

***The Poet Exposed: Portraits by Christopher Felver*, St. James Press, LTD,
Toronto, 1986**

A letter to Chris Felver:

Dear Chris:

Good friend, where will you next be? To what next face or place will you and your camera respond? You, if not in Europe, Miami, or Mexico City, then in Sun Valley; catching the spirit air at Naropa in Boulder; on mission for Ferlinghetti and yourself with Cardinal in Nicaragua, or shooting and trucking in North Beach or Bolinas above San Francisco. One day in L.A., then seemingly thirty minutes later in Maine, then Manhattan. Come now, Chris, I telephoned you in Vermont on a Wednesday, and then, but a few days later, a mailgram arrive from you in China, telling me about your visit to the Beijing Opera. I once told a mutual friend that if I, alone, were to stand once more next to that Coke machine atop Milan Cathedral, the only person I would expect to come strutting out from behind one of those multitudinous crocketed pinnacles, camera clicking or video pack humming, would be Chris Felver. In his commentary in *French Primitive Photography* (1969) Robert Sobieszek tells us that, in 1858, Victor Fournel said:

...It is not given to everybody to be able to amble naively, that man is a mobile and impassioned daguerreotype who secures the most subtle traces, and in whom is reproduced, with their changing reflections, the march of things, the movement of the city, the multiple physiognomy of the public spirit, beliefs, antipathies and admirations of the crowd.

Did you impress Fournel in a former life? Does he see you at work from spiritual plateau? Still fitting well the shoes of Fournel's ambling man, you are a remarkable *flaneur* — as even Baudelaire, despite his contempt for photography, would have likely identified your peripatetical being, your observations, your camerawork: Everywhere! Here, you have brought us silver presences of many poets now, their faces, autographic names, and fragments of writing defined especially for *The Poet Exposed*. Again, as is always the case in your photographic work, you have generously and admirably honored the "creative-others," those well and little known. You, again, prove to be the most selfless visual chronicler of significant selves today. That is the major feature of your style, and many love you for exactly that! And I thank you for asking me to offer an afterword to this wonderful gallery of poets. There is much to say about a book so good and I don't want to offer any academic afterthoughts, but perhaps "selfishly" in the face of your "selflessness," to share something about my love for photography and poetry, and to reflect on some of the reasons why I find your photographs of the poets and their own scripted signals of consciousness about self, about face, about poetry, so moving

and so touching, so indicative that there is still hope for all of us as long as the poet can be present amongst us to sing.

Although many times reconfigured in those lineup snaps for the family album, I remember well my first real encounter with the photographic, in Neptune Beach, Florida's, right below the Georgia line. Brother Dan and I, he in the fourth grade and I in the third, as usual needed money, particularly when Mama and sisters Clara Jean and Thelma Ann were away to Jacksonville in the old black Packard, leaving us to "be good Sunday-school boys' and to watch over our old garage-apartment. That day, the day the sun produced a miracle, remains vividly present in my mind. We prepared a guaranteed money-making extravaganza right in the combined living/dining room: throw rugs turned into tents over the sparse furniture; my tempera-painted scenes of Hawaii copied from National Geographic, and the best faces of Dick Tracy and Popeye, or Piggly Wiggly grocery bags tacked to pine walls; Dan's volcano— dry ice from the icebox dumped into a soda-water filled washtub surmounted by a huge newspaper cone— belched noxious fog. And for the major attraction, a sliding board, down the never-used, enclosed front stairs, a slide made from mildewed E-Z Curve paperboard left from one of the projects Daddy never got to, a slide that turned away from the rusted-shut door at the bottom of the stairwell into an old adjoining shower stall in the garage. From the upper landing of the back-door steps, we trumpeted kids-coded invitational signals on hollowed-out cowherds plucked from the parched skulls of lightning-struck cattle discovered on one of our many secret ventures to the town dump. Our gang came, and, democratically, for any coin, they were admitted to our room of delights. Having ignored the murals, danced around the volcano, destroyed the tents, they were ushered to the slide. At least seven had descended before the ominous sound of that Packard cut the air. I, to escape the force of an angry trio of womenkind come home too soon, jumped for the slide. Down there below, like an upside down grape-cluster, were, the heads of those seven, viewing an inverted and laterally reversed tiny scene cast on that inclined stairwell slide: Varnetta Croy, she who always stole our early fascination, hanging up laundry outside her shack, against a backdrop of sand dunes and the waves of the Atlantic ocean. Coming through the keyhole of that permanently closed door into that darkened stairwell, that never-suspected camera obscura, were the moving traces of Varnetta, her glistening arms and legs, her flapping slips and bloomers, blowing sand and white-lipped swells, kinetically, synchronistically, dimly focused upon that sliding board; projected, as I would later learn by the "pencil of nature," by the actinic rays of the Florida sun reflecting off and carrying Varnetta and her secret things right into our as yet unripe laps. Such fixating wonder allowed for no escape; those imaging beams of lights sufficient trade-off for the smacking wrath of, first, hands and broom, and later, belt. Our fannies were blistered, but no matter! From that point on I was hooked on photography! And for no other more important reason, that is why I, like you, photograph constantly, and why I for twenty-seven years have taught the history of photography, a history, need I remind, originating in the Paleolithic caves despite that some fools still naively believe the wonders of the medium began in 1839.

