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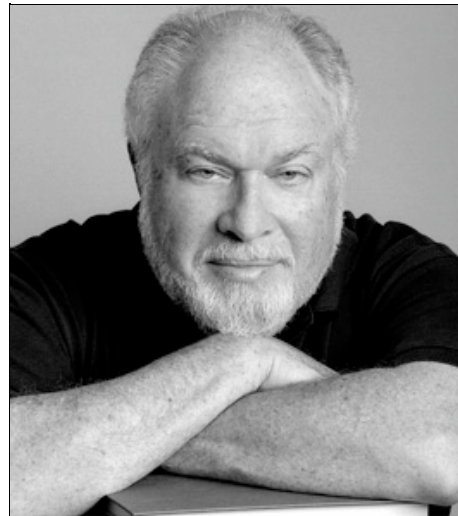
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### Elegy for A Force Of Nature

Former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Hass and local literary lights remember the poet Morton Marcus

By Tessa Stuart



**FOUNDING FATHER:** Morton Marcus is credited with establishing the Santa Cruz literary scene in the 1970s.

'ONE OF the great themes of all poetry and all literature of all time is death,' says Stephen Kessler. "There is this sense poetry is some kind of ticket to immortality if it is great enough, so I think that poets become aware earlier of mortality—their own and everyone else's." Reducing themes of life and literature to their very essence is part of a poet's work, but Kessler—local poet, translator, essayist, editor and novelist—has particular reason to dwell on such thoughts these days. He will be one of four poets who will read at the inaugural Morton Marcus Memorial Poetry Reading this Saturday, Nov. 6, at Cabrillo College in honor of his friend and colleague Morton Marcus, who passed away a year ago last month. Kessler, along with Joseph Stroud, who taught at Cabrillo with Marcus, and Gary Young, Santa Cruz's Poet Laureate, will each read a few selections from Marcus' final book of poetry, *The Dark Figure in the Doorway*, released this month. Joining them will be two-time Poet Laureate of the United States and winner of the Pulitzer Prize Robert Hass, whose friendship with Marcus stretches back to the 1960s, when they traded poems and mixed at literary parties in San Francisco.

The tradition of memorial readings, in which one speaker takes the lectern to honor and remember a late colleague, dates back as far as the tradition of public speaking itself—honoring the dead was one of the three occasions for public speech in ancient Greece (political and legal purposes were the others). Poets, more than practitioners of any other trade, carried forward the tradition to its modern incarnation, maybe for the reasons Kessler alluded to, and have been successful because, quite simply, they have a way with words. Kessler, for example, once compared Marcus to "the Giant Dipper or Mt. Umunum" for his prominence in the Santa Cruz cultural landscape. It's appropriate praise: during his life Marcus published 12 volumes of poetry, a novel and a memoir, placed hundreds of poems in magazines and anthologies, produced a 16-part history of film and co-hosted a radio show about poetry and a television show on film. He's frequently credited with fostering the fledgling literary scene in early 1970s Santa Cruz.

An appearance from a poet of Hass' stature (among other distinctions, his résumé includes a National Book Award, a Pulitzer prize, a MacArthur "genius" grant and two terms as U.S. Poet Laureate) would be a coup for the community regardless of the occasion. It is particularly appropriate, though, for a number of reasons. There is the fact Hass is one of the best-known practitioners of the West Coast style, under which rubric Marcus' most popular anthology, *The Santa Cruz Mountain Poems*, would be classified; the fact that Marcus was champion of the arts, bringing a number of well-known poets to read Santa Cruz throughout the years; and finally the fact that early in their careers, the two men shared poems and a friendship with one another that left a lasting impression on Hass.

### Trading Verses

Hass recalls first meeting Marcus not long after Marcus' 1968 arrival in California (by way of New York) to teach at Cabrillo College, and though he says he forgets the exact context, it was probably a literary party in San Francisco. "There were young poets hanging around the

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area, and there were parties from time to time," he says. (He is making a bit of an understatement, as one can imagine the characters milling around the punch bowl likely included some of the most recognizable voices in modern American literature.)

It wasn't until Hass moved back to the Bay Area a few years later following a brief teaching stint in New York that he would, on occasion, gather with Marcus, Joseph Stroud and Charles Simic (who would also go on to be U.S. Poet Laureate, but was at the time teaching at CSU Hayward) to read each other's poems. "There was a period when we, before we got too busy, were closest friends. In those days we would trade poems before they were published," Hass says.

