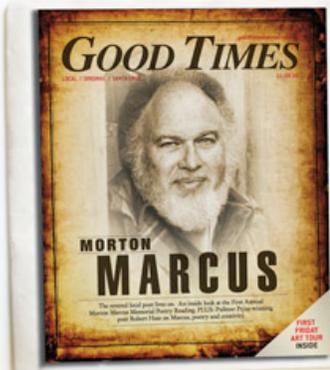


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Morton Marcus Lives On

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WEDNESDAY, 03 NOVEMBER 2010 10:43 | GT STAFF COVER STORIES - COVER STORIES



It has been a year since poet, film scholar, teacher, colleague and dear friend Morton Marcus left us, and he is still sorely missed. Author of 12 volumes of poetry, one espionage novel, and the lavish, informative autobiography, "Striking Through the Masks," Mort contributed hundreds of poems to anthologies and literary journals, and was the longtime co-host of The Poetry Show on KUSP radio. He was a regular contributor to GT and other local papers and a fixture at literary and cultural events around town. A passionate advocate for human rights as poet, teacher, columnist, and union organizer, he was also a celebrated and rigorous English instructor, and film guru to generations of awed Cabrillo College students.

A lifelong movie lover and self-taught film expert, Mort wrote and starred in the 16-part video series, Movie Milestones. From 1999 to 2009, he co-hosted the locally produced movie review TV program, Cinema Scene, with Richard Von Busack, and his regular Saturday morning film discussion group at the Nickelodeon was attended by a loyal, if opinionated, crowd of supporters. Named Santa Cruz County Artist of the Year in 1999, Mort was also the recipient of a Gail Rich Award in 2007 for his contributions to the local arts scene.

So it's not surprising that Mort's influence continues to ripple throughout the Santa Cruz arts and letters scene. Earlier this year, his contribution to the local film community was celebrated when the Santa Cruz Film Festival offered its 1st Annual Morton Marcus Audience Award For Best Narrative Feature to a participating filmmaker.

On Saturday, Nov. 6, the First Annual Morton Marcus Memorial Poetry Reading will be held in his honor at 7:30 p.m. at the Cabrillo College Music Recital Hall. Each year, event sponsors will bring in a prestigious poet for a free-admission public reading in Santa Cruz. This year, visiting poet Robert Hass, Pulitzer Prize- and National Book Award-winner, and former U.S. Poet Laureate, will read from his work. This year's inaugural event also coincides with the release of Mort's final book of poems, "The Dark Figure In The Doorway: Last Poems" (White Pine Press). Gary Young, the first Poet Laureate of Santa Cruz County, will serve as emcee, and join local poets Joseph Stroud and Stephen Kessler in reading selections from Mort's final book.



The event is co-sponsored by Poetry Santa Cruz, Ow Family Properties, Cabrillo College English Department, and UC Santa Cruz. Admission is free, but seating is limited and Mort had a legion of fans, so tickets will be required to get in. Doors open at 6:30 p.m., and seating will be first come, first served.

Tickets are no longer available at any of these outlets, event promoters urge poetry fans to come to the Recital Hall on Saturday night anyway, and join the queue. Seats unclaimed just prior to the start time will be made available to those in line, again, on a first come, first served basis, so best get there early. (And no kicking, gouging, or scratching as Mort used to say when he hosted Bruce Bratton, Wallace Baine, and myself in our annual critics melee at the Nickelodeon over the best and worst movies of the year.)

I suppose every one of Mort's admirers has a favorite Morton Marcus poem. There are certainly plenty to choose from. But when I first heard Mort read "Smoking Cigars" at a local book store (from the collection

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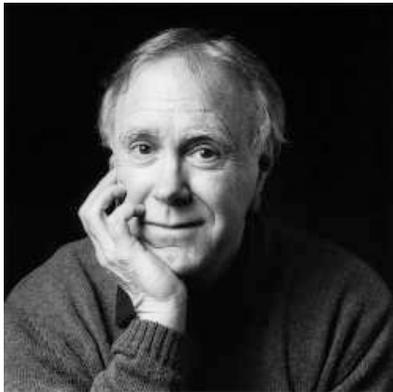
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"Moments Without Names," from White Pine Press), well, it blew me away. Understand, I hate cigars in real life, but in a few fleet, lyrical phrases, Mort had me reimagining the whole idea of smoking dried, aged plant leaves as a way to commune with the spirit of a place and the souls of ancient lives, a consummation with history itself.

