which I couldn't be happier about.

SARAH: And what is the purpose of a poem in the current U.S. culture? Is it for entertainment? Political commentary? Deep-deep-thinky stuff? Or is poetry primarily a tool for people to *seem* bookish? (An idea comparable to a person wearing eye-glasses to seem bookish, if that's still a thing.) And what do you think poetry is for?

KLIPSCHUTZ: All of the above! Poetry has an uphill battle. Entertainment: We're in competition with comedians and talk show hosts. And it's a golden age for them. Poets are hamstrung by political correctness. Sure, comedians get in hot water, but some are fearless. (Eric Andre!) Poets, editors, publishers, not so much. Political commentary: We have stiff competition there too, on many fronts. For people who remember, the great Hunter T. Thompson combined literary heft, journalistic flow, slashing humor, and informed, biting analysis. While there's no one quite like him now, again, some of the late-nite talk show hosts are keeping it real.

Deep-thinky stuff: I'll go with Bukowski, who said an intellectual can take a simple idea and make it complicated and an artist can take a complex idea and cut to the chase. (Or words to that effect). As to posers, with or without glasses, same as it ever was. And on what poetry is for – can I get back to you in about 10 years? I may need to hire an expert. And experts are expensive, so I should start saving. I will say, though, and this colors what I've just said, that there are things and approaches poetry can do better than stand-up or YouTube or songs or films or paintings. In other words, something a comic or commentator can't! That's a heavy lift, but it's also a natural fact. And for me it's a know-it-when-I-see it deal more than a definition or a prescription.

SARAH: That's cool, even though 'know-it-when-I-see-it' can also add an oddness to an artist's side life. As a writer myself, I notice that sometimes my friends and family are nervous that I have written or will write about them. I don't write overtly confessional poetry, so it's easy for me to say, 'My poetry

usually isn't about anything real. Images and thoughts just come out and mentally connect as a poem.' This is the easy answer, and I'm sticking to it, but I know that real life is part of that mental connection. I call it 'seepage,' but only when I am alone. It's just that, even if subdued, real life people, experiences, events, or perspectives vivify and even create poems.

So based on that, tell me a story. Tell me about a specific event, or a personal experience or insight you had, and then explain how it 'seeped' (overtly or covertly) into a poem, even if the seepage only influenced voice or perspective. Explain the changes that you made (exaggerations, contortions, deletions) to the event or experience to make them match the mental connections intended for the poem. Or, from your story example, did you play with the ideas and images until a poem was connected and shaped?

KLIPSCHUTZ: First off, a quote from Czeslaw Milosz: 'When a poet is born into a family, that family is finished.' I haven't completely finished my family off yet, but I'm making steady progress! Okay, then, multiple examples come to mind of seepage. I'll leave my family out of this one – they've suffered enough – and stick to two friends.

'Love & Kisses,' a suite of five poems, is the centerpiece of *Premeditations*. The protagonist is Carol Tinker, Kenneth Rexroth's widow and a poet and painter in her own right. Around the Y2K Scare, we met at a reading in Santa Barbara, where she lived, and she kind of adopted me. She took to my poems and we were both phone people. Late at night she'd call and give me endless advice. At first, I thought she might have some connections, but I soon found out she was a recluse and had gone to the same charm school as me. Carol would tell me everything I was reading was wrong, and what I should read instead. She was brilliant, and maybe something of a drinker. Hilariously dismissive when she wanted to be.

She died in 2012, so she never got to see 'Love and Kisses,' which quotes her lavishly. It started when I began to write down what she was saying on the phone – major seepage! – especially since she held court and my role was basically to listen, be playfully berated, and praised if I agreed with her. Parts of the poems take the form of impressionistic phone transcripts. Overall I

don't think it's unflattering, but I doubt she would agree. Besides, for me the poems were about creating a *version* of her, not Carol herself. In the process of rearranging and selecting, some exaggeration was inevitable. And the first poem in the series, a prose poem, I made up entirely. On the confessional tip, I will admit to settling a score with a mutual acquaintance Carol mentions, Patrick (his real name). Carol seemed to take a strange pleasure in telling me how fat he was getting. And so did I – so I put that in. Patrick is about fifteen years younger than I am. A while back, he had turned on me, and called me a 'mediocre middle-aged poet.' Then, since he has mental health issues, he thought we could still be pals.

SARAH: In keeping with that line of thought, but on a more general level. What is your writing process?

KLIPSCHUTZ: Visions and revisions, like T.S. Eliot said. And more revisions. And then some more. Time and distance. Lack of sleep to induce one more finishing push. Sometimes a poem takes me twenty years, and then I go back to the original first draft. My poems start from lines, not ideas. And I don't like to know where the poem is going. If I surprise myself, I have at least a fighting chance to keep the reader engaged. That's a paraphrase of Frost.

SARAH: In your new book, I notice that you refer to a number of canonical poets in the titles (including Wallace Stevens, Robinson Jeffers, Kay Ryan), in-text references, and allusions. Yet you bring them into contemporary relevance often using a humorous lens. Was it your intent to humanize modern canonical poets and contemporize their works? Or were the poems in which you allude to these works intent on capturing your reactions and interpretations of the poems as you apply them to your perspectives and these times? Or both?

