

BOUNDLESS BINDERTIES 2

A JOURNAL OF POST-POSTMODERN LITERATURE





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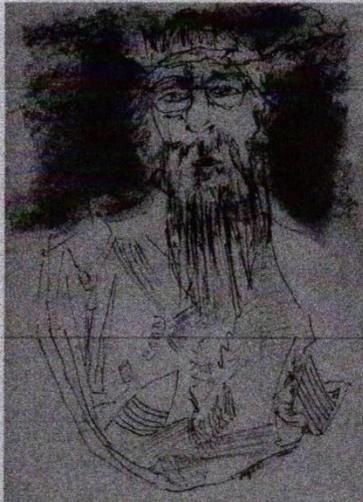
is an international journal
of post-postmodern literature
that is made possible
by the Kickass Foundation
in association with
Faerie Gold Productions.

Subscription rates:
institutions: \$15
individuals \$10
students \$7
single copies \$4

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PRINTER:

Faerie Gold Press

a subsidiary of D Press

www.dpress.net



Gabriela Anaya Valdepeña

ON RICHARD DENNER

Richard Denner is one of the most prolific, and one of the most egregiously under-celebrated, poetic geniuses of our time. This is not necessarily to Richard's dismay; he finds freedom in his own cocoon, even as he graciously accepts whatever honors he has been unable to avoid. This independence is his power; he seems to require no other validation than his own judgment and his private fancy. But like Whitman's "noiseless patient spider" he takes the entire world into his gut, spinning a magnificent web that is sure to capture us all in time.

A quick glance through his *Collected Poems* immediately makes clear the range of his interests and the variety of his tone, as well as the liveliness, the persistent energy that brightens even the darkest material. His poems sing the mundane, and yet revel in the secrets of the grave. He celebrates the vulgarity of joy while at the same time exposing the euphoria of sadness. All is interwoven into a language that combines simplicity, beauty, and witty evocations of a cosmic logic. "I have enough love to make the stars ache," Richard tells us in *Night of Mystic Rain*, "and I can afford to buy the silence I become." Though he is a man with emotion to spare, he never wastes a word.

Like all poets who remain true to the willful muse, Richard seems impervious to the petty shibboleths of both peer and public. There is no dogma of obscurity; nor is there a fawning transparency. "I want mustard on my hotdog," he tells us in *Sermon on the Mound*, a sentiment we can all understand and share, even as our thoughts cannot help but wander to the parable of the seed and the Kingdom of Heaven. Richard knows that poetry does not have to be fully understood to be enjoyed, nor does it need to

frustrate understanding to be celebrated. That is why his work can seem an open book to the curious naive, while to the literate remaining a mystery to feed our myths.

Richard also delights in a free, and sometimes hilarious, exploitation of multiple personae. Just when you begin to fall in love with one of them, he will create a new voice to steal your devotion from the last. Whether Rychard Artaud, Richard Denner, Bouvard Pécuchet, or Jampa Dorje, who Richard is, is who he isn't—who he becomes, kills, or resurrects. One gets the feeling that anything, or anyone, who threatens to get in the way of Richard's art, will become his art. I find myself seduced and yet aching to run away. I want to dance in my pajamas, and drown in the hilarity of my pulse. Sometimes it is his understatement that wins me over; sometimes it is his unapologetic bombast:

Sing FUCK, scream FUCK, mumble FUCK,/ YOUR LIFE WILL BE
SUBLIME!

He is crude. He is romantic. He is a shy poet who seduces with magical honesty.

Richard's confidence in the multiple self allows him to develop an intimate relationship with his own poetic heroes. He is free to humanize, to exalt, and to steal. In the poem *Commitment* Richard describes both himself, and Ezra Pound, at once:

the poet sits alone
in the Idlewild Airport Café
sketching his next Canto
'mid
C Beef 65¢
Coke 10¢
comfort after 14 years
in a Washington D. C mental ward

As in Pound, the power of vision transcends the most prosaic environment. And in *Captain of Poetry*, his poem on the death of T. S. Eliot, Richard walks the shore, like Prufrock, and eloquently democratizes the futility of “the overwhelming question”:

I figure he has the answer
to the question now, but
what do you do with it
when you're dead?

Indeed, it is not enough to have just one life, one voice, one style, one self. And there is never enough time to wait for validation from your peers. Stare at the mirror just long enough to grow a mustache and beard, and then greet the stranger before you. Richard is legion, for he is many: devil, man, Buddha, worm, and rain.

Eve West Bessier

RICHARD DENNER'S COLLECTED POEMS

Richard Denner's poems are storms of desert rain. Short, intense, profuse and creating fertile ground.

The first poem of his collected work begins with this slender proclamation: “we find / ourselves / in a new / world / speaking / an old / language.” Yet, Denner finds a nascent tenderness in that old tongue that radiates equally from drama and humor.

Hugging the spine of this 500 plus page, black monolith, Denner's incantations rant, roll off the tongue and stare down the gullet of the eternal with a vengeance, and with an elegance that is no pomp and all

circumstance.

Certainly the circumstances of this forty-year span of the poet's life are fertile ground enough for poetic insights. The poems are arranged chronologically and geographically, moving from Berkeley in the 1960's to Alaska to Washington to Colorado, and finally landing in Santa Rosa, California in 1998. The volume also includes the author's linoleum block prints and nude figures, rendered with a confident honesty.

The poet's voice remains remarkably secure and even throughout this stretch of time and personal evolution, as if the voice itself were already found and whole when that journey began and only the angle of perception and the depth of vision have clarified.

Denner is fond of angles, of the way light thrown on matter changes reality, alters meaning, if even for a moment. His poems spawn words that then turn 180 degrees to new meanings by association, or by the magician's slight of hand.

His poems of love are arrestingly unhampered by sentiment. His politics are sedimentary rock elevated by platonic tectonics, ideas hoisted and tossed like a salad and dressed with apple cider vinegar. Sharp and uncensored. Denner is unconcerned about appearing wise or astute, his writing is clean and playful, devoid of conceit, adroit by virtue of candor.

Denner's work brings us to "a place smaller than the heart / but bigger than the world." And if he is one of the first of his generation of poets to publish a collected work, it is perhaps because he has lived each day not once, but once again to savor its very tonic and to gain all there is of truth and beauty from the bough's sweet fruit.

