

Aleph to Zed

Vanessa Place

THE ALPHABET GAME: A bpNICHOL READER

bpNichol
Edited by Darren Wershler-Henry
and Lori Emerson

Coach House Books
<http://www.chbooks.com>
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There's no profit in reviewing a book by a dead man. The work is a completed object, done, if not finished. The Canadian poet bpNichol is known widely, and if not known personally, should be. The facts, like the life and work, are now set in stone: born 1944, died 1988, made poetry from every sort of process, including sound and sight and straightforward word play. Play as in head games, play as staged on the page, play as the blue guitar. bpNichol made long poems, short poems, poems of seemingly solid dimensions and poems of no dimensions at all. He was one of the Four Horsemen, world-renowned sound poetry ensemble (with Rafael Barreto-Rivera, Paul Dutton, Steve McCaffery); he was one of the three writers on *Fraggle Rock*, a Jim Henson production ("Dance your cares away / Worry's for another day"); he was, in a word, of and for the world. He had the gift of the prepositional, and he wore it well.

The Alphabet Game: a bpNichol reader is published by Coach House Books, and ably edited by Darren Wershler-Henry and Lori Emerson, who have

done an admirable job curating the essentially incurable. For bpNichol's pieces metastasize. They refuse to stay on the page, as their metabolic momentum is too great. They possess a quantum force that rejects the Euclidian plane, becoming most accelerated when more compressed, and have a habit of lurching flea-like, sudden and sideways, when you think you've got them under your thumb. Watch "Not What the Siren Sang But What the Frag Ment," and witness leaf turn flea and sky turn kys and turn by turns to crab and "wait..."

By his own admission, bpNichol had an aleph habit: he was addicted to letters as uncontrolled substances. His long lifework, *The Martyrology* (1972–1987), is a runic rumination triggered by the fact that St. = St. (street = saint). The selections of the nine volumes reprinted in *The Alphabet Game* are a solid sampling of the literal transubstantiations therein ("all the words i once believed were saints / language the holy place of consecration / gradually took flesh / becoming real"). There's a modulation of plainsong sanctity and spare geography throughout many of his works. It's big-sky beauty as seen from a train window, framed like it were nothing, but suffused with the constant poignancy of knowing that as it's coming, you're going. And in moving, we're all of us moving on. For whether by way of the slip-sliding narrative juxtapose of paperback porno, musings on lane homes, and the unavowed void in the novelistic

Journal, or the elliptic clay of the letter A ("Allegory #30"), depicted in bpNichol's freehand drawing as an open air portal, a giant bald-faced man peering past the backyard fence into the Borgesian aleph, there is an "em ty" ("Still Water") in the middle of all motion.



These are the fixed marks in this changeable sky: the father, the road, the lake, the death. This ecumenical list is not accidental: bpNichol wrote language as religion, complete with icons and iconography, and the dumb stories that make people believe. The role of Doubting Tom is to make faith, so that in "The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid," the skeptical narrator ("history says that billy the kid was a coward, the true eventual story is that billy the kid is dead or he'd probably shoot history in the balls") makes it his job to set the story straight ("eventually all other stories will appear untrue besides

this one") even though set straight, the story of billy the kid requires a leap of faith ("the true eventual story is that billy the kid shot it out with himself. there was no one faster"). The frogs that leap in *Art Facts* become, in the facsimile reproduction of bpNichol's hand-drawn concrete poetry, frogs only as they go glop in the pond. Faith in works.

Word made flesh. bpNichol wrote "thought" as "thot" as if ideas were too hot to handle and in

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homage to the Egyptian god Thot who had the head of an ibis or baboon, the god of writing, and the scribe of the gods. Because writing is the thought that cannot be thought apart from writing, because the act of inscription is an act of incarnation. Embodied and disembodied, like all the best gods, and, like all the best gods, suspending reason in favor of rhyme

till God's re sonned
on the tongue
the groan that must accompany your birth
lord
I or d
unless the el's read 'one'
one ord er
absolute & true
which is the two tone order of the pun.

(It is particularly gratifying that Coach House Books is located at the corner of Toronto's bpNichol lane,

so that bpNichol has become the patron St./St. of Canadian publishing.)

***bpNichol wrote language as religion,
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believe.***

Reading from aleph to zed prompts nostalgia. Not for a time when such poems were written, for bpNichol was a reverse lightning-rod, drawing energy from all corners and shooting off illumination to all avant corners: visual poetry, sound poetry, the poet as machine, the new masculinist lyric. (To hear some of the sound, go to ubuweb and PennSound.) But nostalgia for a time when words were real objects, capable as cake of being put in the mouth, and to the same toothsome end. When "no means no" meant,

actually, "no," not an actual nothing, when Steve McCaffery could write in his book with bpNichol, *Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book-Machine: The Collected Research Reports of the Toronto Research Group 1973-1982* (1992), that "The language act is also an act of survival. Word order = world order." What Jacques Rancière posited, bpNichol posted: art is politics. And so bpNichol knew that poems—no matter the guise—are sermons and sculptures, obligingly dragging along their own now and negative space. Much of what bpNichol started has become less than the lesson he might have wished, as sound poets elide the text to the ear, vis po focuses on the eye, and the new masculinist lyrics ruminates on Jean Baudrillard and the bowling shoe. This is a very good book to have for rebeginning.

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Poetic Appropriation

John Domini

67 MOGUL MINIATURES

Raza Ali Hasan

Autumn House Books

<http://www.autumnhouse.org>

79 pages; paper, \$14.95

verse, their unrhymed triplicate pairs often iambic and never much longer or shorter than pentameter. But then too, Hasan's rhythm and pacing prove impressively flexible. Each poem sets a well-balanced package, achieving a swift development and closure; after that, the lower half of the page seems a space for meditation, wide open—in keeping with the vast and unusual frame of reference.

Hasan isn't appropriating Shakespeare, but

