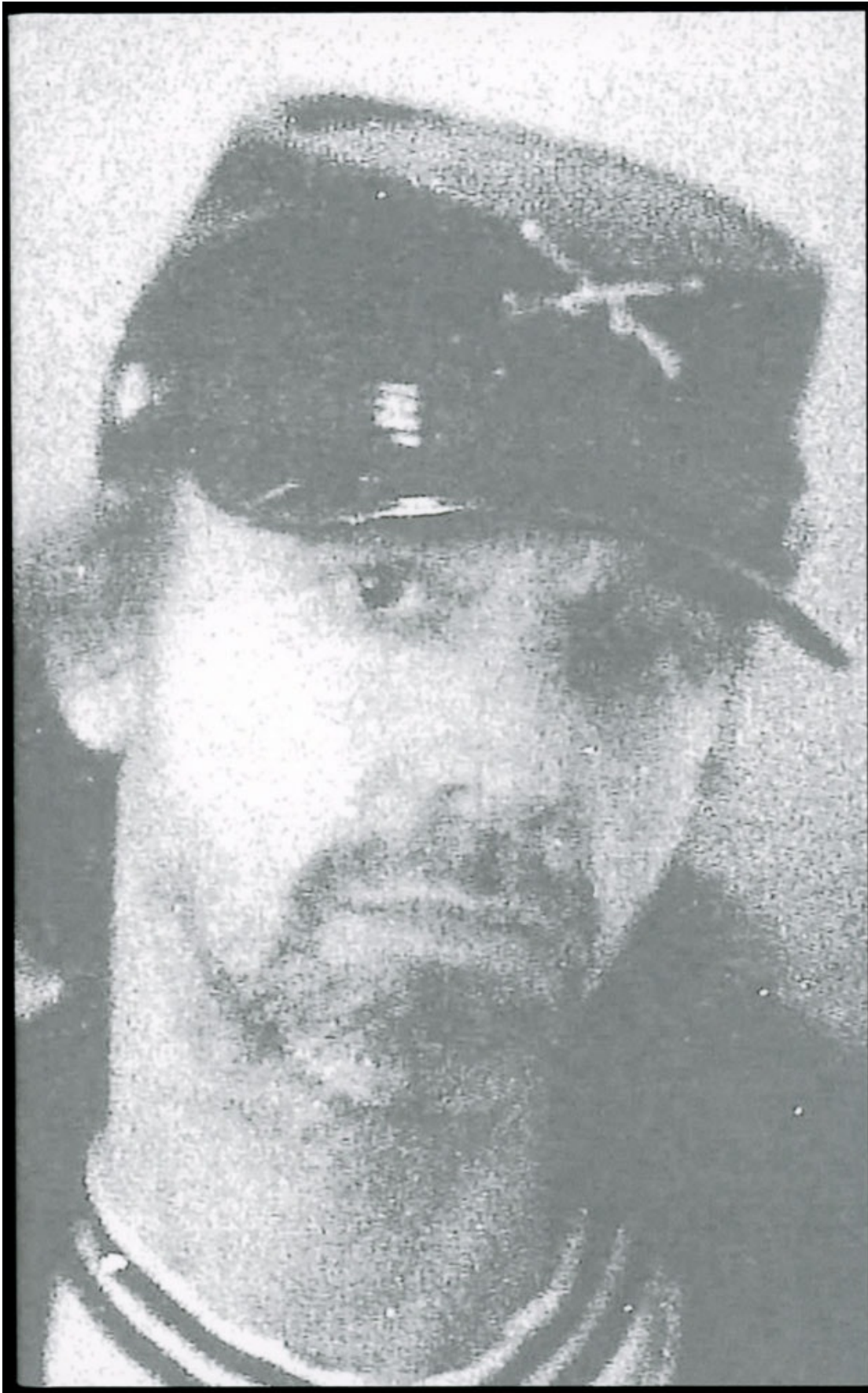

Rene Ricard's *God with Revolver*

By Terese Coe
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Rene Ricard
God with Revolver
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Rene Ricard's poems here, despite dating from the 1980s, encompass much of his life in all its brilliance, disordering of the senses, self-confidence, and self-immolation. As if his self-confidence had brought on its opposite, some degree of self-flagellation. Eros and Thanatos are united in his life, and they are often enough inextricable in his poems. He enlightens from a position of extraterritoriality. He worships feeling only. Not feelings, but the ability to feel *anything*, the harshest touch, the loneliest spasm, the sorest poverty, the purest emptiness.

Transgressiveness is an irony not to be forgotten, and what cannot be forgotten is gold. Shreds of fecund memory are treasures even when disordered, or even more when disordered. The sounds of words enhance color and composition. He is clear-eyed and quick with phrases, no need to wait, with omnipresent trust in his instinct for the vibrant and essential. The suffering is at times kid stuff, taken for granted, at times excruciating.

"What *else?*" is his reaction to what life hands him. He suggests that humans are freaks of nature composed of infinite freakish emotions because all emotions are weird. *God With Revolver* is intimate and erotic without being pornographic, because he's psychologically tortured and goes on despite that. We know the pain is real. His ecstasies are real but more often below the surface. This makes it all the more moving as we wonder at his nonexistent filters, such as they are. Ricard doesn't trust his instincts to tell him he can survive. We're all killing ourselves day by day, these poems say—but his pace was blinding.

Incongruity comes into play throughout the work. He may be incommoded, intractable, inseminated, inopportune, and not indifferent, though he often means to appear indifferent. He loves the adventitious because often enough it gives definition to the creative. Often enough to be useful.

