

The State of Poetry

GROUNDBREAKING CALIFORNIA ANTHOLOGY FEATURES FIVE LOCAL MASTERS OF THE WORD

✓ *Authors*
by Bobi Wood

California, according to local poet David Swanger, is "like an avocado; you may not eat it very often, but you always remember it."

The unassuming Swanger has the tantalizing ability to speak in slow, elegant metered prose and one can imagine his mind soaring and swooping above whatever he's talking about, patiently selecting each and every word to form his vivid compositions. The man gives you the feeling that you are in the company of a poet.

Those who enjoy the company of poets will not want to miss a reading by four local poets at 7:30 p.m. Monday at the Capitola Book Cafe. They are banding together to celebrate California — the Santa Cruz region in particular — as part of a groundbreaking anthology of California poetry entitled *The Geography of Home*. The book, published in April by Heyday Books, includes works by Swanger,

Adrienne Rich, Morton Marcus, Joseph Stroud and Gary Young. "It's interesting that California has

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been so important in people's lives, that even when the major part of their life has been spent elsewhere, that part which was lived in California, brief as it was, was powerful. You know?"

"I lived most of my life in New Jersey, but California is more dramatic and volatile — it's both more impressive and more dangerous. You think of places being dangerous like Newark, New Jersey, where I was born, (with) urban dangers... but I think the dangers in California are more primitive. They are literally deeper lying," Swanger says.

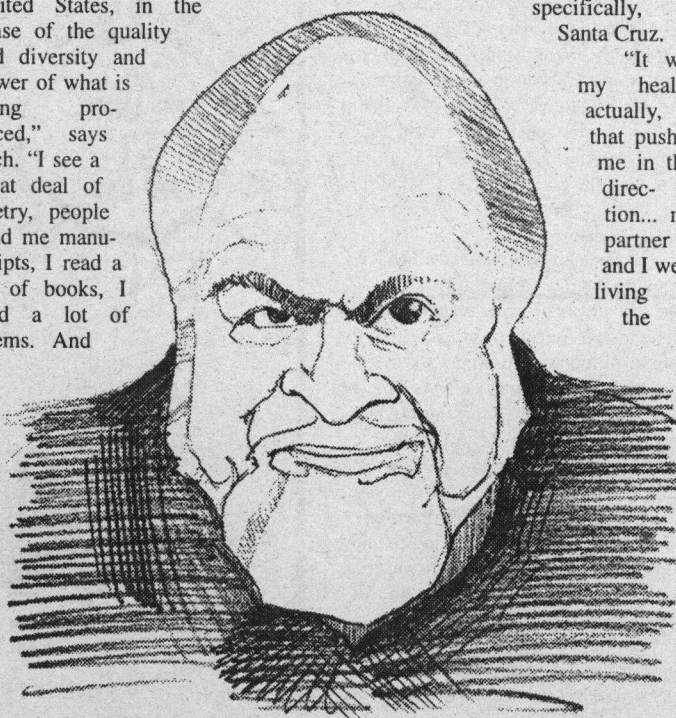
Swanger, whose work is published frequently, has poems out in recent editions of the *Georgia Review* and the *Nebraska Review*. Swanger has taught at UCSC since 1971; he currently teaches Creative Writing in the Literature Department and Educational Philosophy in the Education Department. His most recent collection of poetry is 1995's *This Waking Unafraid*, published by the University of Missouri Press.

Some fascinating possibilities emerge from between the fault lines. Swanger thoughtfully explains one of his poems that is very much inspired by the particulars of place. Of his recent poem, "Natural Disaster," which was written during one of Santa Cruz County's massive rainstorms, Swanger deadpans: "Whatever the disaster, we're not ready. We are in a constant state of unreadiness. Even for death, we try to ready ourselves."

Swanger adds, "The most important thing about that poem for me is names. It names the creeks, it names the people, and then, towards the last line, it names God, it names the lucky survivor. And then, the last thing it does is to name the natural force that's caused all of this, which is just rain."

