

THE HOLY FOREST

Collected Poems of Robin Blaser

Revised and Expanded Edition

Edited by **Miriam Nichols**
Foreword by **Robert Creeley**
With a new afterword
by **Charles Bernstein**



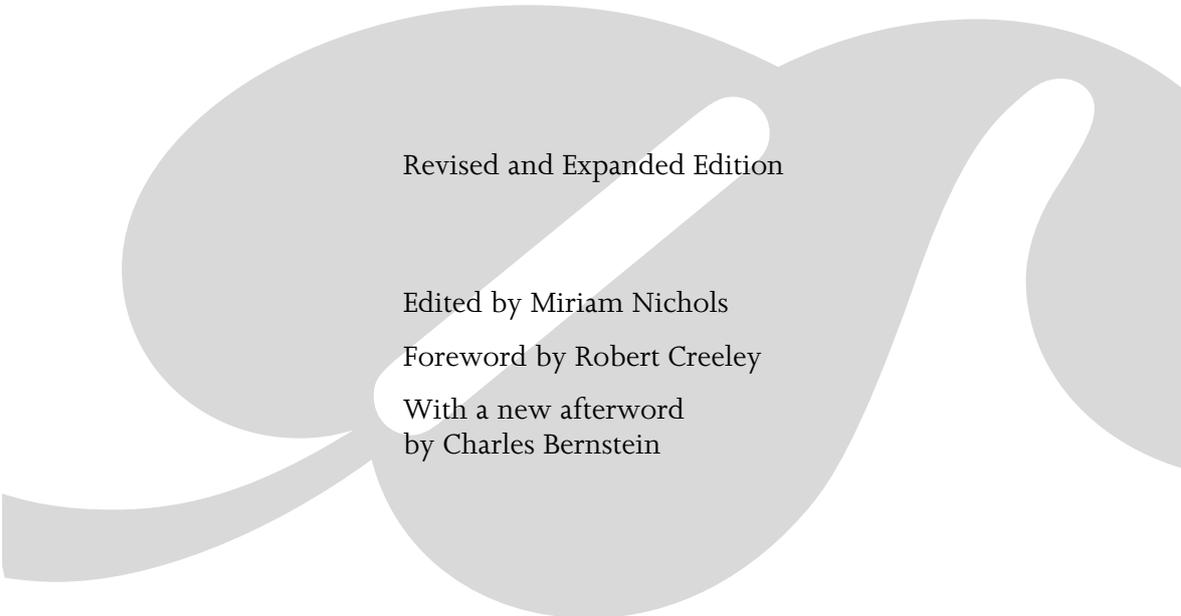
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FOREWORD

For a reader to begin here may well prove displacing if one expects to find either a simple explanation or some securing directions. I have read Robin Blaser's consummate poetry for years, but I cannot predicate its authority on any sense that it has answered the questions which compelled it or come to the conclusion of what it thought to say. What has to be recognized is that these poems are not a defining "progress," or a skilfully accomplished enclosure. Above all else I must emphasize a sense often echoed here, that the "unfolded fold" to be found in his work—the turn, the bend in the road, the "twist" of Charles Olson's preoccupation—is the nexus of its life and the life it has made so movingly eloquent. No one is going anywhere—as if to get "there" were the sole possibility.

Reading these poems, one finds a life that is inexorably human, the adamant given of our common fact. Yet Descartes's curiously meagre proposition, "I think, therefore I am," can nonetheless empower the imagination, and "Only the imagination is real," as William Carlos Williams insisted to anyone who would listen. All else lives by the fate of its active being, its seemingly unreflective fact. But our human life yields a double, its acts and the thinking coincident. Who knows which more proves our determining world?

I first knew Robin Blaser as one of an almost mythic band, a triad composed of himself and his fellow poets Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer. In his valuable essay "The Practice of Outside," which

serves as his defining proposition for the value of Jack Spicer's own poetry, he speaks with great clarity and power of that poësis he shared with Spicer, recognizing how malevolent the stable "discourse" had become:

Where the poësis reopens the real and follows its contents, the presuming discourse imposes form and closes it, leaving us at the mercy of our own limit. . . . It may be argued that the push of contemporary poetics towards locus, ground, and particularity is a re-making of where we are. . . . From Pound's hierophanies and Williams's ground to Olson's cosmology and Spicer's narrative of the unknown, a remaking of the real is at stake. One needs only to notice how much of it is a common experience and also something regained, rather than an invention.

