

Press—As Subject and Cited Authority

2006 | Featured author: “Finishing the First: 12 Debut Poets,” *Poets & Writers Magazine*, (November/December).

FINISHING *the* FIRST

A DOZEN DEBUT POETS WHO SEALED THE DEAL IN 2006

A LITTLE over half a century ago, a twenty-nine-year-old poet named Archie paid a vanity press, the Pittsburgh-based Dorrance Publishing Company, to publish his first book, *Ommateum*. A short collection of thirty terse, evocative poems, it did not do especially well.

"I guess Dorrance must have known that they wouldn't sell, so though they had said they would produce three hundred copies, they actually may have printed three hundred sheets, but they only bound a hundred copies," the poet said twenty-five years later, in an interview published in the *Manhattan Review*. "And I think they eventually threw away the other two hundred because they couldn't sell the first hundred. In five years, it sold sixteen copies."

Readers now know Archie better by the name under which he published nearly thirty books and won many of the country's most prestigious prizes, including two National Book Awards: A. R. Ammons. Critic Harold Bloom has said that Ammons, who died in 2001 at the age of seventy-five, was among "the Sublime of his generation" and that no other American poet is more likely to become "a classic." According to W. W. Norton, his debut book has already attained the status of a classic, as evidenced by the publisher's decision to reprint it in September. It's likely that readers will respond to *Ommateum* a little differently this time around.

For poets whose first books have recently been published—and especially for those who are still awaiting the opportunity—anecdotes such as this are either uplifting or disheartening. After all, some poets end up wildly successful even if they weren't welcomed with open arms—or wallets—at the beginning of their careers. On the other hand, if someone of Ammons's

BY KEVIN LARIMER • PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM GREENFIELD

talent can't hawk his wares, how likely is it that one in the hundreds of debut poetry books published this year will stand out? Only time will tell.

In addition to the tastes and attitudes of readers, the opinions of the poets themselves can change as well. Consider the sober words of Ted Kooser, the former poet laureate and the author of twelve poetry collections, on his debut, *Official Entry Blank*, published by the University of Nebraska Press in 1969. "My first book, which seemed to me at the time to be so wonderful, is, thirty-five years later, an embarrassment. Of the poems published there I might find one or two [that] I would bring forward into a tombstone collected-poems volume, should there be one, but I'm not even sure about that," he says. "But, of course, it was an important step."

And these aren't simply the words of a poet who's feeling a little gloomy because his tenure at the Library of Congress recently came to an end. Others have a similar take, like Stephen Dunn, the author of fourteen books of poems, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Different Hours* (Norton, 2000) and *Everything Else in the World* (Norton, 2006), who was thirty-five when his first book, *Looking for Holes in the Ceiling*, was published by the University of Massachusetts Press in 1974.

"In retrospect, I'd like to thank the editors who rejected it over a two-year period, though at the time I thought their judgment and taste were at best questionable. They did me a favor. The manuscript was in need of the poems that eventually I was able to write and include in it," Dunn says. "I expected to be thrilled when my copy of it arrived in the mail, but I remember feeling a strange sense of anticlimax. And when I showed it to my friends, they said how nice the cover was, when all I wanted to hear was how wonderful the poems were."

Lest new poets get too discouraged, consider the perspective of Quincy

Troupe, who has published seven poetry collections, most recently *The Architecture of Language* (Coffee House Press, 2006). Troupe admits his first book, *Embryo*, isn't perfect, but he was thrilled when it was released in 1972 by Barlenmir House. "I have never been ashamed of *Embryo*, because I realized it was only the seed poetry of what was to come, which I hoped would be better," he says. "In the poetry I write today, I still draw from some of the best, most rooted, and truest elements of the poetry in that book."

Brenda Hillman's debut, *White Dress* (Wesleyan University Press, 1985), appeared ten years after she had written most of the poems in it, and by then she had moved on to other work. "My poems certainly went in many other directions over the years; I don't think people should disclaim their early work but see it in the context of the time and of their circumstances," says Hillman, whose seventh collection, *Pieces of Air in the Epic*, was published by Wesleyan last year. "Besides, there are poets whose first books are actually the most interesting."