Johnny Little

SEEK TO DISCOVER THE SELF

“Seek to discover the Self—the way, the poets say, is difficult,” says Richard Denner in a poem he wrote in the Alaskan woods after escaping from being teargassed in Berkeley. Denner seeks understanding of something lost. What was lost? And what was there to be gained by going deep into the forests of the north country? “A treeplanter can live comfortably, even in Hell,” says a character in one of Denner’s poems.

For a poet-visionary, knowledge is self-knowledge, and to gain self-knowledge is to enter the mind of God. Man needs meaning. Perhaps, this is what distinguishes a human from a beast. To cross over the border between the human to the divine is to forsake all hope, and yet, without faith, nothing can be accomplished. However, if Faith be fickle, Denner is willing to make a pact with the Devil.

SCORPIO, SCORPIO RISING

Scorpio

beastie in the bunghole

bugaboo of bugaboos

mite in the middle of the third root race

big eight of the cycle of life

maggot of the mind’s eye

mistake, abortion, infection, crablouse

error of the raised eyebrow

O deadly persuader

O propagator of corruption

O comic of crimes not yet committed

O gutless guttersnipe
O diddler at the door of destruction

let me fall with you into generation

This is poetry of experience. Denner doesn't just diddle at the door of destruction, he barges right through. And he knows the Underworld. He spent time in jail cells and under observation on mental wards. He fought battles for the Free Speech Movement and the Vietnam Day Committee. And he always works hard, goes at it like he's killing snakes. He's been a cannery worker, a cowhand, a logger and a treeplanter; he's changed diapers in convalescent homes and dug test holes on the trans-Alaskan pipeline. He's also been a news reporter, a bookseller, and a publisher. But for Denner, the quest is to go beyond the task at hand and see beyond the language of a given job into the deeper order of the Universe.

In Jack Spicer's writing of serial poetry into small books, Denner saw the foundation for an epic approach to the poem—the poem as a poetics, a poetics for a life, and, to follow a metaphor used by Freemasons, a life as a cathedral not made by human hands. “Denner has always belonged to the alternative party, its Masonic-anarchist branch,” states Mark Halperin.

Lee Harris describes Denner's books in his essay, “D Press: Jewel in the Net”:—

The first D Press chapbooks were simple affairs, printed from a Kelsey movable type handpress and 60-point Boldini Bold, all acquired for fifty bucks. The pages were hand cut, hung to dry in Richard's attic flat and hand bound, yet showed brilliant illustrations (*Aztec Design* by Grant Risdon). Good paper, fine cover art with linoleum block prints to accentuate the poems, a balance of art and word, these Dennerisms would become D Press trademarks.

And now some eighty of the books have been collected into eight volumes in a non-traditional format, a collected book format, which is a take-off of the Black Sparrow edition of *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*. In Denner's

collections, the format is the same as his individual books with the colored covers and artwork being reproduced, along with his maintaining, as much as possible, the original typefaces. The collected book design and the title pages are homage to Jack and, further, pay obeisance to the history of printing. Woodblock, linoleum cut, etching & engraving, letterpress, mimeograph, offset and computer are all a part of the Denner process.

This is a mark of Denner's originality. He has produced not only an impressive body of poetry along with incredibly diverse compilations of these poems, but he has also created a form of writing by merging form and content and writing right into the book.

Belle Randall

HAVING TEA WITH BLAKE: SELF-PUBLICATION AND THE ART OF RICHARD DENNER

Richard Denner, poet, founder and sole operator of his own press, D-press, is a maker of beautiful little books. One calls them "little" without condescension because they are chapbooks, of various dimensions, each worthy of contemplation as an object in itself, and also as an example of what can be done by way of self-publication if one is ingenious enough. Denner has made a place for himself as an artist while remaining entirely outside the mainstream—a possibility for which we have few examples. Designed on a computer screen with the aid of a color copier, his dazzling books require no special technique, expense, or equipment. Even as an illustrator Denner tends to favor media—collage, linoleum block—which needn't intimidate the novice, and he steals from others (in line drawing, from Cocteau and Matisse) so unabashedly that theft becomes a resource.

Whatever is dubious about this—self-publication, minimal craft, plagiarism—falls before the authority of the books themselves, with their certitude, vitality,

and evident integrity. (To see for yourself, go to the D-press website). The process of making books has become for Denner an integral part of the creative process of writing poems. Denner does not first write the book and then make the cover; the book and its contents are created at the same time. “In the early letter press editions, I wrote some of the poems right in the type case, utilizing the limitations of the size of the type and type case (how much poem can one print in a 4x5 inch area using 60 pt Bodoni bold)? Now that I use a computer, I pour my poems directly into the book using a publisher file, many poems evolving by their placement in series...” Much about Denner’s approach recalls another artist for whom pictorial and poetic ideas were born together in the imagination, William Blake. Blake invented a new method engraving in order to be able to combine it with letter-press printing, unifying the two processes into a single act of creation, as Richard has done with his computer.

Denner’s books are revolutionary because they subvert the status quo. Despite the changes commercial publishing has undergone in recent decades (computerization, mega mergers, globalization, the stock market decline), a hierarchy persists, a measure of influence and prestige: at the pinnacle are the major publishing houses, such as W.W. Norton, which publishes Shamus Heaney, and Random House, Billy Collins. Such publication promises wide distribution, reviews, readings, television interviews and book signings. It bestows fame, which, for a poet can be everything. Just beneath publishing by a major house, rivaling it, comes publication by one of the distinguished literary presses like New Directions or Copper Canyon. This has some advantages: the book is apt to be kept in print longer, the poet treated with greater respect. Beneath this, or again, rivaling it, come the best of the university presses, then the small “art” presses, those that produce collector-quality letterpress chapbooks in limited editions; and, beneath these, like bottom fish, those numerous tacky small presses that come and go and on the local scene, generated by political or social agency (“Poems for the Homeless,” “Poems by Battered Women”), and beneath this, or blending with it, the more recent phenomenon—print to order books—whose presence is changing the landscape of book publishing,

permitting the writer to “launder” self-publication and enabling him to afford it. For a fee, Xlibris, or any of an increasing number of print-on-demand companies will publish your book, and add Amazon.com will it to their list. You can select the name of your press and contribute a photo for the cover. Because, as the term “print-on-demand” implies, your book is printed only when it is requested, no further expenditure is required. How will anyone know that your book is essentially a vanity publication? Most print to order books are immediately recognizable by their nerdy generic designs, boxy edges (the pages and cover cut in one fell swoop), stapled centerfolds, and so on. Richard’s books, in contrast, have been displayed at the Berkeley Art Museum, and praised in “Temple,” whose editor Charles Potts has gone so far as to declare Denner a “great poet.” But for all the admiration Denner’s books have garnered, in the world of mainstream publishing they remain invisible because they are self-publications. (I am talking here about print publication. The Internet is a world too vast and lacking in boundaries for anyone to have an overview of its offerings, thus it too remains largely unsorted and outside the hierarchy. It is a supremely democratic realm, and one where, not surprisingly, Richard’s poems—which appear on close to 50 websites—are at home).