It was those early years of swapping poems with Marcus that established the impression that persists in Hass' memory. "Mort was a generous, big-hearted, sociable guy, funny, pleasure-to-be-with, but there is this terrific streak of melancholy in his poetry that if you knew him and you knew the poetry, you would know." It forges a very particular kind of bond, Hass says of trading work with other poets. "They are interested in the technicality—there is that kind of bonding that is not very different than the bonding of relief pitchers—but then there is a difference of getting to know people, because in poetry at its best there is this intimacy. ...There is something intimate about what you know about people from reading their poems."

Marcus is best remembered locally for sharing his poetry not with future laureates but with emerging voices, in a community series that brought poets of different levels and tastes into the same fold. In an interview conducted a few years ago, Marcus recalled, "Cabrillo was a community college, and in those days you did things for the community, so they said, 'If any of you people have any ideas you'd like to do in the community, let us know.' And I went straight to the community services guy and said, 'You don't have a poetry series here; let's start a poetry series.'" The series he started was one of the first of its kind in the area, and is credited with connecting poets with one another, creating a space and an audience for their work and, ultimately, one of the most vibrant literary communities of its time.

Joseph Stroud was hired to teach at Cabrillo the same year as Marcus; the two were even given offices next door to one another, and kept them for more than 30 years. Stroud recalls, "We started doing readings just at some of the local restaurants—there was a reading series at Zachary's for a long time, and at The Oak Room, and then of course the Cabrillo series."

"Mort had very cosmopolitan tastes, so we had Michael McClure, Allan Ginsburg and Robert Bly, but he also really believed in helping young poets get their start, so it was where many of the young poets in the area had their very first reading." The annual Mort Marcus Memorial Reading is intended to carry on the tradition Marcus began in the 1970s, Stroud says. "Mort really believed in bringing a poet to the community—that's what this is really all about. And he'd be extremely pleased to know that Robert Hass is the first reader."

## Dead Poets Society

It is a pleasure that is shared by Hass. "I felt quite honored to be invited to be the reader at the first reading to honor and remember Mort," he says. The invitation was particularly poignant because in recent years Hass and Marcus saw each other less frequently. There was one occasion in particular that they continued to run in to each other, though, Hass says. "I would always see him at memorial readings, because one of the things poets do is gather to remember a poet."

Remembering, it seems is the poet's chief pursuit—poets were the ones who first made elegy an art, and, Hass says, there are subcategories even more specific. "There is a genre of poem—a younger poet remembering an older one," he continues, ticking a few off. "John Milton's 'Lycidas,' Shelley's elegy on John Keats ..." Though he doesn't mention it, he has contributed a poem to this tradition as well. In "After Coleridge and For Milosz: Late July," Hass remembers his colleague Czeslaw Milosz, the Nobel Prize-winning poet whose work he translated from Polish:

*... I think of the old man's  
dark study jammed with books in seven languages  
as the headquarters of his military campaign  
against nothingness. Immense egoism in it,  
of course, the narcissism of a wound,  
but actual making, actual work. One of the things  
he believed was that our poems could be better  
than our motives. So who cares why  
he wrote the lines about the hairstyle of his piano teachers  
of his piano teacher in Wilno in the 1920s  
or the building with sumpy baroque cornices*

that collapsed on her in 1942...

The poem appears in his newest collection, *The Apple Trees at Olema*, published earlier this year, from which he'll read at the event. He says he may also try to track down a few of the poems he and Marcus swapped with each other.

"Wordsworth has a line: 'We Poets in our youth begin in gladness ...'" Hass pauses, forgetting the exact wording, but a quick Google search later produces it: "But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness."

The quote is illustrative not so much for the implications of "despondency and madness," but specifically for the fact that that is the part Hass forgot. Remembering the gladness of the early days of his and Marcus' career is mostly what he's been concerned with lately.

"My experience was that when I was starting to write in the '70s, we poets would get together whenever we got a chance and the parties were quite hilarious and wild in those days," he says. "But as you get older, you spend more time with your family and things. In the last 10 years of his life we would exchange books when we published them, and as I said, we would see each other at memorial readings, when someone dies. That just seems to be how it is, that relationships have to be sustained on proximity as you get older."

*THE FIRST ANNUAL MORTON MARCUS MEMORIAL POETRY READING featuring Robert Hass, Gary Young, Joseph Stroud and Stephen Kessler will be held Saturday, Nov. 6, at 7:30pm at the Music Recital Hall, Cabrillo College, 6500 Soquel Dr., Aptos. Free tickets are available at the Cabrillo College Bookstore, UCSC McHenry Library, BookShop Santa Cruz and Bookworks in Aptos. If ticket outlets no longer have tickets, please come to the Recital Hall on the night of the event, as ticketholders who do not claim their seats by 7:30pm will have their seats given away to the waiting list.*

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