
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**



THE HOLY FOREST

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the generous contribution to this book provided by the Humanities Endowment Fund of the University of California Press Foundation.



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



University of California Press
Berkeley Los Angeles London

University of California Press, one of the most distinguished university presses in the United States, enriches lives around the world by advancing scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Its activities are supported by the UC Press Foundation and by philanthropic contributions from individuals and institutions. For more information, visit www.ucpress.edu.

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

© 2006 by The Regents of the University of California

The first edition of *The Holy Forest* (Coach House Press),
© Robin Blaser, 1993. *Wanders* (Nomados Press) © Robin
Blaser, 2003.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Blaser, Robin.

The holy forest: collected poems of Robin Blaser / Robin
Blaser ; edited by Miriam Nichols ; foreword by Robert
Creeley ; with a new afterword by Charles Bernstein. —
Rev. and expanded ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN-13 978-0-520-24593-8 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10 0-520-24593-8 (alk. paper)

I. Nichols, Miriam. II. Title.

PS3552.L37H65 2006

811'.54—dc22 2006040497

Manufactured in the United States of America

15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on New Leaf EcoBook 50, a 100% recycled fiber of which 50% is de-inked post-consumer waste, processed chlorine-free. EcoBook 50 is acid-free and meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/ASTM D5634-01 (*Permanence of Paper*).

CONTENTS

Foreword by Robert Creeley xvii

A Note on the Text xxiii

Author's Note xxv

Note: Texts added to this revised and expanded edition are followed by an asterisk ().*

THE BOSTON POEMS (1956–1959)	3
Two Astronomers with Notebooks	5
War for Those Who Are Not Soldiers	7
And when I pay death's duty	9
A 4 Part Geometry Lesson	10
Poem ("O dark heaven . . .")*	12
Hérons	13
For years I've heard	14
Poem by the Charles River	15
Letters to Freud	16
The Hunger of Sound	19
Quitting a Job*	26
CUPS 1–12 (1959–1960)	29
THE PARK (1960)	47

THE FAERIE QUEENE (1961)	57
An Appearance	59
Metamorphoses	60
So	61
From a Fortune-Cooky	62
The Sphinx	63
For Gustave Moreau	64
THE MOTH POEM (1962–1964)	65
A Literalist	67
The Literalist	68
Between	69
The Borrower	70
Awake	71
Supper Guest	72
The Medium	73
O-friend	74
Invisible Pencil,	76
Atlantis (“draws back . . .”)	77
Atlantis (“the light of it . . .”)	78
My Dear—	79
Paradise Quotations	80
it it it it	82
Salut	83
C	85
The Translator: A Tale	86
IMAGE-NATIONS 1–4 (1962–1964)	87
Image-Nation 1 (the fold)	89
Image-Nation 2 (roaming)	90
Image-Nation 3 (substance)	91
Image-Nation 4 (old gold)	92

LES CHIMÈRES (1963–1964)	95
The Shadow	97
Myrtho,	98
Horus	99
Anteros	100
Delfica	101
Artemis	102
Christ among the Olives	103
Golden Poem	108

CHARMS (1964–1968)	109
Psyche,	111
Translation	113
Winter Words	114
The Stories	115
In a Dark	116
The Prints	117
Love	118
The Private I	119
Song	120
1st Tale: Over	121
2nd Tale: Return	122
: At Last	124
Aphrodite of the Leaves	125
The City	126
Sophia Nichols,	127
A Gift	129
Bottom's Dream	130
The Finder	131
Out of the Window,	133

Merlin	134
The Cry of Merlin	135
envoi	137
GREAT COMPANION: PINDAR (1971)	139
IMAGE-NATIONS 5–14 AND UNCOLLECTED POEMS (1965–1974)	147
Image-Nation 5 (erasure)	149
Image-Nation 6 (epithalamium)	156
a good return*	157
Image-Nation 7 (l'air)	159
Image-Nation 8 (morphe)	164
Enfant Terrible,*	166
Image-Nation 9 (half and half)	167
Image-Nation 10 (marriage clothes)	170
Image-Nation 11 (the poësis)	177
Image-Nation 12 (Actus)	179
Image-Nation 13 (the telephone)	183
Image-Nation 14 (the face)	185
Origin*	187
STREAMS I (1974–1976)	189
Luck Unluck One Luck	191
Sky-stone	193
Suddenly,	195
Gathering	196
The Skill*	197
Harp Trees	199
Tumble-Weed	200