—from *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, ed. Robin Blaser (1975)

Blaser's company was not just persons of the "San Francisco school" but survivors from a legendary Berkeley, where learning for oneself and discovering the appropriate teacher (Ernst Kantorovich is such an instance) had still a singular value. Robin was the quiet one, as my mother might say, certainly the modest one, and it was he, one guessed, who kept the bridge between Duncan and Spicer secure, though it was always precarious. I think of those brothers in the old stories, of the magic that protected them, of the complex trials they had to undergo, especially the youngest, least recognized, most at risk—who again I proposed to myself as Robin.

I am taking the occasion of Jack's book to speak of the battle for the real of poetry in which all contemporary poetry in America is engaged. It began with Pound and continues. For me, it moves West and becomes a fateful meeting of three men—Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan and myself in 1946.

—from *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*

No doubt I compound it all with my own story, but a poem of his from *The New American Poetry* (1960), our first meeting place, made actual where we were and had to be:

Hérons

I saw cold thunder in the grass,
the wet black trees of my humanity, my skin.

How much love lost hanging there
out of honesty.

I catch at those men who chose
to hang in the wind

out of honesty.
It is the body lies with its skin—

Robed in my words I say the snake
changes its skin out of honesty.

And they
hanged there with some symmetry
died young
like herons proud in their landscape.
Now it is age crept in, nobody younger knows
the quick-darting breath is
our portion of honesty.

A wryly attractive biographical note in the same collection continues aptly: “Born in 1925. Tied to universities from 1943–1959: Northwestern, College of Idaho, Berkeley, California as a student; Harvard as a librarian from 1955–1959. Now free and hoping to remain that way. But it’s doubtful. Money!”

There were to be subsequent employments of similar nature, but with his moving from San Francisco to Vancouver in the mid-sixties and his transforming presence at Simon Fraser University (1966–1986), Robin Blaser became a source for poetry’s authority beyond any simplifying place or time. It is not at all that his work is transcendent or beyond the obvious limits of common life. Quite the contrary. In this still shifting edge of that West which is his first place of origin, he enters upon his own power without distraction or compromise, and comes to the substantiating community of his own need and recognition. In this respect only Robert Duncan finds a place of similar order, while their peers, such as Spicer and Olson, too often are battered by increasing isolation and overt rejection. So the last words said by Jack Spicer to his old friend echo with poignant emphasis: “My vocabulary did this to me. Your love will let you go on.” These words have no simple reason, such as Blaser’s initial Catholicism or Spicer’s determined Calvinism, to explain them. What is realized is what has always been, that our words are literally our world, that their permission, what they lead us to, is all we have.

Jack Spicer’s own genius was his clear sight, a sometimes ruth-

lessly grounded specificity. It was he, for example, who recognized that Blaser would follow his emotions with a shifting rhythm, led by feeling to pattern. Together they proposed a “serial poetry” far more the fact of what might now happen rather than any presumed method for gaining generalized continuity, however defined. Therefore one can come to this actuating place of Blaser’s powers without need for static containment or to think to summarize its information finally. The point seems clear enough in the titles of several of the books, for example: *Image-Nation* (in its continuing parts), *Streams, Syntax, Pell Mell*. What he has written about his poetics proves a basic advice:

It seems to me that the whole marvellous thing of open form is a traditional and an American problem. . . . The whole thing came in a geography where the traditional forms would no longer hold our purposes. I was very moved when, some years ago, I was reading a scholarly book by Jo Miles in which she is making an argument for the sublime poem . . . and she begins to talk about the narrative of the spirit. I think the key word here is narrative—the story of persons, events, activities, images, which tell the tale of the spirit.

I’m interested in a particular kind of narrative—what Jack Spicer and I agreed to call in our own work the serial poem—this is a narrative which refuses to adopt an imposed story line, and completes itself only in the sequence of poems, if, in fact, a reader insists upon a definition of completion which is separate from the activity of the poems themselves. The poems tend to act as a sequence of energies which run out when so much of a tale is told. I like to describe this in Ovidian terms, as a *carmen perpetuum*, a continuous song in which the fragmented subject matter is only apparently disconnected. Ovid’s words are:

to tell of bodies
transformed
into new shapes
you gods, whose power
worked all transformations,
help the poet’s breathing,
lead my continuous song
from the beginning to the present world
—from *The Fire* (1967)

Put it that one is to be somewhere in this transforming, accumulating poetry—not simply be led to a conclusion, but be taken by just such a magical *carmen perpetuum* to all the *image-nations* of this re-

markable, revivifying world. How lovely that neither concept nor any other obligating pattern can enclose us, if we can “come into the world,” as Charles Olson put it, recognizing that “we do what we know before we know what we do.” The authority in any act is rooted here.