There are of course good reasons to be wary of self-publication. When I suggest it as an option to the students in my poetry writing class in the university extension program, mostly middle-aged adults who have been closet writers for years and are starved for recognition, many disdain it. Like me, they are from a generation for whom self-promotion was different from acclaim. We yearn for a book because a book proves that our work has value to someone else—a gratification self-publication cannot provide.

Nevertheless, self-publication has its place. It is a way of bringing a group of poems to completion, and, as a practical matter, of getting them to that circle of friends, acquaintances and admired writers, who may, for the poet, constitute the most important audience. The books will not find wide distribution, but they may be offered for sale at public readings, or, if you are like me, given away, at some expense to the poet, to desired readers. As Richard’s books clearly demonstrate, self-publication rises above “vanity

press” when it is fully justified by its art. As such, it has a hollowed tradition. Yet whatever beauty Richard’s chapbooks have, the establishment cannot see, because it does not fit into established categories. Most museum quality chapbooks are done on a letterpress, an obsolete piece of equipment operated by turning a wheel as tall as your armpit while pumping a treadle sufficiently heavy to make a man’s leg ache; type setting by hand is an arduous journey, requiring skill, patience and practice in the deliberate placement of every letter of every word. Devotees of this craft are the least likely to be able to appreciate Richard’s work, because it takes shortcuts, but they need to look again. Most small presses, if they become at all successful, resort to newer technology of necessity, and this is not necessarily a bad thing. Too ornate a frame can overwhelm a picture, and the letterpress chapbook with its richness of paper, fastidious craft and inherent old-fashionedness, can overwhelm contemporary poems if the voice is casual and unassuming, as is Richard’s.

Improvisation, spontaneity, discovery—the values of Richard’s poetry and art reflect his lifelong devotion to the practice of Buddhist meditation (the explicit subject of at least one of his books, *Songs of Jampa Dorje*). Richard’s is an art that is entirely willing to throw itself away. The impulse out of which his books arise is one of joyful play. As objects, they seem almost disposable. They are not made of fine paper; they don’t ask to be saved forever and then get mislaid in the *Sunday Times*, as fine chapbooks are apt to do. The continuous practice of ego-annihilation gives rise to much of Richard’s humor. Having leapt headlong into the river of time, Richard is prolific. His output—outpouring, really—is overwhelming evidence of his creativity. D-press has published nearly a hundred books in its thirty years of operation. Season after season, for years I have been the grateful recipient of box loads of books created by Richard, some his own poems, some the poems of others, some designed by Richard alone, some in collaboration, all manifesting the same unerring sense of color and composition that makes his little books wonders of graphic design. Any disdain one might feel for so-called vanity press publication dissolves before the realized beauty of these books.

Publication by a major publishing house may bestow prestige and influence, but these are not, after all, ultimate values for the poet. Such publication does not guarantee the quality of the poetry, nor even, for that matter, wide distribution. There are plenty of horror stories of books published by major houses never to see the light of day; the late Henri Colette's second book won the Lamont yet was shredded before distribution. The finest small presses produce books with a charm compared to which mainstream publication looks somewhat crass. A poet might prefer the elegance of small press publication for a particular group of poems or prefer it because it afforded the opportunity of working closely with a friend. Poets who have the option usually publish in a variety of ways.

But even if one overcomes a prejudice against self-publication, the fact remains that self-publication and print-on-demand books have no path to mainstream distribution. Anyway, you launder it, self-publication hits a glass ceiling. The poet may list his book with Amazon.com or Barnes and Noble, but will win no contests, receive no mainstream reviews. A poet like Denner, for whom the design and the cover of the book are an integral part of its creation, is working outside the mainstream in a way that all but assures his neglect, and this is true, even though the reception his poems have received "on line" suggests his work's appeal. No contest will accept a self-published book (indeed, publication is their reward); no mainstream critic will assess it. From the point of view of the status quo, Richard's books don't exist.

One of the most subversive aspects of Denner's work is what I will call his forgeries. Denner's art is extremely derivative, and he knows it. One of his books—a long poem in tribute to Allen Ginsberg—is designed to look like the early City Lights editions, of which *Howl* is an example; another, a translation of one of Richard's books into French (a computer translation one wonders?), looks exactly like one of those plainly jacketed paperbacks one finds in the foreign language section of the bookstore. And am I just imagining it or is Richard's *Collected Poems: 1961-2000* (Comrades Press, England) designed to look like a New Directions book? This amuses me greatly. I have envied poets who are published by New Directions. Richard shows me how I might grant my own wish. Derivativeness becomes part of

Richard's amplitude. The impulse to copy calumniates, in Richard's work, in *Another Artaud*, a book which is the mirror image of the *City Light Artaud Anthology* published in the early Sixties and edited by Jack Hirschman. As John Bennett declares on the back cover, "If one leafs through the pages of *Another Artaud*, the visual and structural similarities hold, and if one goes no further, a conclusion might be reached that a rather clever thing has been done. But if one delves into the writing itself, distinctions blur, and one Artaud bleeds into the other."

Richard's acts of theft are revolutionary, for they show us how we may both co-opt and subvert icons of mainstream success. To copy the appearance of other books is an idea whose applications are endless. Using the color copier available at my local copy store and a software program called "booklet," I was able to imitate Richard's books, for example, and the point is, you could too. I created a chapbook of my own poems and another by the poet Charlie Burks. The books I made were displayed and sold by our local poetry bookstore, which for me was enough to make them real. Richard's books are revolutionary and liberating. They delight in their own existence and invite others to do the same. "All of this is available to us all," they seem to say: we need not sit around and wait to be published, we need not "submit" to the remote, judging eye of editors. In order to justify self-publication we need only make books that are truly beautiful.

