

COLLECTED POEMS

by James Schuyler
Farrar Strauss Giroux
New York, NY 1993

The house was quiet and the world was calm.

*The words were spoken as if there was no book,
Except that the reader leaned above the page,*

*Wanted to lean, wanted much most to be
The scholar to whom his book is true, to whom*

The summer night is like a perfection of thought.

—Wallace Stevens

Reading James Schuyler's *Collected Poems* this summer, just out this June, is better than vacationing at the shore, or mountain retreat; in fact it is better than anywhere one could imagine. There, or rather here in his book, one visits with the imagination of a great poet whose art transforms us as it informs our relationship within our surroundings only to discover words are the landscape in which we want most to go. Modesty, fortunately, is not one of Mr. Schuyler's virtues and the world he artfully presents, as we are keenly aware in every line, is neither his nor ours, even when the recognition of the real in his observations is so stunning we can only acquiesce.

Objects are never as real in life as they appear in Schuyler's poems. One might say Schuyler is an objective surrealist interpolating flat reportage with hyper-descriptive elements.

*The lilac leaves. The lilac trusses stand in bud. A cardinal
Passes like a flying tulip, alights and nails the green day
Down. One flame in a fire of sea-soaked, copper-fed wool:
A red that leaps from green and holds it there. . . .
(from "Hymn to Life," pg. 223)*

It's as though his "outside" is the reading of an afterimage flashed upon the optic nerve creating a neurasthenic tableau whose colors shift, and in this polarization or synesthesia we find world and ourselves impressed (nailed down, taken aboard) in his process. In this activity—the need to capture—Schuyler is an ecstatic, perhaps even a religious thinker, though he is neither overtly moral nor pious. In these visions of excess, Schuyler is never a tourist. He is, however, profoundly genuine in his arduous humility to get it right.

*There almost has to be a heaven! so there could be
a place for Bruno Walter
who never needed the cry of a baton.
Immortality—
in a small, dusty, rather gritty, somewhat scratchy
Magnavox from which a forte
drops like a used Brillo Pad?*

(from "A Man in Blue" pg. 17)

And wonderfully, for us, in our significant need for refreshment which he quietly indulges, getting it right means he can run on to "camp" where fun *"is something more than beer and skittles, and the something more is a whole lot better than beer and skittles!"* But his sense of whimsy, like that of John Ashbery, can also reveal that life in a funhouse is anything but fun. The nonsense in his poems can sometimes peek through to expose nature (and social orders alike) as empowered, terrifying and indifferent.

When Schuyler reviewed his lifetime friend Fairfield Porter's work in Art News in 1967 he wrote: *"The quotidian image is transfigured to pure paint."* Replace "language" for "paint" and the same can be said of the transfiguration Schuyler enacts within his own medium. The title of the review "Immediacy Is the Message" is telling as well, as Schuyler is the master of the quick take. However it is more complicated than "first thought best thought" for Schuyler is a known fiddler and would sometimes take up to a year tinkering with a poem—getting it right. The surface of his poems has only an illusion of immediate and effortless description. His poems, like ethnographic accounts, read from a subject-position both inside and outside of the human activities and "weather" they track. And although a case can be made that he himself was an outsider, we continually find ourselves adopted within the natural and normative social intricacies he records as familiar. We know that James Schuyler suffered profoundly in his adult life, he was hospitalized several times for schizophrenia and in many ways, I feel, his work is that of a solitaire, recording the light outside a window—guest room, hospital room etc. You don't have to go digging. It's in the poems. His vivid rendering of the world is born out of a necessity to cohere, not merely for embellishment but as an act of sanity. Yet he is not simply inventing a locus for himself in his poems. The act is, in fact, far more sophisticated—it is description as event. An event which includes potentially everyone: the ominous cabby, a nurse, a failed lover from highschool, a newspaper boy, friends and family alike. All have a place within Schuyler's "camp," which remains complicated and thick. The event of the poem is a promise of salvation divested within the infinite possibility of forms.

In his book of essays *The Interpretation of Culture* the anthropologist Clifford Geertz illuminates the role of ethnography as "thick description." In Schuyler's case, we might substitute

poet for ethnographer in the following quote: *"What the [poet] is in fact faced with is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render: incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries. And this is true at the most down-to-earth, jungle field work levels of his activity: interviewing informants, observing rituals, eliciting kin terms, censusing households, [describing them] not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior."* Indeed, his entire opus is full of *"transient examples of shaped behavior,"* never *"conventionalized graphs of sound."* Ethnography is not so far off, considering the subject matter of Schuyler's poems, especially the long poems. Take almost any passage:

*. . . I think with longing of my years in
Southampton, leaf-turning
trips to cool Vermont. Things should get better as you
grow older, but that
is not the way. The way is inscrutable and hard to handle.
Here it is
the Labor Day weekend and all my friends are out of town:
just me and some
millions of others, to whom I have not yet been introduced.
A walk in the
streets is not the same as a walk on the beach, by
preference, a beach
emptied by winter winds. A few days, and friends will
trickle back to
town. Dinner parties, my favorite form of entertainment.
Though in these
inflationary times you're lucky to get chicken in
place of steak.
What I save on meals I spend on taxis. Lately a lot
of cabs have
signs: NO SMOKING, PLEASE, or NO SMOKING DRIVER ALLERGIC.
A quiet smoke in
a taxi is my idea of bliss. Yes, everything gets more
restricted, less free.*

(from "A Few Days" pg 361)

Not unlike Whitman, Schuyler believed that *"a freedom which excludes is less than free."* ("Immediacy Is the Message"), and he has invented a form wherein we are free to come and go as we partake of the terms of its telling. His technique to create an open field was never more telling

than when, in an important gesture near the end of his life, Schuyler came out in 1988 to give his first public reading. The line outside of the DIA Foundation was four abreast and was over a block long comprised of life-long devotees and younger readers. In short all the various clans turned out to participate in the masterful space of that event.

I can't imagine anyone not being completely thrilled to own this edition of the *Collected Poems*. The cover is a portrait of Mr. Schuyler, reading in his room at the Chelsea Hotel, by Darragh Park (who, along with Raymond Foye and Thomas Carey is an editor of this volume). My only complaint is that I was also hoping to find fugitive poems from his career. The good news is that the present volume is replete with 90 pages of "Last Poems," which are remarkable. It is hard to pick favorites as they are all first rate and as good as anything he has written—outrageous, unconventional, particular, angry, disappointed, kind and knowing. A significant treat. The long poem "Hymn to Life" is presented here for the first time with its glorious long lines unbroken, which to my mind does make a difference. Also all of the poems from *The Home Book* are included. The most striking aspect of reading through the *Collected Poems* is the variousness of his craft, from short staccato lines to luxurious run-on sentences. The entire book creates an almost seamless vision of life as it is and as we see ourselves in it from a distance. To reread Schuyler's poems is a rehearsal for an event we need always to possess—the promise of artistic excellence.

PG; August 7, 1993