Unfortunately, this revelation didn't make me any more tolerant of Mort's sweet cigar smoke wafting upstairs from the porch below and into our open window late at night during the two vacations Art Boy and I, and Mort and his wife, Donna Mekis, took together in the French countryside with our friends Bruce and Marcia McDougal. But I'd give a lot to be able to go back to France one more time and fall asleep breathing in those toxic fumes, knowing that Mort was still down there on the back porch, in rapt conversation with a lost world. | **Lisa Jensen**

WHAT IS ALIVE IN US

What is alive in us, what vibrates
in our animal skins, is a harp string
that is never still, a harp string
tuned to the drone of silence.
It is the single thread, the radiant filament,
that sews us to our coat of darkness,
the umbilical that holds us
to the planet each of us is
yet allows us to wander among the stars —
the guy rope that secures us
to ourselves, yet lets us venture
into the darkness all the way
to the planet of someone else.
—from "The Dark Figure In The Doorway"



In Memory

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Robert Hass reveals a fascinating inner world of creativity and pays tribute to Morton Marcus

Morton Marcus is most assuredly not forgotten. To celebrate his life and work, a group of his friends, family and local institutions have organized an event that will take place on Saturday, Nov. 6, at Cabrillo College, where Marcus taught poetry and film for decades.

Robert Hass will headline the event with a reading of his own poems. He will be joined by local poets Gary Young,

Joe Stroud and Stephen Kessler, who will read poems from Marcus' just-released, "The Dark Figure In The Doorway: Last Poems," published by White Pine Press.

Hass, the featured reader, has won just about every major award that a poet can win, including the Pulitzer Prize, The National Book Critics Circle Award, and The National Book Award. He's received a MacArthur Fellowship, (often called the genius award). He's a translator, essayist, critic, and for several years, was a weekly columnist for The Washington Post. And from 1995 to 1997, he served as The Poet Laureate of The United States.

Recently, Good Times conducted an email interview with Hass. Take a look.

Good Times: Neil Astley chose one of your Czeslaw Milosz translations for the anthology, "Staying Alive." The last line of "My Faithful Mother Tongue," the Milosz poem, is "... what is needed in misfortune is a little order and beauty." In your latest book you have an immensely moving poem about the death of your brother. It opens with an illustration of how difficult it is to shape a bit of order and beauty from grief, especially in its earliest stages. The first stanza goes:

I woke up thinking about my brothr's body.
that q That was my first bit of early morning typing
so the first dignity, it turns out, is to get the spelling right.

It's audacious but effective to let readers in on the evolution of your attempt to make "a little order and

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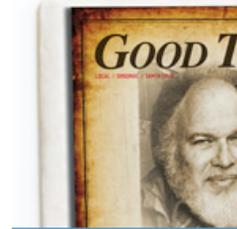
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Morton Marcus Lives On



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From Field to Able

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What's the best thing Obama can be doing for the

beauty” out of misfortune. Would you share with us your thoughts about why we often turn to poetry in times of emotional upheaval?

Robert Hass: I don't have a good answer to this question. It may be because, in times of emotional upheaval, I tend to turn to music. Because, I guess, I find it sometimes—where grief or loss is concerned—somehow soothing, comforting. I remember that when I was going through a divorce, I tended to listen alternately to Dylan's "Blood on the Tracks" and Monseratt Caballe singing Puccini arias, loud, on the car stereo; it was like a steam infusion of rich sadness. And where anger or bitterness are concerned, there's something comforting about excess—like that lyric of Liz Phair that goes something like, "Fuck you for your untouchable face, for existing in the first place." And I've had moments when only Howling Wolf did the trick—the humor and the tonic howl. When my brother died, I listened for some reason to late Beethoven quartets. He would have had no interest in them, but I needed something grave and piercing. I imagine the turn to poetry is the same—it's a power of art that it can intensify and clarify feeling and give you a little distance on it at the same time.

GT: In one of the essays in "Twentieth Century Pleasures," you wrote: "The first fact of the world is that it repeats itself."

In the small community of film reviewers in Santa Cruz, Morton Marcus was a "fact of the world." Most of us gathered in the Nickelodeon Theatre on Thursday and Friday mornings to watch advanced screenings of films. Mort has been gone for about a year now, but we still look over at the seat Mort sat in and can almost see him sitting there. We certainly 'feel' him sitting there. It's a feeling that's simultaneously sad but in a real way, consoling. It is a fact of our world repeating itself, every week. It's been at least 25 years since you wrote that essay. How often do the ideas in it inform your poetry and your teaching?

Robert Hass: I think I am remembering, and not hallucinating, a conversation with Mort on this subject. He was expatiating on one of his favorite subjects at the time—genre fiction. He'd just written, or was writing, his novel in the "thriller" genre, and was talking about how every popular genre of fiction had a core emotion or emotional formation—I think it was 'paranoia' for the spy novel. That led to a discussion—Mort in his kitchen obsessively cleaning the counter as he talked—I don't know if that was characteristic behavior or not since I didn't see him in his lair that often, but he'd just moved into a new apartment and he cleaned an already clean kitchen counter with great diligence as he talked—of predictability and surprise and I had spoken of the power and reassurance of predictability and the necessity of surprise and how the interplay between them was what people loved about all artistic forms. Mort mentioned the English psychoanalyst Charles Winnicott and his book "Play and Reality," some of which is about 'transitional objects' like small children's loved blankets, about how we teach ourselves the world, which is to say, relation to others and to ourselves, through play. So I did read Winnicott—it was always surprising, what Mort had read—and have been thinking about those issues in my teaching and writing sometimes ever since. (A phrase Mort might have liked—"sometimes ever since." He also had a theory about time.)

