

# Poet Kate Braverman survives the process of being printed

by BEN PLEASANTS

For young writers, the road to publication can be a bloody gauntlet lined with unscrupulous agents, thoughtless editors, unsympathetic friends, hungry creditors, jealous rivals and savage critics. Success often arrives by way of a slander suit, ruined health, family distress and financial disaster. When the way becomes too long, success may arrive posthumously, as in the case of Sylvia Plath or Hart Crane, or not at all, as in the case of, say, William Wantling.

I recall visiting Kate Ellen Braverman at Cedars-Sinai about three years ago and thinking to myself, "This woman is not going to make it to her 30s." She had recently finished her first novel, "Lithium for Medea," and was pushing it along through the final process with the usual difficulty. Joan Didion and John Rechy had read the uncut version and liked it. Didion had a few more reservations than Rechy. Harper & Row had bought the book on the basis of a few chapters, and they were having more reservations than Didion and Rechy. They didn't like the title. They wanted the book cut in half. They desired a different ending. Couldn't Braverman come to New York?

Braverman did. They went at it every day for two weeks, editor and author. The novel was cut by half, the ending was reduced but not altered and the title remained. Kate suffered from fatigue, mental collapse and spinal meningitis, not exactly in that order. The ordeal came close to killing her. Meanwhile the underground started yelling *sellout*, while the Hillside Strangler was stalking and carrying away victims on opposite hills overlooking her Echo Park cottage. When she returned from the hospital, she slept with a bayonet under her bed. Her psychologist told her she was too immature for love and her cat ran away.

Then things improved.

The Hillside Strangler moved elsewhere. Her cat came back somewhat the worse for wear. Harper & Row brought out "Lithium for Medea" and promised future publication. The bayonet, however, remained beneath her bed. Critical reviews started to appear in newspapers and magazines. Many were enthusiastic. Some were not.

Most ignored the descriptive skill, the comic irony and the long stretches of poetic brilliance. One had the feeling there was a sign up in the New York Review front window reading: "FULL UP: NO SERIOUS NOVELISTS NEED APPLY." The kind of criticism that might have accompanied a novel of promise did not arrive and it left Kate Braverman with an empty, bitter feeling.

But the fact remains, "Lithium for Medea," even cut in half, has some first-rate moments and some magical descriptive passages:

"From Fountain Avenue and Vermont the city was revealed. White gouges like white scars leading to the hills. I realized that Los Angeles is a rented city. It was born fully formed from the daydreams and wet dreams of greedy little men pushing celluloid fantasies. Los Angeles is a Monopoly board with orange trees. There is danger, too distant to be a factor. Earthquakes last only seconds. It is too much to hope for."

The poetic description of the dying father was drawn quite precisely from life. "My father had a great eye for detail," says Braverman wistfully. "He spent a lot of time alone. He knew how to live within himself. That's one of the things he gave me. Because he could not talk, he loved to watch and he gave me a sense of what you could see with your eyes."

He gave her a feel for the local. She was raised in Venice and never objects when others refer to her as a local author. "There are only a few localities. L.A. is one of them. L.A. is a major force. I know it and I



Times photo by Tony Barnard

Kate Braverman

write about it and I understand it. We are the Shamus poets here."

She is also compared endlessly and forever with Sylvia Plath, two poets living on the edge, and that doesn't bother her either. "I never studied poetry at Berkeley and I never read any modern poetry until I read Plath and then the whole thing opened up for me. When people say, 'You write like Plath,' I'm incredibly flattered." She comes round with a full smile and a full set of polished red nails tapping on her coffee cup. Tapping very directly. "When history is able to right itself of its incredible prejudices about how to look at women who dare and women who offend the male sensibility, I have no doubt that Plath will stand up as one of the great poets of the 20th Century. When the century is over and there are only six names remembered from the United States, she'll be one of them."

I asked her what it was like to work at a time when women's writing was being taken more seriously. She stopped tapping her nails.