Ruptures

"I think that this is a marvelous time for poetry in the United States, in the sense of the quality and diversity and power of what is being produced," says Rich. "I see a great deal of poetry, people send me manuscripts, I read a lot of books, I read a lot of poems. And



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— Morton Marcus

I am continually finding new and wonderful poets...

"And at the same time, I feel as though this is one of the worst periods in our history. And that this 'poetic renaissance,' if you want to call it that, is expressive in a way of that, not that anyone is writing about that (although many are). But there is a hunger for values, and for experiences, and the mechanisms of corporate power just do not provide that. Or are antithetical to, or are opposite to that."

The prolific, openly political Rich, the most nationally known of the Santa Cruz poets included in the anthology, has written more than 16 volumes of poetry and four prose works, including her newest, *Midnight Salvage*, published by W.W. Norton this year.

Rich thoughtfully shared the story of what brought her to California and, specifically, to Santa Cruz.

"It was my health, actually, that pushed me in this direction... my partner and I were living in the

making this enormous leap; I mean, both of us felt like we were very East Coast oriented, very New York oriented, and couldn't quite imagine what it would be like to have a normal life here. But I don't think either of us has ever regretted it after the first few months," she says.

"I see poetry as this resource that's kind of untamable. I also think there's a lot of poetry in this country that's very comfortable; that seems to have the function of keeping people feeling comfortable in a very disturbed and disturbing time."

Making readers feel comfortable is definitely not what Rich is about; the award-winning poet is known equally well for her intense, take-no-prisoners prose style and for her powerfully moving readings. In an excerpt from *An Atlas of a Difficult World* included in the new anthology, she writes:

I don't want to hear how he beat her after the earthquake, tore up her writing, threw the kerosene lantern into her face waiting like an unbreakable mirror of his own.

"And that was true, too," Rich says somberly after discussing the poem, her deep brown eyes gone serious now, "because that's documented fact that after the earthquake, domestic violence hotlines reported many more calls than they had had before it. And that fact struck me." Rich emphasizes that although she doesn't know, she guesses the phenomenon was caused because "the earthquake left everyone, male and female, feeling terribly out of control."

Rich speaks of the dramatic gaps between the rich and the poor in California, saying, "These fissures and cracks, I know, are not peculiar to California, they're throughout our whole continent. But many things seem more graphic here."

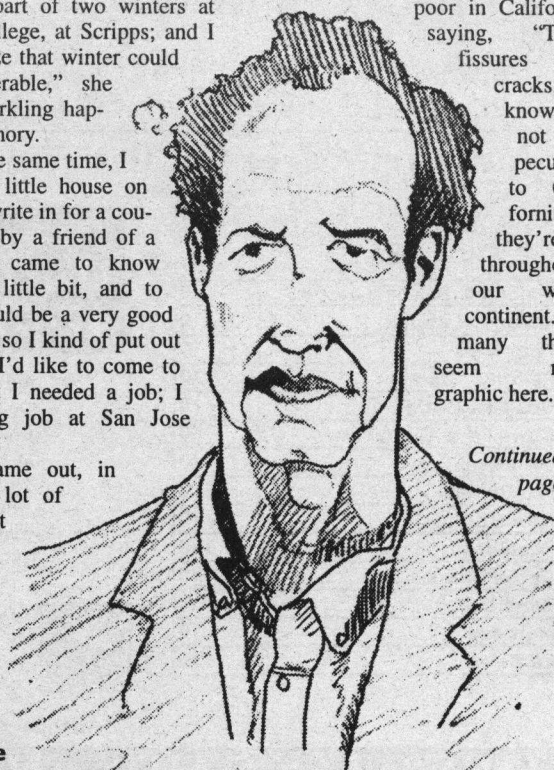
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Northeast and the winters were starting to become more and more difficult for me. Then I had an invitation to teach for part of two winters at Claremont College, at Scripps; and I began to realize that winter could be quite tolerable," she says, eyes sparkling happily at the memory.

"And, at the same time, I was loaned a little house on West Cliff to write in for a couple of weeks, by a friend of a friend, and I came to know Santa Cruz a little bit, and to feel that it would be a very good place to come, so I kind of put out the word that I'd like to come to California, but I needed a job; I got a teaching job at San Jose State..."