"Blake had tea with me in the garden/ behind Willow Wood Market," Richard claims in one poem ("Worn to a Phrasl"); a postscript to the poem adds, "The sun was high in the heavens at mid-second light while we talked and drunk our Wuli Oolong. The day was a cup of poetry."

Belle Randall

THE EVERYDAY POEMS OF RICHARD DENNER

Richard Denner and I belong to a small circle of San Francisco bay area poet friends who have often given readings together and appeared in print together in at least one anthology, *Berkeley Daze*, (thanks to Richard in his publishing mode), and who, because of this, have sometimes wondered what to call ourselves. The answer does not come easily, for, aside from being friends—if it is possible to put aside such a significant thing—our methods as poets are very different. Today, writing this introduction to Richard's second chunky volume of collected poems, I am calling Richard an "every day" poet, and his poems "every day" poems. What do I mean by this? First—and most obviously—that, Richard—Buddhist monk and maker of beautiful books, part Berkeley poet and part Ellensburg cowboy, he expresses his love of ordinary things in ordinary language, filling his poems with reflections on every day experience, talking to the reader in a conversational, sometimes self-deprecating, voice that is more likely to undercut the speaker's romantic impulse than to embellish it. A poem that begins "Worms will devour us," continues:

Everyone is busy, busy
getting and spending,
while the worms get
the job done
(“Love Song”)

Without resort to rhetorical effects, with nary a flourish, this poem ends in flat statement: “I drink from the cancer cup.”

This flatness is no accident. Richard deliberately eradicates—or attempts to eradicate—the lyricism we almost inevitably associate with poetry: “I tried to murder the rose creeping/into the tower, but it returned with a vengeance” he writes (“At the Edge of Beyond”).

As a Buddhist *Drupla* (a lama who accomplished the dharma in a mountain retreat)—a title he has earned over many years of formal study at Tara Mandala, a Buddhist retreat center near Pagosa Springs in Colorado, hours, days and years spent in solitude, meditation, service and retreat—and, long before that, as a shopkeeper, (for decades the owner of Ellensburg’s preeminent book store, *The Four Winds*), a planter of trees, a lover, a father and friend—it is not the romantic, but the ordinary, his poems treasure, finding it to be the site of illumination, as well as a source of perpetual play. Like a good stand-up comic, Richard finds inspiration in the jeers of his hecklers:

If it makes one sentient being happy
I’ll upgrade my tech for hardware that’ll play an MP3
although I hear Ryokan laughing from celestial heights.
 (“A Reply to Yeshe”)

A shoulder-shrug tone and a seeming lack of intensity are not usually complimentary traits of a poet, but that they are deliberate is explicitly stated in the poems: “I am not projecting persona or emotion” Richard says in a poem called “Self Portrait.” Yet poetry is often defined as “heightened language.” Indeed, according to T.S. Eliot, poetry is language “charged with the utmost possible meaning.” How, then, can it be casual? We can see why a poet might want to rid his work of the artificiality of traditional devices and conventional forms, but how, without such artifice, is “every day language” to acquire the intensity of poetry? For Richard—as widely read an autodidact as any I know—the problem becomes philosophical.

Once, after attending a poetry reading, one of my students recalled that, when he was a child, his father used to read aloud to him, adding that he could always tell if his dad was reading poetry, even if he couldn’t see the page, because “all at once, his voice got phony”— (these were, I think, his exact words). This was met with a laughter of recognition from the other students. We all knew what he meant. Hadn’t we just been talking about the curious affectation that caused poets at public readings to lift their voices at

the end each line as if it were a question? That special breathlessness that announces the presence of ego in all its vulnerability? Isn't this self-consciousness the very thing that made Marianne Moore say of poetry, "I too dislike it." To see what Marianne Moore dislikes is to see a problem posed poetry. If the language is casual and conversational, how to charge it with meaning? If the language is "charged with meaning", how to avoid pretension? Poetry, it seems, is always either too naked or not naked enough.

In meditating on this, we find that Richard's twin quests are really one. He is both a lama and an artist (I use the word *artist* instead of poet, for it is as a graphic designer of books, as well as the poems that fill them, that Richard's talent finds its most complete expression). The poet is *both* an American cowboy and a Tibetan Buddhist monk:

In the plaza of Upper Pagosa, there's a
bronze statue
Of a cowboy riding a bucking bronc that I
pass, thinking
"This is cowboy country. Love it or leave it."

Then I see it with fresh eyes—
the Sambhogakaya Buckaroo
Riding the Stallion of Emptiness with the
Saddle of Compassion
Using the Spurs of Bodhicitta and the Crop of
Great Perfection.

("Sambhogakaya Buckaroo")

In a later poem, Richard finds an image for what is meant by ego death:

There's a parcel of space
that was an "I"—
now there's just the sky.

(“City Market Poems”)

In moments of enlightenment and poetic inspiration, the speaker simultaneously attains grace and two left feet:

Awakening—

“This is it!”

And I spill

my cup of tea.

(“City Market Poems”)

As I suggested at the start, Richard’s poetry is “every day poetry” in another way too. *The Collected Poems of Richard Denner: 2000-2018* is approximately 300 pages long. Most of the pages contain a couple of poems, and Richard was writing new poems even as this volume was being produced. Any way you figure, that’s a whole lot of poems. Richard, it seems, is visited by inspiration often, even every day—an achievement undertaken not as an exercise, a “poem starter,” such as a creative writing teacher might assign to loosen up students who feel blocked, but as something earned simply by doing what comes naturally, a practice developed over the course of a lifetime.

I have long admired the prolific aspect of Richard’s work, so different from my own rather slavish and sometimes undeniably constipated devotion to revision (there’s a poem I’ve tinkered with, off and on, for over forty years). Richard, with his love of the ordinary, seems to live in a state of perpetual windfall. Imagine a crowd of us, standing in an orchard under the trees, holding out our aprons to receive the joyful bounty, this steady stream of poetry—a gift that comes to Richard, astonishingly, every day or so.