And that, of course, is one major impetus for unpublished poets to keep writing. It's also a big reason why publishers keep looking for undiscovered talent and why readers (hopefully a growing number of them) keep cracking open the hundreds of slender debuts released each year: to witness the emergence of a new voice, to hear the first movement of a symphony.

THE twelve poets featured here may never enjoy the success of Ammons. Or Kooser, Dunn, Troupe, or Hillman for that matter. Then again, one or two may outshine even the brightest poetry stars (and end up being embarrassed of their debut books). Perhaps one of these collections will rank on par with the classics, and future scholars will study its author as the defining voice

"New poets are continually reinvigorating poetry," says Jeffrey Shotts of Graywolf Press.

of early twenty-first-century American poetry. It's not only an uncertainty for the poets, it's a downright gamble for the presses that publish them.

Graywolf Press, an independent publisher based in St. Paul, publishes nine to ten books of poems each year, two of which are by poets who have never previously published a book. "I think it's vital for publishers to take a chance on new writers for no other reason than because the work itself is original, engaging, and deserving of readers who are also willing to take a chance on new writers," says poetry editor Jeffrey Shotts. "New poets are continually reinvigorating poetry, and those new voices are essential to the art and deserve to be published well."

Graywolf published Landis Everson's debut, *Everything Preserved*, last month. Anyone who has studied the poetry that came out of California during the 1940s and '50s knows that Everson's voice is not new: The eighty-year-old poet was a significant figure in the Berkeley Renaissance, a movement that rebelled against formalism. He counted Robin Blaser, Robert Duncan, and Jack Spicer among his friends. After the group disbanded in 1961, however, Everson no longer had a community of peers, so he stopped writing for over forty years. Then, a few years ago, Ben Mazer, a young poet in Boston who was writing an essay on the Berkeley Renaissance, contacted Everson to see if he could publish some

KEVIN LARIMER is the senior editor of *Poets & Writers Magazine*.

of his poems in the literary magazine *Fulcrum*. With Mazer's encouragement, Everson started writing again. Once he had collected enough poems for a manuscript, he submitted it to one contest—the Poetry Foundation's Emily Dickinson First Book Award, given for a first book by a poet over the age of fifty—and he won it. Everson, who is recovering from a recent stroke, says he feels “pretty lucky” to have won. As well he should: *Everything Preserved* was chosen from over eleven hundred submissions.

It's relatively rare for a poet to wait that long to publish a first book, and it's even rarer for a poet to win a contest on the first try. Just ask Susan B. A. Somers-Willett, whose debut, *Roam*, was chosen by Leslie Adrienne Miller as the winner of the Open Competition in the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry. She submitted her manuscript to more than 100 contests—101 by her count—over a period of seven years, but she used the experience to her advantage. “The wait, however frustrating or full of dark hours, proved a time of exploration and self-investigation,” she says.

Somers-Willett is just one of seven debut poets who also teach for a living, she at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Thomas Heise, whose collection *Horror Vacui* was released by Sarabande Books in April, is an assistant professor at McGill University in Montreal and takes advantage of his summers off to read and write. But Heise, who received an MA from the University of California, Davis, can remember a day when his writing schedule was quite different. “My first two years out of my MA program, I worked seventy-hour weeks reading patents and assembling case files in a major litigation firm in San Francisco, and even then I managed to eke out some time to write, even if it came at the cost of sleep,” he says. “So my current work feels luxurious by comparison.”

David Tucker, whose debut, *Late for Work*, was selected by Philip Levine as the winner of the 2005 Katharine Bakeless Nason Prize for Poetry and

published by Mariner Books, probably wouldn't characterize his work as “luxurious.” Tucker is the deputy managing editor of the *Star-Ledger*, a daily newspaper in Newark, and he works hard to find time for his own writing. “Mostly I manage it okay, but there are days when I do need more time,” he says. “On the other hand, the worlds of newspapering and poetry somehow work together for me. The newsroom is a big chaotic workshop anyway, so I never feel removed from writing.” Tucker, who happens to be the second oldest debut poet here, at age fifty-nine, says he writes early in the morning, before work, in his study at home in South Orange, New Jersey.