"So we came out, in 1984, with a lot of qualms about

"The California landscape is etched in me deeply and permanently and has shaped my interior life." — Joseph Stroud



Local poets David Swanger, Adrienne Rich, Morton Marcus and Gary Young will read from *The Geography of Home* at the Capitola Book Cafe at 7:30 p.m. on Monday.

Illustrations by Sef McCullough

Shamans of the Earth

"Something that concerns me and the writers of my generation," says Marcus, Santa Cruz Artist of the Year, "is that for a long time, California really was considered by the big publishers of the East Coast to be a sort of secondary wild place, where you don't go without snowshoes and rifles. And that just everyone who writes or does art out here is really laid back, and goes to the beach, and can't have any serious intellectual or aesthetic pretensions. It was great to have this anthology come out and say, 'Hey how 'bout this rest of America?' And, especially, East Coast, we do have some of the strongest poetry being written in this country, which Gary and Chris (the editors) never doubted for a second, and neither did I."

"This place used to be a hotbed. In the '70s, this place was unbelievable. I would put on poetry readings, not only out at Cabrillo, but in restaurants in town, and we would have readings actually every week, and people would pile in after 9 o'clock at night when the restaurants closed... and they would fill up the place, 80 people. I mean they were sitting on the floor, standing up, just to hear new poets, young poets and prose writers from Santa Cruz... I mean, people were really, really listening to poetry and were into it. That changed around the end of the '70s, and I really have not seen the kinds of audiences with the intensity of before."

Marcus laughs, "I do have some really pompous purposes. I really think that the poet, in many ways, is a spiritual doctor. In our society he really is the vestige of the old shaman and his songs, if people will listen to them, will put them back in harmony with the universe, spiritually speaking... I think that one of the things that's happened in America is that everyone's become very humble and has a lot of humility; the poets have a lot of humility and (imitating John Wayne) 'shucks, man,' they don't realize that they're doing the John

Wayne of poetry. I've never felt that way because it denigrates, really, what you're doing. I don't think you're anything special if you're a poet, strangely speaking — because it's very paradoxical — but at the same time, what you're doing is darned important and you've got to acknowledge it."



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— Adrienne Rich

Demographic Demise

Gary Young, award-winning poet, Santa Cruz resident and co-editor of *The Geography of Home*, attributes the small crowds at poetry readings these days to demographics.

"One of the things that I've noticed, and one of the things that troubles me, is that when I was a 20-year-old, in my early 20s, I went to hear poets that were a little older than me, like Mort, and I went to hear poets who were significantly older than me, like Everson and Rexroth... We all, who were interested, went to

their readings, and as I've gotten older I've

found that the average age of the audience has gotten older, too. I wonder where are the young people?"

Young, who studied with Bill Everson, a poet and lay Dominican priest who spent his last years in Santa Cruz and was known as

Brother Antoninus during the Beat Generation, begs the question: "Are they at the slams? Are they playing with their computers? Are they watching Jerry Springer? I don't know. I don't know."

"I know that people are reading poetry, and again, it may just be the demographics here, and that (the '60s and '70s) was a different social time, poetry was tied to the anti-war movement, it was tied to all the political upheaval, and we all — face it — we were all 'lefties.' Some of us were extremely radical (Young shakes his head and laughs), and poetry was part of the radicalizing rebellion that was going to change the world. It wasn't just going to be a political revolution, it was a spiritual revolution, and part of that was going to be fueled by poetry. And we don't have that now; that political consciousness doesn't exist anymore."

Explaining his thoughts behind the creation of the anthology, Young states, "California is an immigrant culture and that's one of the beauties of the state. A third-generation Californian is a rare thing. People have always poured into the state, they continue to pour into the state and that's why I say that California really repeats in microcosm a lot of the experience of the country."

Shaky ground

Swanger says, "The earth moves in California. It may move elsewhere, it does move elsewhere. But in California, on a beautiful sunny day, with a slight breeze, and all the apples ripening in the back yard, suddenly the earth begins to move. And the hill on which you stand seems actually to be advancing towards you; an army of grass is advancing toward you. Only California can invent an army of grass advancing upon your homestead."

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