And poetry? But suggestions! The black man who guided the glass-bottom boat at Silver Springs seemed like a real poet to me, chanting over and over again, as we

looked down into the crystalline water, *See the fishes touch their nose, see the ferns as they grow-ses; dip you han into the water, keep your seat where you oughter*, his mellilloquent baritone commands mesmerizing my soul. And Reverend Stout's reading of the Psalms with no spaces between the words: how well I remember the machine-gun rhythms of those still cryptic Psalmic "prayers for help, and against enemies" shouted from his pulpit, when I was thirteen during World War II. Goodman Stout's *Moab/is/my/washpot/over/Edom/will/I/cast/my/shoe/over/Philistia/will/I/triumph* remains my ridiculously magic hedge against foes. My favorite book, then: Louis Untermeyer's 1945 edition of *Pocket Book of Story Poems*, purloined from the school library where it was placed under the sign, RESTRICTED. It was in that little book, its acid-cracked pages retained to this day, I discovered John Davidson's late-nineteenth-century recast of the legendary "Ballad of a Nun": she, ... *fittest bride/Of Christ in all the diocese*; she, who, before her final reclamation by the Virgin Mary, longed to ... *use her blood*, to ... *taste of love at last!*, who ... *doffed her outer robe,/And sent it sailing down the blast*; she who *Half-naked through the town ... went*; and gave ... *a grave youth nobly dressed;/ ... all her passion's hoard./...to become The strangest woman ever seen./... a mermaiden./... a ghoul,..../A heathen goddess born again./... a she-wolf, gaunt and grim!* No wonder that RESTRICTED sign! Living in that downward slope of the Bible Belt where even dancing was a sin, that ballad, that nun, not her light but her shadow, her mysterious wants, blooded in me a downright gluttonous appetite for anecdotal poetry. Somehow, like Huck, I thought going to hell on poetry was the perfect antidote for my every Sunday off-key suffering and pinch face anglicism as a forced member of the junior high choir at the Golgotha Presbyterian Church. In *Story Poems*, I first learned never to see war on reading Tennyson's lines: *Not tho' the soldier knew/Some one had blunder'd:/ Theirs not to make reply. /Theirs not to reason why,/Theirs but to do and die.* Maybe that's why the poetic voices of Ginsberg and Bly seemed so right later on. And why Jessica Hagedorn's "The Songs of Bullets" and Bernadette Mayer's "No Nukes," inscribed here in *The Poet Exposed*, seem so right today. In *Story Poems*, I discovered Service's... *the lady that's known as Lou*; read verse about those wondrous characters: Roy Bean, Sam Bass, Parson Gray, Juggling Jerry, Jim Bludso, John Barleycorn; about what I would later know to name Oedipal desire and transvestism in the tale of Childe Maurice"; about how *Kind hearts are more than coronets* from an encounter with "Lady Clara Vere de Vere"; about, though then only incipiently understanding, cruel egotism and hateful pride in the miracle of condensation — a novel in fifty-six lines— "My last Duchess," by Browning. And more! Other books, other poems! What adolescent could have found a more provocative fueling of lust than those lines from Charlotte Mew's "The Farmer's Bride:" ... *Oh! My God! the down,/The soft young down of her, the brown,/ The brown of her—her eyes, her hair, her hair!?* Eventually, Frank Doggett—my high-school principal, avid fisherman, ribald humorist, a scholar of now international renown still devoting his life to the study and explication of poetry, particularly the works of Wallace Stevens— found the first large audience for his extraordinary critical consciousness in senior schoolchildren eager to hear his analyses of Donne, Lovelace, Marvell, Keats, Blake, Hardy, Whitman, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarme. What other twelfth-grader in 1950 America was so privileged to learn, as we did from Doggett, of the "singing bird" motif in poetry past and present; the nature of concrete poetry relative to cubist painting; how the poet Jules Laforgue, later Elizabethan dramatists, even a