Not every poet is able to stick to a consistent writing schedule. Ada Limón, the winner of the 2005 Autumn House Poetry Prize for *lucky wreck*, says she tries to carve out a chunk of time to write whenever she can, even if it's on the subway or right before bed. “Ideally, I would write all day—seriously, because one hour of writing for me takes at least an hour of procrastination,” says Limón, who is the event manager at Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia in New York City, a job that she says does not allow for a lot of free time. “If I could develop a way to write and walk at the same time—safely—I would have written at least ten books by now.”

Limón's book was published in January by Autumn House Press in Pittsburgh. Michael Simms, the non-profit press's executive director, says *lucky wreck* was chosen from over 650 manuscripts that were submitted to the press's annual contest, and that he personally read each one, hoping to find one or two worthy of publication. “Every poetry editor's dream is to discover the next big talent—the poet that everyone will be talking about in a few years,” he says. “To be able to say I was the first to publish him or her—that's an exciting ambition.”

April Ossmann, the executive director of Alice James Books, a cooperative poetry press in Farmington, Maine, shares Simms's ambition, and

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says that one of the benefits of taking a chance on a debut book is the opportunity to offer “a kind of good-news antidote to the nightly bad news.” A recent standout in the list of six poetry titles that Alice James publishes each year, half of which are debuts, is Christina Davis’s *Forth a Raven*. Davis spent a decade writing and revising the book. “I found that once

a poem was published in a magazine, I didn’t like it anymore and I would tinker with it until it went extinct,” she says. “But a few lines would survive the tyranny of my dislike.” The book was published in June—in a print run of fifteen hundred copies; Ossmann says she expects to order a second printing soon—and Davis says

she is pleased with the finished product. But old habits die hard, and she found herself casting a critical eye on the book. “The disappointments were only in certain last-minute decisions I made, moments in which I doubted my own aesthetic instincts,” she says. “It all comes down to a comma!”

Anthony Hawley says he spent two years trying to find a publisher for his book, *The Concerto Form*, before it was picked up by Shearsman Books, an independent press in Exeter, England. Like Davis, Hawley continually revised his manuscript during the submission process. “Sending it out always forced me to rethink what [it] needed,” he says. “If I hadn’t sent it all those times I might not have chiseled away at the book as much as I did. Each time I sent the manuscript out to a different publisher or contest, I forced myself to hone the book a little more.”

Then there’s Daniel Brenner, whose book *The Stupefying Flashbulbs* was chosen by Rebecca Wolff as the winner of the Fence Modern Poets Series. He jokes that it took him only a couple of hours to write the book. “I was throwing stuff together and changing it,”

says Brenner, who is an independent contractor in Jersey City. Although he’s not sure of the exact number of contests he submitted to before *The Stupefying Flashbulbs* finally won and was published by Fence Books, he says it was “enough so that I was sending out each manuscript with a sense of doomed resignation.”

“Every poetry editor’s dream is to discover the next big talent—the poet that everyone will be talking about in a few years,” says Michael Simms of Autumn House Press.

Brenner is one of only three of the debut poets—along with Tucker and Vievee Francis—who does not have a graduate degree. (Tucker has all but one credit for an MA from the University of Michigan.) Francis, whose book *Blue-Tail Fly* was published by Wayne State University Press in Detroit, says she did not have the “wide network” of peers that many build in graduate school, so she found the process of securing prepublication reviews, or blurbs, for her book daunting. “All of the poets who blurbed my book had read or heard me read my poetry before they knew me personally, so I felt secure that they all had a genuine appreciation for my work.” Indeed, *Blue-Tail Fly* features some of the most glowing prepublication reviews of any of the debut books. Anthony Butts, Thomas Sayers Ellis, Thomas Lynch, and Ted Pearson are among its admirers. Even so, Francis says she has decided to pursue a master’s degree.