KLIPSCHUTZ: Poems come from life, and sometimes poems come from life by way of other poems and from reading and absorbing poets, loving and hating them, arguing with them, correcting them, stealing from them, paying homage. Kay Ryan has a distinctive style and I was moved to address her in it, to mimic and honor her at the same time. Robinson Jeffers is a strange and problematic figure, an *isolato* and a political conservative whose poems about hawks and wind and cliffs and unruly waves were

embraced by the Sierra Club. I got a kick out of picturing him as a one-man band, like you see at tourist spots, the guy playing a ukulele while beating a kick drum with his feet and shaking a tambourine he wears like a crown. He can do it all, only he needs you, the audience, to toss coins in his hat in order to be able to eat the next day. Similarly, Jeffers needed an audience, and for many years he actually had one. Bukowski revered him.

Wallace Stevens, I feel duty bound to point out, was a stone cold racist, and also an anti-Semite. But one of the most sublime philosophical poets of all time, I'll step out on a limb and declare. My poem for him was originally four separate ones. In parts of it I'm channeling him. Also, both the Jeffers and Stevens poems are in a way impressionistic sketches, sort of like those portraits Calder did with wire of figures like Fernand Léger and Josephine Baker.

SARAH: Based on this, how important is literary tradition? I teach English, and I always tell my students that before Steinbeck or Hemingway were on required college English reading lists, they were popular writers who wrote books that people wanted to read. Even Shakespeare wrote plays to sell tickets. As a poet with a background of Beat poetry influences, influences considered deviant from the literary norm, what do you think of the value of poetry simply because it's 'good' regardless from which the poetic movement or era it came?

KLIPSCHUTZ: 'Good' is a tough one. If you'll allow me to substitute 'appealing,' that I can roll with. Leaving out the thorny issue of appealing to whom. I am attracted to a wide variety of writing, which includes characters like Raymond Chandler, who wrote pulp novels that stuck around – which is Frost's definition of a great poem: one you can't get rid of. Chandler stuck around long enough to get grandfathered into the canon. Again, in deference to the times, I feel compelled to point out that he was also a king hell racist (*Farewell My Lovely* in particular), and no slouch as a homophobe and anti-Semite. Maybe, though, if I may suggest, we can stop holding writers to a strict standard of belief systems and judge them on the totality of their books, or even their styles. Or else we can purge our bookshelves and leave only Alice Walker. But oops! She's also an anti-Semite, so it looks like the French Revolution all over again once heads start to roll.

SARAH: In *Premeditations* there are poems about established poets that evoke blues standards, such as 'A' Comin' and 'Alfred Fowler (Kayo) Saxton,' or that reference folk or country music traditions, such as 'Instructor's Critique' and 'Autumnal.' What is your intention with these choices? And from your perspective, what roles do the blues and folk and jazz music traditions have in the world (and future) of poetry? And in the world in general?

KLIPSCHUTZ: I try not to have intentions. Leonard Cohen said that our opinions are the least interesting thing about us. And Lord knows I have plenty of opinions. (Colette sure knows that!) When it comes to writing, though, I am as likely to channel another voice or point of view as I am to lay out my own. As to music, I'm also a songwriter, primarily with Chuck Prophet, so I've co-written blues, folk, country, and rock tunes. Jazz is a ways out of my wheelhouse, though I appreciate it. Songs are songs and poems are poems, except when they aren't. Like Ray Davies says in 'Lola': 'It's a mixed up, muddled up, shook up world,' and that goes double for music and poetry! When a songwriter wins the Nobel Prize for Literature, all bets are off.

SARAH: I agree. Songs are often more accessible than poems. So I wonder: how important is the accessibility of meaning in poetry? As a poet and someone who reads poetry, which of the following do you think to be true of 'good' poetry: 1) the poem's meaning is wide open; 2) the poem's meaning is guided, yet open to interpretation; and/or 3) the poem's meaning is fixed?

KLIPSCHUTZ: Accessibility as it refers to poetry is a double-edged sword. It's a put-down as often as it's a praise word. Just ask Billy Collins. I like my poems clear on the surface, with mystery lurking underneath and woven inside of them. That goes for the poems I write and the poems I like to read. As to door number 1, 2, or 3, I hate to sound too agreeable, but I think all three are true. It depends on the poem. To me, chasing meaning is a game, and often not as amusing as Twister or as exhausting as a disagreement with Sharon Doubiago, whose poems and prose I highly recommend. But I don't teach, and I don't want to put you and other teachers out of work. so far be it from me to interfere with the hunting of the snark ...

SARAH: Well, I wear many hats: teacher, poet, editor are a

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few among many, and sometimes I forget to change hats! However, in this discussion, the hat that suits me best is 'poetry lover,' and I think this same hat fits all of the *Chiron* readers, including the poets themselves. I honestly don't know of anyone who writes poetry because they hate poetry – but that's another interview with a poet who has yet to come forward!

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But back to you – I have said this many times before: I really like your poetry. Your writing has consistently enjoyable surface value; your poems are clever and true, imagistic but precise. And then there is always the intentional deeper meaning, which is your aim, as you just said. I am happy that your poems have appeared in *Chiron Review* and I am really pleased to be able to speak with you in this interview so that *Chiron* readers can find out more about you and your work! That said, I am having difficulty ending our fun talk, but it has to close up somehow ... So I've decided to end it swiftly, to cut it like a guillotine. Before I do so, any last words?

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KLIPSCHUTZ: I think I'll just bask in your generosity and appreciation. After all these years, when we finally meet, the first few rounds are on me.

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SARAH: It's been a great talk, Kurt! And when you say the 'first few rounds' are on you whenever we actually meet, I will hold you to that. But I hope you mean three booze drinks followed by black coffee ... because I'm an enthusiastic lightweight with caffeine needs! Thanks in advance – and thanks for the interview and for sharing some of your poems in this edition of *Chiron Review*!