Jamesian atmosphere, informed the work of T.S. Eliot? How I would sit upon the shores of Neptune Beach and worry about becoming like Prufrock, *To wonder, "Do I dare?"* And, *"Do I dare?" / ...Do I dare/Disturb the universe?*, while, from the Atlantic, I also had

...heard the mermaids singing, each to each./...seen them riding seaward on the waves/Combing the white hair of the waves blown back/When the wind blows the water white and black./...Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

Notwithstanding but primitive achievement in math and science, a paper I wrote on "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and John Donne's "Song" (*Go and catch a falling star*), and Doggett's help, won me a scholarship at Kenyon College. From John Crowe Ransom, I would learn to

...dip my hat to Chaucer,/Swilling soup from his saucer,/And to Master Shakespeare/
Who wrote big on small beer./.../Sing a song for Percy Shelley, Drowned in pale lemon jelly,/And for precious John Keats,/Dripping blood of pickled beets.

Alas, that "Survey of Literature" was beyond my purse, and pursued studies in art and photography at the University of Florida's. Nevertheless, between pictures, I was swilling at the trough of the sacred with Milton as guide, learning from Dylan Thomas what it's like *When only the moon rages/And the lovers lie abed/With all their griefs in their arms*; from Wallace Stevens more reasons to remain obsessed with *Lol-lolling the endlessness of poetry*.

Having now come close to the age of that ...*sixty-year-old smiling public man* in Yeats's "Among School Children," I know how poetry has guided my life. Above all, I know how Rilke's poems and his *Letters to a Young Poet* cannot escape my continuous dependency:

If you will cling to Nature, as the simple in Nature, to the little things that hardly any one sees, and that can so unexpectedly become big and beyond measuring; if you have this love of inconsiderable things and seek quite humbly as a ministrant to win the confidence of what seems poor: then everything will become easier, more coherent and somehow more conciliatory for you, not in your intellect, perhaps, which lags behind astonished, but in your inmost consciousness, waking and cognizance...try to love the *questions themselves* like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue...live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer, and if only it comes out of your own will, out of some need of your inmost being, take it upon yourself and hate nothing.