Lee Harris

D PRESS: A JEWEL IN THE NET

Like Indra's all-encompassing jewel net, D Press sparkles and shines with an offering of well-crafted chapbooks that reflect more than forty years of publisher Richard Denner's handiwork with words, ink, paper and illustration. Available works are always new as the idea of keeping press runs short allows for a quick turnover, a low cost or break even per book, more time for fresh material and other writers to make it into print. Present titles include *Angio Gram* by Charles Potts, *Celestial Cattlecall* by Lee Harris, *Rebel Girls* by Leila Castle, *What Is The Sign?* by Gay Shelton and *A Year in Cows* by Jane Booth. Belle Randall (*Wax Museum*) and Luis Garcia (*Even Steven*) have been performing with Richard for years under the group name *Circle of Friends* and are kindred spirits.

Although conceived in a Ketchikan attic flat in 1967, the roots of D Press go back to the Bay Area of 1959. Richard took classes at UC Berkeley (Diane Wakoski was there) and perhaps unconsciously received the metaphysical mantle of alumnus poet Robert Duncan. Soon, Richard found himself reporting for Public Service Station *KPFA*, getting married and working as a bindery clerk. He became acquainted with every facet of printing: the feel and look of paper, the color and smell of ink, typesetting and the uses of different typeface, the feeding and rolling of presses, the cutting and stitching of recto and verso. After a move to Aptos for more classes at Cabrillo College, Richard became a regular at The Sticky Wicket, a coffee house with poetry readings and live jazz. Many ordeals and a few years later, he attended the seminal 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference, what John Bennett has called, "an event creating white light intensity that rivaled any drug high and had more staying power."

This convergence of the Black Mountain, Berkeley Renaissance, Beat and Northwest Schools gave Richard the pivotal opportunity to study under such

avant-garde poets as Charles Olson, Ed Dorn, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Spicer. Later he would study with Robert Bly, Gary Snyder, Phillip Whalen, Denise Levertov and Carolyn Kiser at Fort Worden Center for the Arts in Port Townsend, Washington. But it was Jack Spicer's molding of *series poetry* into little books that had the most singular effect.

In 1965 Richard became a staffer on one of the original underground newspapers, the Berkeley Barb and wrote his first article, *Where Is The Citizen?*, which according to publisher Len Fulton (Dust Books) put the coffin nails in this floundering Berkeley co-op paper which he co-directed. Besides printing his poems in The Barb, Richard became a street poet who gave impromptu solo and regular group readings with others such as Luis Garcia, Richard Brautigan, Richard Kretch, John Oliver Simon, and Gene Fowler. "I would hold five different colored magic markers," Richard said, "and write rainbow words on girls' legs and arms." Poems from these embryonic years appear in his *Letter to Sito in Time of War* (D Press 1998).

Here I am reminded of Cummings or Snyder, words in vertical order as if they had fallen off a pen, images juxtaposed with ideas to steer and grip the eye rather than rhyme scheme, line length and academic filler.

*we find/ourselves/in a new/world/speaking/an old/language//we speak//of
beauty/andfeelings/whilethe/machines/blast/thebirds/fromour/hearts//watch/
thewords/hear/thehowl/come/totheear/eye/nose/lip//scream/atthe/dichotom
y/ofthe/comma/adream/anillusion/howtime/passes//dinosaurs/dance off/the
map/where you/and I sit/drinking/coffee//we hold/down/this loose/end/of
the/universe/feeling/at home/in the/smoke.*

Great one breath rhythm here, vowels echo and consonants resonate while war and apathy are clearly addressed. An economy of words, words used like paint or graffiti, well-woven words that challenge and explode with intensity and insight, simple poems not only of use but of beauty and all connected by a central motif—these would become Denner trademarks. Luis Garcia aptly alludes to them as "dinner" in the title of his book, *Poems for Dinner* (Summit Road Press 1997).

According to Karl Shapiro, a rational person is least able to understand poetry, and the poet must find inspiration and pry truth from hard won experiences. At The Barb, Richard was suffering from rationalitus with acute ennui and hot flashes of Armageddon. So he took off for Alaska, in search of lost horizons, to find his true self (and what is reality?) through a series of pristine cognitions. He worked as a water-chaser, unsetting choke and bundling logs for a logging outfit. For two years Richard lived with wife and child in a cabin at Deep Bay off berries, hunting and fishing. Back in civilization, he got a job on the Ketchikan Daily News and worked at a cold storage plant. *Tackshack* (D Press 1998) is full of such experiences: the Tongass National Forest, glacier deposits, bears, dead salmon, king crab, soil samples, and *The Beast* (Richard's Alaskan Pipeline poem which pits industrial horrors against natural habitat and spells indigenous doom).

The first D Press chapbooks were simple affairs, printed from a Kelsey movable type handpress and 60-point Boldini Bold, all acquired for fifty bucks. The pages were hand cut, hung to dry in Richard's attic flat and hand bound, yet showed brilliant illustrations (*Aztec Design* by Grant Risdon). Good paper, fine cover art with linoleum block prints to accentuate the poems, a balance of art and word, these Dennerisms would become D Press trademarks. An old picture of Richard adorns one cover: he appears much like young Trotsky in Siberia with wire-rimmed glasses, mustache, student garb and a pensive gaze...he had reason for concern.

Up the Alkan Highway, Richard traveled to the University of Alaska at Fairbanks. He worked in the backshop of the student newspaper and graduated in 1972 with degrees in English and Philosophy. D Press was admitted to the campus library but banned from the UA student bookstore. Perhaps it was the explicit prints in *Linoleum Nudes* or graphic poems, such as 'Musky/Hump/in US/for 69.' Whatever, feathers flew, and the UA Polar Star (which later printed Richard's works) put out the story, 'Books Raise Censorship Question.' Professors came to his defense; Richard's chapbooks were found to have literary and artistic merit; and D Press was back on the shelf. It would be easy to dismiss this book ban as provincial fuss, however

the ground D Press broke in Fairbanks mirrors the breakthroughs of alternative publishers such as Grove Press and City Lights in the lower 48 states.

