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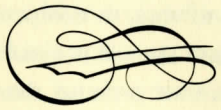
Ree Dragonette: A Brief Memoir



D.H. Melhem

In a Manhattan church basement where a poetry reading is taking place, a diminutive woman in the front row strains forward with remarkable intensity. From my chair at the rear, I note her distinctive profile, the dramatic contrast of pale skin and short, light hair framing deep brown eyes that seem to emit sparks. Such concentration! Months later I encounter her more directly: At the Maison Française, at a women's reading sponsored by New York University and organized by poet Shirley Powell, I read from my recently published first collection and from a new manuscript. Warmly received, I am nevertheless unprepared for the woman who applauds vigorously and shouts "Brava!" Awed by the generous spirit that can rise to such enthusiasm, I am wistfully reminded of the responsive opera audiences in Italy who offer immediate rejection or acclaim. Indeed, this is Ree Dragonette, a poet of Italian descent (the operetta and semiclassical radio star Jessica Dragonette is her cousin) whose love of poetry has come as a blessing to many writers.

Born in Philadelphia on November 13, 1918, Ree believed that, as a Scorpio, she had a powerful "sting." Her father, a tailor, supported a family that included four daughters and eight sons. She married early, bore a son, Reed, was divorced, went to New York, and married John Corsiglia, to whom she bore three children: Juanita, John, and Ralph. And after a creative "silence" (as she referred to the years between 1950 and 1958), she began to write again. Her husband took several of her poems to a local downtown bar named Goody's, where Anca Vrbovska had conducted a poetry reading series, and at once Ree "inherited" the series. Her career, as poet and poetry coordinator,

was launched. She later conducted readings in Manhattan at the Harlequin, Le Metro, Les Deux Megots, and in her own home. She encouraged and participated in jazz-and-poetry performances at the Village Vanguard, and soon became a dynamic fixture on the New York poetry scene of the sixties and seventies. Her Town Hall concert with the Eric Dolphy quintet, arranged by Martin Mitchell and Ross Fagin, "was and is unprecedented," her long-time friend Calvin Hernton told me.

When her marriage to John Corsiglia failed, she became, for the rest of her life, a single parent who struggled valiantly for survival, a home-oriented mother in conflict with her role as a serious artist, one who fiercely maintained her intellectual and social independence and her dedication to poetry and its community. Her fourth and last child, however, was a spiritual conception: Calliope Poetry Theatre. Conducted in her studio at Westbeth, an apartment complex that houses many artists and writers, it flourished from 1971 until lung cancer severely debilitated her in 1978.

Calliope grew into Ree's daily life; every Friday evening it became an oasis for local and visiting writers. A stage was built by her two sons and its meetings were co-hosted by her daughter. Guests who could afford to donated a dollar or two for wine, cheese, crackers. Although psychic torments troubled her home life, she was devoted to the retinue of young people who would often accompany her home after a reading and for whom she would prepare an impromptu supper of pasta. At Calliope, Ree was well aware that, for some poets, the "snack" became, of necessity, a meal, and everyone had to be fed. She functioned as both mother and *grande dame* of a literary salon.

Although Ree shunned what she referred to as "careerist" pursuits, she understood the need not only for an audience, which Calliope provided, but also for respect and recognition. To this end, she established and funded the Calliope Annual Awards, another kind of bread she could put on the table.

Ree herself was the best audience one could have: her patience was limitless. Marathons went on until they ended, which was usually about three or four in the morning. Claudia Menza recalls her own debut: Though the audience was drastically diminished by 3:00 a.m., Ree sat at regal attention, as if the fledgling poet were first on the list.

In this way she encouraged or mentored scores of writers, among them Vera Lachmann, Olga Cabral Kurtz, Margot De Silva, Emilie Glen, Donald Lev, Eunice Wolfgram, Shirley Powell, Ed Sanders, Helen Duberstein, Daniela Gioseffi, Hugh Seidman, Layle Silbert, Denis Sivack, Susan Sands, Sabina Jacyna, Roberta Gould, Stanley Barkan, Pat Wallace, Anne Witten, Honor Moore, Eloise Iliff, Frances Whyatt, Richard Davidson, and myself.

We took her vital presence for granted. She and Calliope would always be there, would they not? Even near the end, when government funding of the arts was cut and she lost her CETA poetry workshop; when her friends from across the country rallied to offer a benefit reading, and, frail and near death, she rose to read, unforgettably and for the last time, "Parable of the Fixed Stars," we were awed by her struggle against cancer, against death itself. On January 18, 1979, the magnificent voice gave way to an audible silence.

An "inventor," in Ezra Pound's sense of the select company of original poets, Ree held fast to democratic principles. She was pleased that her poetry could be enjoyed by "the man who rakes the leaves." Despite the occasional terseness of her compression, Ree wanted her work to engage the working class. She saw art as captive of academics and the bourgeoisie, whom she frequently referred to as "sterile." Ree was a major presence, a precise metaphysical observer of the emotional landscape. No other American poet offers us this fiery yet crystalline cauldron of a universe.

"All my poems are love poems," she would say. This is true of her entire oeuvre, from *Like Pharaoh's Eye Like Onyx Stone* (1962), *Parable of the Fixed Stars* (1968), *Say It in Sanskrit* (1971), to *Apogee* (with Denis Sivack, 1972). In

Remember Zion (1970), the personal meshes with history, myth and religion, and physics to redeem a sense of immortality. In *This Is The Way We Wash Our Hands* (1977), her last published work, it merges with the symbolic and the political. A prose poem of the mythic present, it offers up revelations in a prophetic voice. The universe is Dragonette's province.

As her physical condition deteriorated, Ree's self-criticism grew increasingly harsh. A year before her death, in an autobiographical sketch in *Poets*, she characterized her numerous unpublished poems as "all failures, some brilliant, some dismally dull and incomplete." The worst offense a poet could commit, she maintained, was to be boring. Her poetry never was. A new generation of readers will be astonished by its contemporary boldness and restored by its personal affection.

Lines rush toward me from *Remember Zion*:

> Over waterless cliff, over snail wind
> spanned by (interminable with slag)
> winter:
> I walked to you.
>
> ...
>
> I live laden
> spotted with gold.
> Remembering you
> where you were with me,
> my body flowers:
>
> bears crocuses.

□

I thank Juanita Corsiglia for
her valuable information regarding this essay.

—D.H.M.