Whether or not graduate school makes one a better poet—or, to put a finer point on it, a better *published* poet—is a source of contention. The MFA experience is, after all, completely

subjective. María Meléndez, the author of *How Long She’ll Last in This World*, published by the University of Arizona Press, received her MA from the University of California, Davis. The experience was a mixed bag, to say the least.

“On the one hand, graduate school was the worst stew-pot of stress I’ve ever simmered in, because I really felt like I’d staked my life on poetry, having moved my husband and son out to California so I could attend the program. At one point, I was sure the stress was manifesting itself on my body—I developed these weird eczema-like raw spots over my hip bones and collar bones, something I’ve never had before or since. But

I felt a little smug about these, a little ennobled, since they made my suffering visible—beyond what my dietary habits had already done. As a fellow student pointed out to me during an encounter at the vending machine, caffeine, transfat, tobacco, and orange #47 had become our four basic food groups. This meant a bag of Cheetos and a Mountain Dew made a pretty decent dinner during smoke breaks in the evening workshop.

“On the other hand, I was very lucky to have some terrific teachers, two years’ worth of poetry deadlines, and a cohort of graduate-student writers who managed to stay truly interested in each other’s work for the duration,” Meléndez says.

Anna Moschovakis, who is currently pursuing a PhD in comparative literature at the City University of New York Graduate Center, received her MFA from the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. “It’s a unique program—low-residency and multidisciplinary—which, from what I can tell, has very little in common with most MFA programs,” says

Moschovakis, whose debut, *I Have Not Been Able to Get Through to Everyone*, was published by Turtle Point Press in September, eight years after she finished at Bard. "All the instruction is individual, and as a writing student you work with painters, photographers, filmmakers, sculptors, and musicians, as well as with the writing faculty." The rigor that Moschovakis says she was exposed to in the program has served her well in her position as an editor at Ugly Duckling Presse, a nonprofit art and publishing collective in Brooklyn that produces books of poetry and translations, chapbooks, artist's books, and broadsides.

Before enrolling in the MFA program at the University of Minnesota, Alex Lemon studied political science at Macalester College in St. Paul and hadn't given much thought to poetry. But a series of strokes—Lemon suffered from arteriovenous malformation, a mass of abnormal blood vessels in the brain—which led to a series of brain surgeries, made him reconsider


his plans. "I had brain surgery in 1999, and the first poems I ever wrote were directly related to that experience," he says. "After surgery I had a new body—one that wouldn't work wholly, or smoothly—and even after I'd finished going to rehab and had become more comfortable with my new self, I was bewildered emotionally. Almost all of my early poems bled from this place." The first section of *Mosquito*, Lemon's debut, published by Tin House Books in August, is composed of poems that describe his slow recovery. He's now at work on a memoir titled "Happy."

FOR all of these debut poets, the experience of publishing their first books has changed their lives—if only a little bit—and given them a new perspective on poetry and the business of writing. They, along with hundreds

of others who can consider 2006 as the year in which they formally entered the realm of published poets, have begun promoting their books, giving public readings—plying their trade. After all, the work of a writer is never really finished.

But first, a moment of celebration. Lemon says the biggest shock of this whole experience was simply holding his finished book in his hands. "When I first touched it I thought I might pass out or throw up," he says. "I feel so fortunate and grateful about all of this." Even the most seasoned poets would agree such excitement is worth holding on to for a little while—at least until 2007.

For excerpts from the twelve debut poetry books; a checklist of other recently published first books; updates from poets featured in last year's debut poetry feature; and reminiscences by Stephen Dunn, Brenda Hillman, Ted Kooser, Ann Lauterbach, Quincy Troupe, and C. D. Wright about their first books, visit us on the Web at www.pw.org/mag/debutpoets2006.htm. ∞



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I Have Not Been Able to Get Through to Everyone (Turtle Point Press)

Poet: Anna Moschovakis

Age: Thirty-six

Residence: Brooklyn

Graduate degree: MFA from Bard College

Jobs: Copyeditor, translator, freelance designer and printer, teacher
The job-writing juggling act: "I don't feel like I have to write poetry every day—when it happens, it happens, and the rest of the time I'm busy doing other things."