Next stop Seattle, where Richard took a job with the Queen Anne News and studied at Port Townsend. *Islam Bomb* (D Press 1998) presents some of Richard's first post-modernist poem experiments during these years (1972-74). Here there is an expansion of line and poem length as well as consciousness expanding East meets West terminology. Much like Eliot, Richard combines his fragments into a unified whole, and does not leave one in a forest of foreign text (like Pound) or babble (like Joyce). Using even romanized Sanskrit and Tibetan is high risk business, yet Richard explains his diction and uses it as part of a tapestry whose weave is encyclopedic in scope. In point, his four-page poem on the once unprintable *F* word reminds me much of Robert Grave's exhaustive piece *Lars Porsena, or The Future of Swearing*.

From Seattle, Richard went to Ellensburg to oversee a 300 head cattle ranch in Badger Pocket for several years. Between stints in Alaska, he worked at Moe's Bookstore in Berkeley, so perhaps it was *déjà vu* that he opened the Fourwinds bookstore in Ellensburg (1977). This literary nucleus was enlarged to include a restaurant by Richard's son, Theo, who continues to operate it today. It was here that Richard received a Washington State Arts grant to produce *Ellensburg Anthology* which featured and promoted local writers. The list of Denner influences East of the Mountains seems endless: more anthologies, readings and poetry workshops at his bookstore, formation of a city arts & crafts festival, exhibition of his books and printing techniques at Kittitas County Art Gallery, a three-day poetry workshop for the Washington Poets Association, and video production for Ellensburg Public Television.

D Press books began to resonate with new organic imagery in his *Cow Songs* and *New Gravity*. In 'Diamond Hanging I Blues' the lines are simple and effective, *I mend the fences./I tend the herd./...The shit is ten feet*

deep/and I can't eat or sleep/coyotes yap all night/below the blown moon. A number of D Press books can be considered pivotal in the evolution of Richard's poetic style, psychic metamorphosis and creative adaptability. *The Scorpion* (1975) combines all of Richard's loves: astrology and tarot, philosophy, Tantra, Latin ('Cogito Ergo Shazam') and the fine art of printing, which Richard learned thumping type for Wesley Tanner at Arif Press.

Xitro pays tribute to Richard's spiritual quest, his teachers, Ginsberg and Tsultrim Allione, a vast range of philosophical studies and Tibetan Buddhist practice. When I read *On Borgo Pass* (1998), the line drawings mixed with poetry take me back to the novel watercolors of Henry Miller and the wild pictopoems of Kenneth Patchen, *apocalypse now/a pair of lips now, or words of my perfect T-shirt/Don't Worry/Be Hopi.*

For fifteen years Richard annually planted trees, giving back to the earth and getting in touch. Now, he plants seeds by teaching at a school run on the Steiner Method and also online in poetry chat rooms. When I was asked to write this essay on D Press and 40 years of Richard Denner, I was told there were about 100 chapbooks, and I thought, pull the other leg. James Tate is called prolific because he published some twelve books of poetry in six years. Richard is more likely to publish six books in one year along with a bevy of other poets. James Laughlin (New Directions) published William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound for years at his own expense when they were not selling. He did not want them to end up like Blake, being generally unread in their own lifetime. In the same sense, D Press allows greater access to a variety of poets whose vitality is assured by limited editions of selected work.

As I opened a 20-pound box mailed from Santa Rosa, chapbooks flooded my table, and I wondered how I could begin to encompass such a literary sea (and most of Richard's work is out of print). Seamus Heaney's old headmaster used to look over his writing and sigh, "Ah, pure Hopkins" or "Ah, pure Chekov." My eyes swim through this tidal wave of excellence, collage covers which steal my breath, Leonardo illustrations, such brillig poems, and

I can only whisper in awe, “Ah, pure Denner.”

Lee Harris

THE POLYHEDRAL POLEMICS OF UNBOUNDED DENNER

In Volume Nine of his *Collected Books*, word wizard Richard Denner delightfully continues to create, discover and define his *no-self* by demonstrating that it is indeed the nature of the poet to be all things. Tibetans call this dialectic *pha rol tu phyin pa*, or going over to the other side. Richard accomplishes much of this dynamic by means of “the mask” which although explicit in the ancient Greek poets and tragedians—now resurfaces in such personas as Antonin Artaud, Bouvard Pécuchet, Lorenzo Ghibelline, Sir Arthur Ranting, Francesco Petrarca, and Jack Spicer. Denner’s risqué poetry-of-risk truly knows no boundaries as we “beastie in the bunghole” and “hope to hop even to Proxima Centauri.”

Yet, in the center of this Promethean hurricane, this L’ Idée du Déluge, lies an eye of silence comparable to the humorous pathos of Henry Miller with all the contraction of Samuel Beckett. I look deep into that stormy pacific eye, that “molecule of mayonnaise” where language goes beyond limits and being is beyond self...where Marie Claire is an angel of mercy working the night shift in No Place...and I see “Go Fir It Reforestation in the Land of Many Abuses.” Such uncanny humor is without doubt precious healing balm for our world weariness, and I continue to hear Richard’s en-lightning poems echoing “Yes” and “Why not!” against the encroaching darkness of the Evil Empire’s Imperial “No!”

Fasten your seat belt, Dorothy, Shangri-la has finally come to the American West—riding shotgun in the front seat of Richard Denner’s low-riding Ford Ranchero.

Gianna De Persiis Vona

GET OFF THAT ALIGATOR

Richard Denner is a writer with such a multi-faceted array of talents that a reader can never know quite what to expect. Whether he is creating exquisite books of poetry, autobiography, or flash fiction, Denner is one to experiment with form and style, the result of which is work that never ceases to entertain while it challenges. Denner's fiction dances between reality and an imagined world where his characters, part tangible, part elusive, parry with life's subtle nuances, at once inspiring and mystifying the reader. The art of flash fiction is a surprisingly difficult one, with challenges that the reader, should the flash fiction be doing its job, should be completely unaware of. Denner succeeds in creating stories that read so naturally, and with such ease, that it is possible to get lost in them, without stopping to consider the amount of time and skill such writing necessitates. As a writer, I am forever on the look out for work that both inspires me and reminds me to think outside of the stylistic boundaries I am forever placing around myself. Richard Denner has managed, through the placement of words and perhaps slight of hand, to once again remind me that the only limits that exist in creating fiction are those fabricated by my own mind.