SYNTAX (1979–1981)	201
Preface	203
The Truth Is Laughter 1	204
The Truth Is Laughter 2	205
The Truth Is Laughter 3	206
The Truth Is Laughter 4	207
The Truth Is Laughter 5	208
The Truth Is Laughter 6	209
The Truth Is Laughter 7	210
Dreams, January 1981	211
The Truth Is Laughter 8	211
Tombstone	212
The Truth Is Laughter 9	212
Image-Nation 15 (the lacquer house)	213
Image-Nation 16 (anaclitic variations)	215
The Truth Is Laughter 10	216
alerte d'or	217
The Truth Is Laughter 11	217
The Truth Is Laughter 12	218
The Truth Is Laughter 13	218
The Truth Is Laughter 14	219
A Ceremony	219
Dreams, April 1981	220
Diary, April 11, 1981	222
The Truth Is Laughter 15	224
Occasional Thought	224
The Truth Is Laughter 16	224
Image-Nation 17 (opercula)	225
graffito	227
The Mystic East	228

lake of souls (reading notes	230
Departure (envoi-commiato	239
further,	240
Some Voices in Syntax	241
PELL MELL (1981–1988)	243
Waiting for Hours	245
Skylight	246
Cold Morning Quotations	247
Image-Nation 18 (an apple	249
6 November '82—Dream of a poem . . .	252
Fousang	253
Mooning	257
The Iceberg	259
Sock-hop	260
Useful Triads	262
à cet ultime instant . . .	264
The Pause	266
Moments	268
Story	268
'the universe is part of ourselves'	269
Romance	270
No-name	271
The Soul	272
Desire	273
Anecdote	274
The Ruler	276
Skylights Smoking a Ramses Cigarette . . .	278
Advice: find someplace where	280
To whom it may concern:	281
Hi!	282

First Love	284
Home for Boys and Girls	285
belief	286
My Window	287
'the sounding air'	288
Image-Nation 19 (the wand	289
The Art of Combinations	293
Ah,	293
honestas	294
Epitaphics	295
Image-Nation 20 (the Eve	296
Silver-winged red devil, a toy from Mexico	297
Image-Nation 21 (territory	299
Dream ("I went madly to sleep")	300
Pain-fountain	301
Dream ("standing everest,")	302
Utopia	303
'It springs on you'	305
The Truth Is Laughter 17	307
O.	307
Halloween	309
Giant	310
poetry is ordinary busyness	311
There-about	312
'O on the left'—Posse	312
Carmelo Point, 13 June 1984	313
For Barry Clinton, d. 17 June 1984, of aids	314
pin-wheel—shimmering wind pale	315
The Truth Is Laughter 18	315

Pretty Please	316
And Tereus,	316
Praise to Them,	317
O fragmented ago—	317
I would be there	318
I thought when I dreamed	319
writing table	319
dancing with radios	320
hard, gemlike flame	323
conversation	323
heavy reading	324
hymns and fragments	325
stop	326
'Mr. Dandelion'	327
sapphire-blue moon, once	328
untranslatable reason	329
demi-tasse (an elegy	330
Continuing	332

GREAT COMPANION:

ROBERT DUNCAN (1988)	333
----------------------	-----

STREAMS II (1986–1991) 341

Image-Nation 22 (in memoriam	343
As If By Chance	347
going, going*	350
Interlunar Thoughts	350
Image-Nation 23 (imago-mundi	351
'home, home on the range'	354
the skin moves over the muscles*	354
Giving the Glitter to / Some Body Else	355