Influences: Samuel Beckett, Laura Riding, Ludwig Wittgenstein

Time spent writing the book: Five years

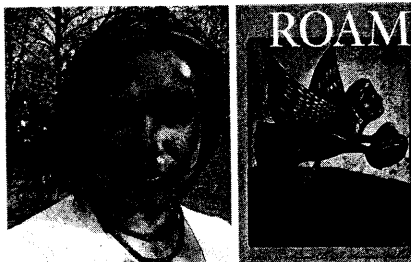
Time spent finding a publisher: Three years

Representative line: "I can't remember what it is I'm supposed to be doing."

Blurbs: Ammiel Alcalay, Ann Lauterbach, Lewis Warsh

Looking ahead: "I'm wrestling with another poetry book, and I'm working—very slowly—on a novella."

A bit of advice: "Don't be in a hurry—I'm glad that the early versions of my book didn't get published. And don't place too much stock in having your first book be an edition of several thousand copies from an established publisher. It's easy to make a hundred copies of a chapbook and get them around to other poets and poetry readers, and in a lot of ways that is the most rewarding way to make your work public."



Roam (Southern Illinois University Press)

Poet: Susan B. A. Somers-Willett, winner of the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry—Open Competition Award, selected by Leslie Adrienne Miller

Age: Thirty-three

Residence: Pittsburgh

Graduate degrees: MA, PhD from University of Texas, Austin

Job: Teacher

Favorite debut: Robert Hass's *Field Guide* (Yale University Press, 1973)

Influences: Lucille Clifton, Adrienne Rich, Walt Whitman

Time spent writing the book: Ten years

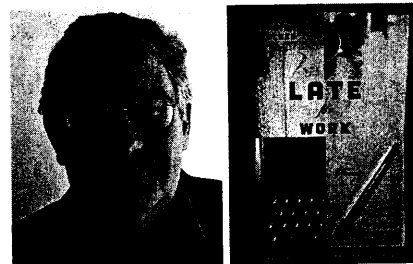
Number of contests entered: 101 over a period of seven years

Representative lines: "Regret / has moved to some other country / so dress, make bets, burn, do nothing."

Blurbs: Khaled Mattawa, Naomi Shihab Nye, James Ragan, Patricia Smith

Looking ahead: "I'm almost finished with 'Quiver,' a book of poetry about the science, mathematics, and evolution of love and beauty. I've also just completed a scholarly manuscript titled 'The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry.'"

A bit of advice: "Forget all the posturing—the poetry industry is made of regular folks like you and me. Get your poems off the page and in the mouth, ear, and body. Know your voice will change and that this is no cause for embarrassment. Support your fellow poets in any way you can. Wait. Know that persistence is the truest form of art."



Late for Work (Mariner Books)

Poet: David Tucker, winner of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference Bakeless Prize, selected by Philip Levine

Age: Fifty-nine

Residence: South Orange, New Jersey

Graduate degree: None

Job: Deputy managing editor of the *Star-Ledger*

Favorite debut: Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855)

Influences: Donald Hall, Robert Hayden, Joe Salerno

Time spent writing the book: Thirty years

Number of contests entered: Approximately twenty

Representative line: "I love these Saturdays in late August when the city room is quiet"

Blurbs: Tom Ashbrook, Mark Bowden, Lola Haskins, Robert Pinsky

Looking back: "I didn't try very hard to get a book published until the last few years. So maybe I could have worked more in earnest at it. But on the other hand, by waiting, I did a lot of cutting and rewriting that made my poems better. Unlike news stories, there is never a reason to rush a poem."

Looking ahead: "I am working on a second book of poetry."

A bit of advice: "Treat it like a job you have to go to every day. Trying to get published is part of the work of being a writer. When you think your book is ready to publish it's probably not. So just keep writing, welcome criticism, seek it, revise mercilessly." ∞