Oh fore and aft midlife crisis, how Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" horrified my heart; cultivated my imagination in evil; made me know the shadow side of being! When I became too rational, how Philip Lamantia brought me back to feeling again, to revalue the oneiric exoticism found in the psychic domain of the "uroboric," that mind state wherein there is a universal overlappingness of all things and beings, wherein *The burning manes of the*

midnight jungle/announce sleep coming on the fatal horses/of love/an explosive pearl in the seashell of sleep (From “Invisible” in *Touch of the Marvelous*, 1974). How W. S. Merwin’s poems relieved my sometimes loneliness, offering the keys to an unconditional life: *something needs me/everything needs me/I need myself/and the fire is my father* (From “A Flea’s Carrying Words” in *Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment*, 1976). How Michael McClure— who, here in *The Poet Exposed*, reminds that *I MUST SEE AGAINST/BE BRIGHT/AND/HOWL!* — enabled me, in his *Ghost Tantras* (1969), to roar poetry, without embarrassment, like a beast discovering song:

THRAHHR THONETT GRAHH
ROO-OOOOOOOO-OOOOOOOOO-OOOOOR!
Place wings upon words and rohrs.
Grahhgrool gahrooo wipps mahoove.
OOH HOW THOW MEE TOH TORNY
seeking
eternity
THOU-ME
THOW!
!GAHROOOOOOOOOOH!

How grateful I am to Naomi Lazard and Carolyn Kizer for bringing to my life the simple, sincere, sensuous, courageous songs of the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, a poetry of peace and social concern, a poetry of, as Lazard has defined it, “almost unutterable sweetness, a melting of sweetness that has nothing to do with sentimentality and is a million miles away from being saccharine” (From *Translating Faiz Ahmed Faiz: A Memoir and a Memorial*, Columbia, 1984). Enough! Obviously, Chris, these few suggestions tell you I am an unbridled dilettante when it comes to poetry. Of that I am proud, for, as Heinrich Zimmer wrote in *The King and the Corpse* (1948):

The dilettante— Italian *dilettante* (present participle of the verb *dilettare*, “to take delight in” — is one who takes delight (*diletto*) in something.... What characterizes the dilettante is his delight in the always preliminary of his never-to-be-culminated understanding.

My romance with poetry is primary delight! Soon, on one of my many shelves in every room of home— my, my wife’s, and my poet daughter’s home— alongside a hundred-plus titles affirming poetry as necessary to life, shall rest *The Poet Exposed*, offering new lodes to mine. What can but hint of its powerful messagings for both photography and poetry?

Paul Valery wrote, in “On Portraits” (1928), that “The human face is the most individual of all things...” and that “we are absolutely compelled, from childhood, to learn to read the human countenance...the face as we see it presents, as it were, a series of possibilities.” Ishmael Reed, in *The Poet Exposed*, writes to you, Chris, of the surprising evidence and potentialities of his face as you have arrested its presence through a contract between his light and your lens: “Nobody’s ever photographed my face quite

this way. I don't know whether to mount the face or send it to the National Space Administration; it looks like something somebody ought to land on, not wear." Not only does the proximity of your hand-held Nikon, but your own consistent closeness to the poets, typically eighteen to twenty inches between you, as if, I could touch their physiognomies; that such proximity to their faces might tempt radical visitations: I love landing on Reed's inquisitive eyes, on Bobbie Louise Hawkins' luminous teeth, lunar guests in her gorgeous smile *caught out of the void, caught onto paper*. I want to curl up in Everson's mane, kiss the courage and the tenderness of Cardenal's smile; climb the sunlit peaks, rest in the dark furrows, glide through the prairies of the archetypal earthly visage of Josephine Miles; leap from those oriental calligraphs, onto the tack of that linear nimbus which leads my eye to eavesdrop on what's behind Gary Snyder's brow. What facial sites; what occasions for sight! Many of your portraits remind me of Kenneth Patchen's lines: *There is no betrayal in the human face./Time's fin, hoof, wing, and fang struggle there* (From "To Whom It May Concern," 1939). Many prompt me to reconsider that fragment from Macbeth: *...face...is a book where men/May read strange matters*. Many of these instantaneously mirrored portraits make me find in them what Walt Whitman found: *In the faces of men and women I see God,/and in my/own face in the glass,/I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every/one signed in God's name*. Some seem like fellow animals in whose reappearance now as past-tense images we are made to search their eyes, noses, mouths, cheeks, to discover some missing link to ourselves, realizing, as John Logan has written, *We want to find a kind of King Kong,/ (magnificent but wrong) caught and salted safe as us/behind the bars of flesh,/behind the glass of the face* (From "The Zoo," 1963). And if we think we shall finally know these faces of poets, memorizing their presences refigured on these tablets of black and white, a deeper stare into the atomistic grains of silver that coalesce *to make a face*, or the someday good fortune to see face to face in fact, will make us know, as Faiz's lines still breathe: *How the features, learned by heart, of a single face, /alter at once, and bloom before your eyes* (From "If I Were Certain," translated by Carolyn Kizer, in *Excerpts from a Pakistan Journal*, 1969). We may evade the originally animate, the once upon a moment, split-second actuality of any one of these outward aspects, affirming Philip Whalen's note about his portrait that *This printed face doesn't see/a curious world looking in—/Big map of nothing*. Yet, despite the silencing voice in a photographic print, we can imagine, with John Berger's *And our faces, my heart, brief as photos* (1984) as the right chart for a proleptic reengagement of these poets' stilled being, that:

The face looks straight at me and without words, by the expression of the eyes alone, it affirms the reality of its existence. As if my gaze had called out a name, and the face, by returning it, was answering, "Present!"

Jack Micheline states for you, Chris, that *The role of the artist is to raise the light* and your photographic portraits of these poets have done that raising well. When I see your work, I am glad I don't feel inclined to say, "I see there a Felver," as I am often bound to name the photographer first and then the subject viewed when encountering the work of impressive picture makers, such as, say, Strand, Weston, Avedon. I sense that the *en face* directness of your work proves you might question the morality of a surreptitiously

captured portrait such as Strand's famous "Blind Woman, New York" (1916), achieved secretly by his attachment of a false lens to the side of his Ensign reflex; that bogus lens mined away from the woman, as if he were attentive to other things, while the real lens of the camera, under his left arm, partly concealed by his sleeve, committed what Ben Maddow identifies as its "90 degree deception: (FACES, 1977), a right-angle ruse to gain a masterpiece while she knew not her face, her light, was being so poignantly, so viciously trapped. When we read Edward Weston's *Random Notes On Photography* (1922), wherein he says that "Only the photographer can register...all the many vital instants of life which affirm the majesty of the moment," how often do we witness in his magnificent portraits, not the subject's moment but Weston's own abstracting strategies, his intentionalist mask more timely than the photographed persona? And when overcome, astonished, by Avedon's brooding, strobe-chiseled faces inevitably decontextualized as they loom from the white Sahara of their seamless grounds, do we seriously consider his own recorded words, "Sometimes I think all my pictures are just pictures of me"? If, as Ed Sanders states, The restitution of the oculus is the foundation of theology, and if a contemporary photographic theology could be defined to offer pictorial assertions about letting faces be what they are, not what a photographer wants them to be, your faces of these poets should serve as a fine testament; not only echoing the old time religion of daguerreotypes, calotypes, ambrotypes, *cartes-de-visite*, and cabinet images wherein face, not style, was revered, but also revealing a splendid new chapter in photographic candor whereby portraits excellently achieved are free of formal prejudice and stylistic disguise. David Meltzer's penned photographic notation of the little face in the box, that face seemingly defined, as I see it, by the dash-line particles of light emanating from a sizzling pinwheel floret-sun, precisely what *The Poet Exposed* achieves: Chris, the power of your vision, your smile, your camera BRINGS THE FACE OF MUSIC BACK, ATOM BY ATOM. Equally, Barbara Guest reveals what you have constructed with light and atomistic silver: *while he arranged his camera, admiring always his adroitness, the rapidity with which his preparations took place as just before the shutter fell his lens sheltered her face*. For me your adept photography has given these poets not only splendid presence but touching *shelter*. And finally, your photographs in *The Poet Exposed* richly reveal to my vision what Ted Joans has writ with such verve for me to ever sing, as if both of you were defining again what I have always known: *You have nothing to fear from the poet but the Truth*.

Handshake, Chris, Keep Shining:

Bill

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