



night & day

Great expectorations

San Francisco's Sister Spit heads east

BEWARE, BEANTOWN. The 1997 Sister Spit Rambling Road Show — the coolest (and cutest) line-up of talented, tattooed, pierced, and purple-pigtailed performance artists the Bay Area has to offer — is headed your way. Don't say I

didn't warn you.

In early July, 10 dykes who cut their literary teeth on the spoken-word stage at California's Coco Club crowded into a couple of groovy vans and began tooling around the country, slinging their savvy poetry in

bars and coffeehouses as far afield as Tucson, Houston, and Buffalo. Three weeks, countless cups of coffee, and an indeterminate number of pee-stops later, this queer performance show is about to stop in our little town.

On July 25, the spitters will storm Upstairs at Ryles to deliver what might well be the funkier literary slam (no small distinction) that Boston/Cambridge has ever seen. Michelle Tea, Sini Anderson, Harriet Dodge, Samuel Topiary, and Cherrie "Duke" Bombardier (fresh from her victory as 1997's Mr. Drag King of San Francisco) are budding literary luminaries whose names might not yet be familiar east of the Rockies — but they will be.

This gang will be joined by several other all-star spitters who have been performing for years at the weekly Sister Spit open mic, first organized by Anderson and Tea in the Bay Area in 1994. Voted the "best place to hear silver-tongued she-

devils" by the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, Sister Spit events have a reputation as the destination of choice for cutting-edge poetry, hard-hitting dyke musings, and raw, energized theatrical offerings. (Lynn Breedlove, of Tribe 8, once wheeled a dead pig on stage and smeared its blood over the face of a submissive straight guy.) Slam topics will cover the usual: politics, gender-bending, love and loss, sex, sex, and even more sex.

Also participating in this All-American line-up is performance-poetry veteran (and former presidential candidate) Eileen Myles, who will be launching her most recent book, *School of Fish* (Black Sparrow Press, 1997). The widely published Myles is best known for her edgy, burning accounts of New York's lesbian life and her wry, original cultural commentary — some of which appears in the magazine *Art in America*.

If you miss the spit-sisters in Boston, you can catch them in Provincetown, where the girls will dish at the Iguana Grill on July 27.

P.S. They've promised: no pigs.

— Louise Rafkin

REBECCA McBRIDE



ON THE ROAD: California's popular performers sling poetry, but no pig blood, on New England stages this summer.

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the Stranger

SCHOOL OF FISH by Eileen Myles

(Black Sparrow) \$14

For Eileen Myles, "a poem has always been an imagined body of a sort, getting that down in time, it moves this way and that, it is full of its own sense of possibility." In her new collection, *School of Fish*, a fresh relation to Robert Creeley's whittled edge turns the page into an open space where we can calmly observe precise temporal pleatings:

*Everything
shouldn't be
so quick
deep down
from the
past to
now and forward*

"Everything"—food, friendship, streetscape, memory, foremothers and fathers, the menstrual pinch—circulates in these veiny lines, even as Myles reminds us that Gertrude Stein studied circulation in the body. She wears her influences well. When she says "it is 4 o'clock" the line cycles back through Berrigan's "dear Margie, hello. It is 5:15 am" as well as forward into quotidian culture, like real-time dog walking.

I love these poems because they're honest without being precious, because they stride along, inadvertently gorgeous, down the street so that I want to keep my eyes there, with the swing of movement. I love them because of the way they show that a writing of identity doesn't have to be either confessional, or syntactically opaque. Here it's a clear rhythm loving both past and present, a "Silly little solo/ in the thundering/ blue, in the/ towers of/ the church."

Furthermore, Myles' lyric is a relevant politics that knits the body to its time. These poems insist "that a woman, unwriting herself, flooding the world with her details, standing in such an endangered place, could be free." At the opening, "The Troubadour" floors me with its relentlessly supple singing into the worldly ratters of—what—St. Mark's? Chartres? Avignon? No, "the sky." Here, really, is *amor*, alive still through all its honeyed centuries, bringing New York and other schools to their acutely girlish knees. **LISA ROBERTSON**

The Female in Poetry

JONATHAN TAYLOR

SCHOOL OF FISH. By Eileen Myles. Black Sparrow. 193 pp. Paper \$14.

Wanting to be an animal is kind of a good version of wanting to be dead—a lifting of the burden of consciousness, at the very least, with maybe something better instead, a new sight. "Life reduced/or expanded to getting doggie her very/next can," as Eileen Myles puts it in the title poem, "School of Fish."