"Until five years ago there hadn't been any women's literature—simply aberrations. It's a brand-new art form for women to *own* the language. By that, I mean to write for themselves. To write to please other women." What Braverman says sounds arrogant, but isn't. She means simply that when a woman writes a book she does so *now* without looking for male approval. Not all the editors, agents, publishers, critics, etc., are male. There are other avenues of approach. Case closed. Tap, tap, tap.

If Braverman is a rookie as a novelist (with a good first season), she is an experienced and accomplished poet. In the original manuscript of "Lithium for Medea" Braverman closed the book with a magnificent 60-page prose poem. Editors and circumstances whittled it down to six pages, but there is an essence in the writing, a scent, an odor, that does for Los Angeles what Joyce once did for Dublin. She has her sketches of ozone-blue electric word arcs that match the best. Other portions of the book are merely transposed poems from "Milk Run," an earlier poetry book, moving the action through the music of her language.

It is poetry, not prose, that obsesses Kate Ellen Braverman. Her most recent collection, "Lullaby for Sinners" (Harper & Row), is an echo chamber of jarring images and powerful symphonic sweeps reaching up from the dark waters of formal dissonances. The musical qualities recall the Germans: more Trakl than Rilke, more Berg than Bach.

She is a serious poet. She writes as a persona, an observer with thin skin.

"You don't write anything serious with the idea of making money," she says flatly. "Even if you sold everything you wrote to the best magazines in the country, you would not be able to earn welfare salary on poetry. I try to explain to people that I'm not malingering or derelict or lousy because I can't shake any coins out of the poetry racket. It's OK for everyone else to try to pay rent on time or buy a bottle of Chivas once in a while—but not the poet. The poet is supposed to be holy. When I go to parties and people ask what I do, I say I'm unemployed."

Braverman's poetry is the center of her being. She has few friends and leads a rather private life. The poets she feels most comfortable with are Leland Hickman and Wanda Coleman. Her enthusiasm for the Venice poets has, in polite language, waned. She avoids literary parties and literary gatherings.

"I like the way Delmore Schwartz put it. Literary parties are like a gathering of the lost with everyone competing for a raft ticket across the Styx. The poetry community is so impoverished and so limited and people are so desperate for recognition. Everyone knows there are *so few tickets* across the Styx. We live in a supply-and-demand society and there is absolutely no demand for poets."

She takes a long drag on her cigarette, flicks on. Billie Holiday, taps five more times on her coffee cup, then lets out a thin cloud of smoke, arranging the orange flowers on her kitchen table.

She has run the gauntlet and made it through. Her ticket across the Styx has been punched and validated and she is vaguely confident. "I want to read my poetry as monologue in the theater. A presentation. I believe in the oral tradition of my art." The faint winter sun reveals her face as distant, not hard; childlike, not neurotic; fragile, not cold. She has come to a place on the narrow landscape of American poetry where her art and talents cannot be denied.

Pleasant is working on a book about coffee shops in L.A.

## to grow on

by BARBARA KARLIN

Two new picture books are offered for Valentine's Day, both lightweight amusements attempting an air of mystery. Slim pickings in Cupid's behalf.

Adrienne Adams has put her rabbit family of Easter-egg artists (Mom, Dad and Orson Abbott) in two earlier books about Easter and Christmas. Now, in **The Great Valentine's Day Balloon Race** (Scribner's: \$9.95, ages 5 to 8), Adams has the entire Abbott rab-

bit family, with the assistance of Orson's bunny friend Bonnie, building a hot-air balloon decorated with red hearts—their entry in the anticipated race. We learn some things about constructing and navigating a hot-air balloon, the illustrations by Adams are festive and pleasing, but there's little suspense regarding the outcome of the race. And it's difficult not to feel cheated knowing Adams could have adapted this plot to any holiday of her choosing.

**Arthur's Valentine** by Marc Brown (Atlantic/Little, Brown: \$7.95, ages 4 to 8) is unmistakably a book

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