What comes then to be in the complexly layered “song” of these poems is an increasingly familiar presence, a person quite literal to any life. There is no fact of a didactic history, however much a particularizing story has been told and told again. Time folds and unfolds (“dépli”) continuously all that is said, and the person each one presumes to know has momentarily to be recognized anew:

in the tree tops,

the child, the child of the big shot, invalid’s child, labourer’s
child, child of the fool, child of railroads, child of trees,
child that is deformed, child of fireworks, child of colour-
lessness, child of damask, Mage’s child, the child born with
twenty-two folds at least his or her concern is only to
unfold herself or himself, curious one or the other’s life
is, then, complete under that form he or she dies there’s
no fold left for one or the other to undo

in the land of magic

—from *Exody* (1990–1993)

Bringing this extensive and multifaceted “song” now together, remembering all that these poems constitute as a presence, makes in turn a vivid and enduring evidence of the human in the fact of that, itself. Much as a tree might grow in beloved intention, or anything of fragile possibility find continuing if unexpected time, so this poet’s life is manifest as a complex of perceptions, of reflections, ironies, humor, things learned, things forgotten, person become substance of its own potential. Robin Blaser makes clear the heroes of his determining order, found particularly in the sections *Great Companions* but everywhere echoing in quotation and allusion whether Robert Graves or Pindar, or Robert Duncan, or the measuring instance of Robin Blaser’s concept of justice, Hannah Arendt. Or his belief in a hierarchic premise for human order such as Hermann Broch’s *The Death of Virgil*. These are all lintels, as Blaser says, those supporting beams over any door’s opening that so

make possible the door. We enter by their provision into *The Holy Forest* (for us/for our rest) itself.

One soon realized that Robin Blaser was an immensely literate poet but never confiningly bookish or contesting in what he knew. One saw him shifting in circumstance, from the harshly exposed yet determined poet of “Hérons” to the confidence and openhanded recognitions and accommodation of a much later work such as the wondrous “Image-Nation 24 (‘Oh, pshaw,.’” Or yet these amazing lines:

*How can a body be made from the word?—language, a shivaree
of transparence—jigsaw—glass immensity
—from “Image-Nation 25 (Exody,”*

Reading them, a younger poet wrote as a tag now left in this copy of Robin’s manuscript: *wow, does this make me want to be poured through Blaser’s work, like clear water through a glass pitcher. . . .* As through a glass darkly—or brightly, as the case may be. Robin Blaser has become a touchstone for all his company, a bond in mind and heart. What does one ever want a poetry to be other than the sounding that reaches through all the fact of our variousness, brings to a common apprehension and presence whatever we have known, feel, or have felt? It is such a simple yet subtle art, this saying things in time. So there is time, it is time, to read.

Robert Creeley
Waldoboro, Maine
August 11, 1993

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

This revised edition of Robin Blaser's *The Holy Forest* is based on the 1993 collection of the same title, edited by Stan Persky and Michael Ondaatje and published by Coach House Press. New to this edition are some poems that were hiding in back drawers in 1993: these have been interpellated into the text in chronological order and marked by an asterisk in the table of contents. Most of the new additions, however, consist of poems written between 1994 and 2004. The serial books *Notes*, *Wanders*, *So*, and *Oh!* appear here as part of *The Holy Forest* for the first time. (*Wanders* was released as a chapbook by Nomados Press in 2003.) The order of the whole, like that of the first edition of the *Forest*, is as nearly chronological as possible. In exception, I have placed the long poem "Great Companion: Dante Alighiere" (1997) after *Notes* (1994–2000) to signal a distinction between the serial run of the former and the latter as a singular work.

On typographical conventions, I have retained original spellings, which shift from American to Canadian, and Blaser's preference for single quotation marks. Over the years, some poems have been dated and others not. Where Blaser has dated the poems, I have preserved the dates in the manner recorded—most often by year, but sometimes more specifically by day and month as well. In front and back materials, I have followed U.S. conventions of spelling and punctuation.

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