This is by way of answering your stated and implied question. I think Mort would have been the first to notice that he had become in this conversation a symbolic object and he would have been quite amused and pleased at the thought, I think.

GT: We know that fiction writers fabricate whole worlds. "Fiction" is their business. But when a poet writes from the first person, there is a tendency on the part of the reader to want to believe that the content is autobiographical, and more or less, 'the truth.'

Most poets claim for themselves the same right as novelists to tell the story that makes the poem work best.

With regard to many of your poems, readers would be surprised to learn that they were not indeed autobiographical and are as factually accurate as your memory allows. They certainly 'feel' that way, to an uncanny degree, and the more powerful for it.

Why do you think we readers want so much to 'believe' the poets we read when they write in the first person? And, in poems like "The Dry Mountain Air," "The World As Will And Representation," and "August Notebook: A Death," are you sticking to the facts, or adjusting events to serve the needs of the poems?

RH: First question. We readers want to believe the poems we read that are in the first person (i.e., we want to imagine that they attempt to represent the actual experience of another person), first of all, because the first pleasure of a story is sympathetic identification with, usually, the protagonist. Stories are a way of being another person, having another pair of eyes. So I think, unless we are warned off it, it is our first and deepest impulse to become the narrated person. Once we've made that identification on those terms, we don't like to feel the implicit contract has been broken, for the usual reasons—to do with trust—why people don't like contracts broken.

Second question. In the poems you mention I did think—certainly in "The World" and "August

Gets Revived



All of a Sudden

he accomplished



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11 Desserts & more



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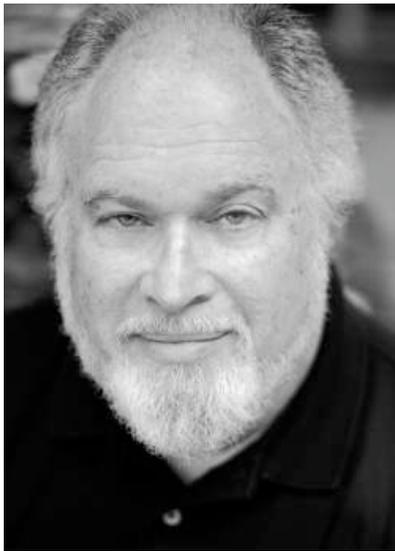
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We arrived during the

Notebook”—to stick to the facts and assumed that some version of my autobiographical self was what the “I” in the poem represented. (Though I also think that the autobiographical “I” to the extent that a reader identifies with it is also necessarily what Emily Dickinson called “a representative person.”) In “The Mountain Air,” I was dealing with my own experience, but I would be fine with the thought that the “I” was a fictional character, since the poem is to some extent about the puzzle of memory and, therefore, of any presumed self. I have also written other poems—in “Time and Materials,” “Domestic Interiors,” “Drift and “Vapor,” “Then Time”—that are narrative poems, made-up or imagined stories about people in which there is no correspondence to particular experience of mine that I owe the reader. The business of adjusting events in general is a tricky matter. “Pears” is another autobiographical poem, i.e., it is about my uncle and my memory of him. It belongs in the book to the theme of war, of men and war. It’s reported as if it were a dream, but it is writing that grew out of a trace memory of a dream and that took its own shape as I wrote it—and the historical details—were my parents playing bridge or canasta? Was it on that canoe trip that my uncle told the story of reading the Arthur Conan Doyle story? I don’t feel bound to my memory of each specific so much as to the feel of my childhood. Though I have kept in mind something I saw once on a blackboard in a classroom where Denise Levertov had just been teaching. She had written, “Accuracy is always” the gateway to mystery.” | **Dennis Morton**

ALL WE CAN DO

All we can do on this earth is step into the future



with a sense of the many people behind us,
the living and the dead, as if we carried our bodies
like amphorae filled with sunbeams into each new day,
continually reaching inside ourselves
to scatter golden butterflies over the land before us,
or to fling them against the night, not like tears, but like
stars
that will guide those who follow across the darkness.
—from “The Dark Figure In The Doorway”

Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Robert Hass will read at the **First Annual Morton Marcus Memorial Poetry Reading** at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 6 at the Cabrillo Music Recital Hall, Cabrillo College, 6500 Soquel Drive, Aptos. The reading honors poet, teacher, and film critic Morton Marcus (1936–2009). The evening, hosted by Santa Cruz’s first poet laureate Gary Young, will highlight Hass reading from his own work, as well as readings by Joseph Stroud and Stephen Kessler from Marcus’s final and newly published

book “The Dark Figure in the Doorway: Last Poems.”

Update: All outlets are currently out of tickets to the event. For a chance to still attend, show up early, and those tickets that are no-shows will be handed out. Doors open at 6:30 p.m.

The event will broadcast on Community TV of Santa Cruz at 10 p.m. on Nov. 12 and at 8 p.m. on Nov. 13 Comcast Channel 25/Charter Channel 71.

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