Devon Ward-Thommes

MANY-HATTED WORD-FULL WONDER

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My first impression of Jampa Dorje was an eccentric monk, with dirt under the fingernails of his work-worn, life-worn hands. He was wearing an old sweater, a lama skirt swiped with paint stains, and chewing a cracker as he pontificated about dharma poetry (whatever that is) to Charlotte up at Lama Tsultrim's house during a dinner party. Yellowish crumbs stuck to the corners of his mouth

But over the months, I've gotten to know him, I've seen different faces peek through—the mischievous imp who catches flies in his mouth and then writes about them. The warrior-bear-catcher, who chases the ephemeral catastrophe and patiently repairs the havoc wrecked in the wake of the beast. The reluctant curmudgeon "Grandpa Popo" who actually is the most gentle with Trinle. The humble monk who mutters prayers between his fingers on the way to Prayer Flag Ridge in the early mornings and is so thoroughly devoted to his female guru. The repairman who can fix a flat tire or a broken window, the caretaker who assuages the nerves of a solitary retreatant and buys one of each kind of apple for her to enjoy between prostration sessions. The Padma family lover who has turned his lust into a deep and lovingkindness. The dedicated monk who is finally, finally, after 10 years of waiting, going into long-term retreat. And now, tonight, we're here to celebrate the prolific poet-visionary, the pilgrim from the underworld who sees the future and is not afraid to go there, to explore, and to come back with words for the rest of us to learn from and be inspired by.

Jonathan Penton

WHAT IS LEFT OUT

In the film *Velvet Goldmine* Mandy Slade, played by Toni Colette, posits that

during times of great change, exceptional, transitory individuals are chosen to alter the consciousness of the citizenry in order to accommodate the rapidity of the necessary cultural changes (in this case, through glitter makeup and group sex, but bear with me). In his book *A Man Without a Country* Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. says that he was labeled a science fiction author because his first story took place in Schenectady, New York, and the sort of people who read literary magazines were simply incapable of believing that a place like Schenectady really existed. He then states that “novels that leave out technology misrepresent life as badly as Victorians misrepresented life by leaving out sex.”

The book *Poet, Be Like God* opens with the 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference. It talks about how the brilliant poet Jack Spicer gave a particularly poor lecture, and shortly thereafter was rushed to the hospital, where he died ten days later, on August 17th, of alcohol-related illnesses. He was forty years old, and was pioneering, among other things, the concept of the chapbook as an art form symbiotic with but independent of the art of the poem. Thus, when Black Sparrow sought to release a definitive collection of his work, it was not a “Collected Poems,” but *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*. It is partly through this facet of his work (not to denigrate the importance or profundity of his poetry) that has caused Spicer to be such a seminal figure in the way the poetic counterculture of the late 20th Century views itself. By being focused around the chapbook, his work seems to inherently belong to the world of community-run printing presses, independent distributors, and the unfounded devotees of poetry distribution laboring in basements across the country.

Richard Denner was twenty-three when he attended the 1965 Conference. Jack Spicer was not the only famous poet he met. He was not the only famous poet who applauded Richard’s work. He was the only famous poet there who applauded Richard’s work and died a few days later. These things happen. Not very often, but they happen.

Denner founded D Press, a self-publishing “company” for the production of

his chapbooks, which he individually physically produced. From his chapbook, *My Process*:

Then, I moved to Alaska and began printing in an attic apartment in Ketchikan, near the ball field. I'd come home from a day's work in the back shop of The Ketchikan Daily News, and I'd print 100 pages and hang them to dry on cotton string along the roofline of the apartment. On the weekends, I bound my books together, set type, and prepared for the following week of printing. The printing was smudgy and uneven, but I pressed on. The typefaces were worn, so I over-inked and pressed harder, pressing the letters into the paper, embossing the page, letting the ink bleed through. Grant Risdon taught me how to cut linoleum blocks, and in a rush of visual imagery, I tipped my linoleum nudes into the books, alternating poems and blocks, giving color to the big words.

After reading *How to Live in the Woods on \$10/Week*, I moved wife and child and press to Deep Bay, fifteen miles from the nearest road by boat. D Press moved into a new dimension. Pouring the words right into the type case seem natural. I began to break my poems into smaller and smaller units. Tried to express myself with just the Anglo Saxon. I was printing with 60 point Bodoni type, and this limited the number of words that could be arranged in a 4X6 inch type case.

The essay goes on to discuss his return to California, where Wesley Tanner taught him signature stitch, which can be done with book-binding thread or possibly dental floss. And it takes us up to the presence of contemporary desktop publishing on computers. Denner discusses his methodology only briefly, here, commenting on how the margin justification that a typesetter must do by hand can be achieved by a click of a button in a contemporary word processor. He doesn't really go into all the things he's been able to do with the time he's saved.

The D Press web site is now an enormous, ever-growing publishing company

with more than forty authors, several with multiple titles, all run entirely by one dedicated, hardworking man. *The Collected Books of Richard Denner* now total twelve volumes, the first eight of which appear in their near-entirety on the Web. The printed copies are full-color, perfect-bound, and printed on fine stock. Although a physical copy of the *Books* is expensive, a few years ago it would have been almost impossible. If you read through such a copy in order, you'll see the very clear progression in technologies. The charm of the early volumes is inescapable. But ultimately, Denner's technology-enabled freedom to expand D Press to its current scope is worth more. And while reading the early volumes of the *Books* from the D Press web site might lack the tactile pleasure of bound chapbooks, it's a bit free.

If, then, *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* stand as a working example of how to use the *form* of the poem and chapbook to subvert the dominant paradigm of publishing, *The Collected Books of Richard Denner* (especially when viewed in context with its [baby] sister project, Kickass Review, can serve to illustrate how technology can be used to that end. Denner is now a Buddhist monk, and uses the term "service" to describe his work with D Press, but at no point did he intend it as a profit-making enterprise. D Press exists for the love of literature, and it is for the love of literature that Denner labors before his computer screen and printer, just as he once labored before his press.

If personal computing technology had not developed, there would still doubtless be a D Press and *The Collected Books of Richard Denner*. If it had developed at thrice the speed, Denner would still be using it to its full capacity. This is the object lesson of his work as a publisher. The last few decades have had enormous, and in many ways highly negative, ramifications for the small publisher and poet. Denner looks at these changes and, at a physical age associated with Social Security checks, asks what he can do to promote literature in ways he couldn't a year before.