It's a theme that's run throughout Myles's work, from her very first book, *The Irony of the Leash* (1978). But in *School of Fish* this relationship to nature moves to the center of a vision that is increasingly mystical. Where her earlier volumes, punctuated by wide-open metonymic summaries and plain-air aphorisms of the self, most often saw the poet bouncing around lower Manhattan, now these linguistic moments are just as often lifted out of such narrative context and allowed to bounce off one another in greater abstraction.

"Reduced or expanded": the animal's lack of self-consciousness, or its lack of anything but; a near self-extinction, or a coextensiveness with the universe. The small and the infinite are constant poles of reference. "The Troubador" opens:

I sing this
silly little solo
in the thundering
blue

let me warble
like a nice
sad bird
if a bird
had knees
& sense
to kneel
in the
light.

The poet, allowing herself to be as big or as small as necessary ("Moon or mouse?"), develops a casual relationship with nature at all levels: "It's the openness of summer/that perturbs me. Yeah, here comes/fall." Seasons are her peers, as are colors: "Who owns/this insidious red," she asks on a sunset-drenched "Twilight Train." Only somewhat paradoxically, this shedding of humanness allows for an unburdened scientific inquiry—"Now what is this grey, in relationship/to blue. Ask some painter is it less light/or is it what."

But by the same token, on that train,

Outside the Hudson
River queerness tools
on my brain like
a hopeless little
wallet of feeling.

What is the meaning of human relations, of something like sexuality, in this lone confrontation with nature? It's a version of the tree falling in the forest, and it inspires a key image in a short essay in *School of Fish* called "The Lesbian Poet," which is itself a key to the poetry: "Last summer I was standing alone on a hill with my dog and a car as an amazing shower of meteorites *flash flash* had stained the sky orange. It was so sensational and I was utterly alone with my animal. I knew I was a man.... I was standing in nature alone, this guy. It was a terrifically human feeling. Alone. Completely full."

It's a reversal of typical "identity" writing ("As a lesbian poet..."). "A lesbian is just an idea," she declares. "The Lesbian poet" is not a category, it's something Myles titled herself, and entitled herself to, via a complicated route that in fact began with many male poetic mentors, like Robert Creeley and James Schuyler—who still fit in because of that possibility she discovered of thinking she's a man. It's something Myles has always practiced with playful mordancy: "If I am/not a/man/how could/I be so/incredibly/important." But that's still a one-way street, because for men, thinking you're a man isn't just a "possibility," and thinking you're a woman isn't much of one, which is how Myles arrives, circuitously, at the importance of marking the female in poetry: "In a culture wild about dick it's essential, I think, to do some kind of owning, of what's inside your belly, the invisible." And why femaleness (as distinct from lesbian-ness) is more present in this volume than in the past.

In keeping with the wildness of it all, femaleness is marked often by blood. Not in a precious or pious way, but just as naturally as the men she cites mark their physicality, even if that's not normally explicitly noticed as something they're doing. From the lengthy and fragmented "1993":

like when
you've
bled on
your jeans
so you
rinse
out the
crotch &
then you're
wringing it
out &
the brown
blood is
coloring
the water
& it's all
twisted
when you

Jonathan Taylor, who lives in New York, writes occasionally about books and culture for *The Nation*, most recently on Gary Indiana.

squeeze
it again &
again &
it looks
like a little
dick &
you take
it to the
laundry.

Marking the femaleness is not about "finding herself," it's just an obvious component of finding herself constantly in the present moment—ceaselessly "turning out the way I am, turning out to greet you," in an Ashbery poem ("The Chateau Hardware") that Myles's poems often remind me of. "I feel/me surging/ahead"—which returns to the animal consciousness. A spectacularly associative poem, "Last Supper," zips with a weirdly detached religiosity between a catalogue of a day's snacks and a couple of Guggenheim museums, culminating in an address to Venice's Peggy G.:

And you know
what I thought
at the
gym tonight
I really thought
it. It was
really bright &
I was naked
I was standing
in the shower
like a mooing
cow, staring
into the
light & I
thought, life,
Peggy, life
is the only
privilege.

In such declamations and declarations, in their mock-epic clash, once again, of the soaring and the humble, *this* idea of the Lesbian Poet is most prefigured by that of the Russian Poet. "By what Goliaths was I conceived/I, so large/and so unneeded?" asked Mayakovsky. Or Ehrenburg:

Time to admit—even to howl or to cry—
I lived my life like a dog. ■