Of the Land of Culture	357
a bird in the house	359
Who's There?	360
rose	361
Bits of a Book	363
EXODY (1990–1993)	367
Muses, Dionysus, Eros	369
Even on Sunday	370
tip-toeing through the stink weed,*	375
in the tree tops,	376
Image-Nation 24 ('oh, pshaw,'	377
Mappa Mundi,	389
Image-Nation 25 (Exody,	391
NOTES (1994–2000)*	397
Robin Blaser: Curriculum Vitae	399
Shipped Shape	407
The Truth Is Laughter 19	407
of is the word love without the initial consonant	408
at this point in time	409
one word of wisdom	410
well, I was walking up	411
that cat,	412
my novel	412
Bits of a Book 2	413
merci buckets—	414
The Flame	415
Ode for Museums, All of Them!	417
A Story after Blake	419

pentimento 1 421
a fountain at the kitchen door, 422
forest 1 423
Liveforever 424
In Remembrance of Matthew Shepard 425
vocabulary 1 426
the bottom line 427
nomad 429
pentimento 2 430
Image-Nation 26 (being-thus 432

GREAT COMPANION:

DANTE ALIGHIERE (1997)* 435

WANDERS (2001–2002)* 459

The Truth Is Laughter 20 461
The Truth Is Laughter 21 461
Oh! 462
Glass Road, 462
Well, my dears,
I knew there were shadows 463
hail yah, 463
'who, who, who, who' 464
half-you flown on a carpet, 464
'there, there, there,' 464
Among universals, 465
Petty, vulgar, provincial, 465
Good morning, 466
So 467
There's a wonder afoot, 467
'like money in the gutter,' David said. 468

did you ever see an angel, 468
forgot, oubli 469
oubli, forgot 470
when Nietzsche said 470
a true story of 471
there were two accent 472
the clock is back, 473
on page 61 473
'I have lost track of the world,'
Mahler said 474
so eerie: 'must get rid of Halloween— 474
To: Colorado / Montana 475
imagine a map 476
I return to my meditations—explications—
experiences 476
who's goose 477
everyday, the carpenter 477
Fingerspitzengefühl, 478
Ruck and rot pucker in political thought 478
woke this morning 479
will be, 479
what did I forget 480
a dream that repeated during the night—
each 480
'oh,' I said to myself, 481
the Bible is as historical 481
if you look at a table of minerals, 482
the first imagination of god 482
well, this old crow is making 483
I've caught the unease 483
what i-densities 484

dear dusty moth	485
Robert Duncan said, 'Don't tell	485
Ethel Merman,	486
SO (2003)*	487
Charles Watts,	489
just out the door	490
begin the beguine	491
there	492
woke this morning	492
a song	493
OH! (2004)*	495
I don't remember this:	497
only the shadow knows	498
comfortably	499
simplified mind	500
sea and sky	501
no body	501
whose salted heart	502
what would you do	503
'Have you got a toybox?'	504
divination by pebbles	505
language is love	506
Afterword by Charles Bernstein	507
Index of Titles and First Lines	511

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 colourlessness, 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.

Many thanks to University of California Press editor Rachel Berchten for shepherding the manuscript through the production process, to Ellen F. Smith for her careful copyediting, and to Peter Quartermain for his work in preparing the manuscript of the new

sample content of The Holy Forest: Collected Poems of Robin Blaser (Revised and Expanded Edition)

- [*read online Topology*](#)
- [download Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954](#)
- [click The Hindus: An Alternative History book](#)
- [*download online Bird Box*](#)
- [download Vodou Money Magic: The Way to Prosperity through the Blessings of the Lwa for free](#)

- <http://cambridgebrass.com/?freebooks/Topology.pdf>
- <http://junkrobots.com/ebooks/5-Minutes-to-Marriage.pdf>
- <http://academialanguagebar.com/?ebooks/The-Hindus--An-Alternative-History.pdf>
- <http://econtact.webschaefer.com/?books/No-Ordinary-Men--Dietrich-Bonhoeffer-and-Hans-von-Dohnanyi--Resisters-Against-Hitler-in-Church-and-State.pdf>
- <http://korplast.gr/lib/Vodou-Money-Magic--The-Way-to-Prosperity-through-the-Blessings-of-the-Lwa.pdf>