In "WE," Ricard writes:

WE want their beauty tragic
See death in their eyes
The insect behind the beauty

Those three lines are the entirety of the poem, a trenchant assessment of the Warhol era and its amusing, absurd, or tragic beauties addicted to either love and/or self-love and/or drugs or booze. In another poem he writes, "And a god of love will finish my life." He wanted the truth most feared. *Is the erotic the door to the divine?* "We want their beauty tragic" is as culturally true today as it was true for Greek tragedy, perhaps all tragedy. Describing the book to Patrick Fox (in his Afterword), Rene says, "They're love poems. They're the Louie poems. These are love's poisonous quills." I guess it doesn't matter who Louie was. Why we love this one and not that one can be anomalous and even impossible for others to understand. Even we may not understand it. A great reason to write about it.

From "JAN. 1, 1982/HOW LONG HAVE THEY BEEN TOGETHER?"

[...]
How beautiful I was when I was a kid.
big blue eyes. A prodigy
expansive and kind: I was raped at ten.
I was beat up by my brother's friends
Other kids were protected by their brother
Mine made me blow a carful of guys when I was twelve.
They all had knives.
A radiant child is an easy mark
So I learned to become vicious
If they were going to kill me they'd be forced
to remember my dying words
I never found loyalty

Most injuries occur in the home
and the great perfidies from those we trust most
I am the island of childhood
civilized into rubble
the waste of emotion
Poisoned under the
toxic by-products of love.
I am corrupt
and I am this country
The vision of democracy gone blind
The expansion of enterprise
when it reaches the limit
and turns in on itself
forced to steal once everything is owned...

"How Long Have They Been Together?" A simple question for a title, yet all kinds of baggage in the subtext. Envy? Begrudging? Plain curiosity? Earlier in the poem he writes, "And I may in fact be evil." Most people never get to the point of honesty where they can state it that simply. "Forced to steal once everything is owned." His ultimate political, personal, and far-reaching theory.

"The book writes itself." Rene's lines are amazing: lucid, penetrating, naked. "There are animals in human form/ in packs like wolves." Or: "As the island was hospitable, they left it in ruins." The economy of means is stunning: a couple of quick sketches and he's there.



Nan Goldin, *Rene Ricard*, 1990. Courtesy the artist.

In absurdity there is humor, and Ricard is no slouch at that in a number of these poems. I WAS SUPPOSED TO DINE AT THE FRENCH EMBASSY moves relentlessly into not tragedy but stand-up comedy. JOAN CRAWFORD VISITS HER FOLKS is a tour de force of wit and satire. The entire poem is a Fun House mirror distorted in a Fun House mirror. It all occurs in the "instant" before her death. Ricard's unreliable narrators are tantalizing.

He is a Cretan bull-dancer whose life lies in the balance. Balance is not easy to come by in the era of which he writes. In bull-dancing there is joy and terror. Never the promise of survival—more likely the promise of death. In the title poem, "GOD WITH REVOLVER," the speaker inhabits a state of terror described in its simplest terms:

...My life overflowing its bounds
I can't buy food, negotiate the streets
or bargain in this life
There are men everywhere the
magnificent saber of Islam in their eyes
Men terrify me
Beauty terrifies me
Beautiful men terrify me
and I would faint in the Barbès mud
the inside of my body pushing towards the outside
I sit in a cafe in Barbès
and a woman walks by in tears
The God of Islam is the God of Love
and I know that love is a terrible thing
and a god of love will finish my life
Love is the steepest bargain
of terrible price. The heart
pushes towards the outside the
heart is a souk
one civilization dents another...

The very names Barbès and Essaouira are rich in synesthesia, and their sounds are magnetic. The first suggests bearded or barbaric; the second is delirious with music. The poem concludes:

My life not such important merchandise
The inside pushes me further out
I would die here without murder or suicide
Barbès or Essaouira full of men
The God of Islam, eighteen
years old, 100 francs a
God with a revolver.
Barbès Dec. 4, 1981

Rene could be sweet and caring, or seem to. I felt lucky that he never attacked me verbally. Fortunately I wasn't introduced to him as a poet and he didn't know until I spouted a few lines of my own: "Tropic of Capricorn, Tropic of Cancer/ What's a lobotomy to a necromancer?" Rene burst into loud laughter and warmed to me after that. "Thousands for a review in Artforum or Vogue and gone in one day," my friend Stanley whispered. Rene even came with me to a poetry reading I gave at the Nuyorican Cafe, but he simply couldn't bear the other readers who went on first, was fairly loudly insulting to them, and I was embarrassed. Finally I told him it was ok if he couldn't wait, and he cut out, relieved, obviously.

Years later I saw him across the room in a Soho gallery at a talk by Paul Krassner, that had to be

around 1996. Paul was funny as always. Rene was with a fashionable apparently wealthy blonde, 40ish, and he was well-dressed himself. He was very attentive to her. It was good to see him showing someone around, maybe a bit of slumming for her. He must have wanted to impress her.

Rene Ricard used his genius and devotion to writing to delight in re-creation as recreation and to exorcize the penitential. These poems display his deep emotional resources, including a part-time immunity to suffering and the self-indulgence to save himself through satire. There's so much on offer for him (and us) in this book, heads go spinning. In his mercurial and courageous self-revelation, he says "Love is the steepest bargain of terrible price." Truer words were never spoken. He knows what so many do not: that the boundaries between truth and illusion are fluid. This book fits 2022 even more than it fit 1989.

Contributor

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Terese Coe writes poems, prose, translations, and drama.