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Bouvard Pécuchet

A RETURN TO STRUCTURALISM

Rather than beginning with the manuscript, Richard Denner begins with the book. He initiates the writing process by visualizing the completed form the manuscript of his telling will take and, then he fills in the empty pages. The poems become books, the books are collected into collections of books, and the collections fill up shelves.

There are twelve volumes of *The Collected Books of Richard Denner* archived in the Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. In a sense, Denner could not be more dead—and yet dead in quite illustrious company. He rubs shoulders with Shakespeare folios and Aztec codices. The Mark Twain Collection—rumors of Twain's demise still circulate—resides in opulent splendor. Here, one might expect to get some well-deserved rest, but after a brief suspension of time, one hears complaints about wormholes and arguments over shelf space...there is table tipping during seances convened by Madame Sosostris...and there is the sound of tears and laughter beyond the garden wall...but that is there, and this is here and now.

Now, he has assembled a new collection of his poems. His previous collected, *Collected Poems: 1961-2000*, served to bring the individual poems, in chronological and geographic order, into one volume. He sent a copy of this 500-page opus, along with a few of his chapbooks to Robert Creeley, who he had met at the Berkeley Poetry Conference, in 1965, who

replied, “Many thanks, for your solid book (and the others!) You got a lot said and a lot done.” That collection included the poems Denner had written in California, Alaska, Washington, Hawaii, and Colorado—imagist poetry, language poetry, slam poetry, poetry of work, love, and war—and, as he turned a more rigorous practice of Buddhism, the Tibetan tradition of the Dzogchen teachings, he began to write poems addressing his notions of the nature of mind, bearing full-in-mind the admonishment of his teachers that discovering the nature of ordinary mind cannot be done with concepts. It was, perhaps a romantic delusion to consider poetry as a vehicle,—but, he decided, like Jack Spicer, who’s magic had rubbed off on him during the Poetry Conference, there were other waters to be fished.

From a Dzogchen perspective, both worldly and spiritual dharmas come into play. All knowledge, every craft, art and science, any thought, impression or feeling can contribute to revealing the nature of mind and the nature of reality. I worked as a bindery clerk, a furniture salesman, a warehouseman, a logger, a cold-storage worker, a cannery worker, a construction worker, a cattle ranch foreman, a tree planter, a janitor, a bookseller, a café owner, and a caregiver before I decided to become a Buddhist monk.

As a not-so-humble monk, Denner began creating a prose narrative of his adventures, choosing to have his stories told in the third person by a fictional biographer, Bouvard Pécuchet, whose name he derived from a combination of the last names of the protagonists of Gustave Flaubert’s novel, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, a pair of copy-clerks with intellectual curiosity, who delve into all branches of human knowledge with ridiculous results. Combine two idiots and get one author. Bouvard writes:

So, how did a Berkeley beatnik become a Tibetan lama? He helped Lama Tsultrim Allione and her consort, Vidyadhara David Petit, create a world class retreat center, known as Tara Mandala, so that he could study with authentic meditation masters from Tibet, and he completed a traditional three-year retreat under the guidance of Tulku Sang-nang. As fellow poet, Eve West Bessier says, “[Denner] has lived each day not once, but once again to savor its very tonic and to gain all there is of truth and beauty from the bough’s sweet fruit.”



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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"Richard Denner is one of the most original people I know. Copying furiously, creating fearlessly, he begs, borrows & steals, and then invents something utterly unexpected and astounding—and he himself is the first to be surprised. He has too much talent for one person, and his outpourings reflect this abundance. ("Mithra cutting/the throat of the Bull w/a ZIP code") He never stops to chip away, to enhance, or to reduce—it's all there in a Henry Millerian stream-of-absurdity with blasts of wisdom. Quite amazing is Richard."

—Gail Chiarello

"Richard Denner composes poetry with a light touch from a relaxed hand, getting progressively clearer, deeper and more profound through decades of practice. From Berkeley to Alaska, through Ellensburg to Buddhism, his classic insight is rendered in a fine idiomatic vernacular."

—Charles Potts

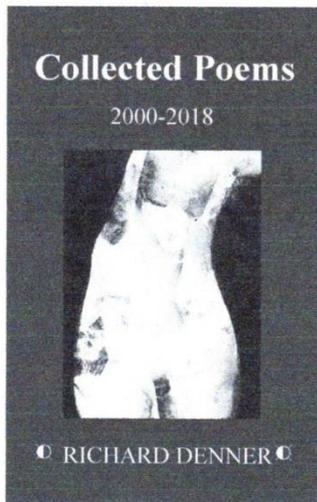
"Richard Denner has always belonged to the alternative party, its Masonic-anarchist branch. His poems can be playful or run an idea a bit further than you're comfortable with; they almost always vibrate, as he does. Denner is one of the edgiest people I've ever known, and in his best poetry that comes through."

—Mark Halperin

"Out there stuff...it is you coming from that place...in a low-rider with tinted windows, no mufflers on the dual pipes, a hot chicano mama snuggled up against your pale Nordic shoulder."

—John Bennett





Readers who immerse themselves in Richard Denner's prodigious body of work are fortunate indeed. His poetry offers a window into a vibrant intelligence; his voice echoes experientially the legacy of the Beat Generation with wit, humor, irony, and profundity. Denner's poetic inheritance is deeply lived but borne lightly; his casual verses sneak up on us with their art and wisdom.

—Katharine Whitcomb

In the *Collected Poems: 2008-2018* by acclaimed American poet Richard Denner, the poet plays with the textual and sonic possibilities of what he calls his "poetry as path" aesthetic. Denner stretches language into invented constructs and holds the reader hostage with tension and experimental forms that dance on and around the formal. The poet pays homage to the canon of poetic masters all while claiming his own rightful spot in American letters.

—Xavier Cavazos

Richard Denner's poetry ranges widely over political, social, historical, religious, and personal landscapes, using methods equally rangy—from language and concrete poetry to straight-forward narratives, but what's consistently central is his delight in language, its harmonic sounds and textures, its quick-silver shifts in meaning and tone, its strange unreliability and reversals. The tones vary from rapture to a dark existential weariness, but the wisdom in the poems is drawn from a lifetime of thinking, reading, and living deeply.

—Joe Powell

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