

VOICES FROM THE underbelly

CALYX BOOKS SOLDIERS ON. by Kate Storm

CALYX Books explores literary waters that have been feared and ignored. Since 1976, this independent Corvallis press has published the literature and artwork of emerging women artists. Like a flower's calyx, the whorl of leaves that supports a flower's bud, CALYX has supported more than 3,500 women writers, many of them now renowned authors in their own right, including Natalie Goldberg, Barbara Kingsolver and Ursula K. Le Guin.

CALYX is one of a handful of feminist literary journals that has survived and thrives beyond the second wave of the feminist movement. In 1973, three feminist journals existed in the United States. "I had always been a big reader," founder Margarita Donnelly said. "Then as I became a feminist, I realized I had read mostly men. After that I spent a year reading only women writers."

Donnelly began discussing women's literature with others. Out of those meetings came the four founders of CALYX: Barbara Baldwin, Elizabeth McLagan, Meredith Jenkins and Donnelly. They solicited funds from the newly established Women's Resource Fund. "We applied along with a group that became a women's crisis center. We all drove to Portland together for an interview and sat in a circle," she said. "[The fund] had a lump sum of money to give out and wanted the applicants to decide how much money everybody got. I think we got \$600 and the crisis center got \$1,200. And from that came our first issue."

In the beginning the journal was called *CALYX Northwest Literary Review*. Soon the press was receiving submissions from all over the country, and then the world. I spoke with New Mexico-based author Natalie Goldberg, who has published 10 books and whose 1986 publication, *Writing Down the Bones*, has sold more than a million copies. CALYX published Goldberg in 1979. "Once I got my voice as a woman I really wanted to write," she said. "I had determination to put women's experience out there."

It was a few years ago that I discovered CALYX and 30 years since Donnelly realized she had not read enough women as part of her academic training. In some ways, I guess things haven't changed that much.

I sat fuming in my college library. I had nearly earned a BA in English, but women were almost absent from the required canon. When I was assigned to read Emily Dickinson and Kate Chopin, I jumped like a starved animal. I needed to hear women's words. The same impetus that propelled Donnelly and three others to sit around their kitchen tables and put women's writing between hard covers led me to their journal decades later.

It was a spring afternoon and rain soaked into the mountains as I drove to the coast. Ani DiFranco played on the stereo. That evening in Newport, four contributors to CALYX's 25th anniversary anthology, *A Fierce Brightness*, were to read from the book. I was excited and nervous to be travelling alone,

hearing women I admired, and spending the night in my car beside the ocean.

In Newport, a windowless, bleak-looking building called The Dogwood turned out to be the place. Donnelly read several of her favorite poems from the book. I remember being struck by her mix of gentle voice and tenacious speech. I was starkly aware this woman had worked very hard for a very long time. She read a poem by Wislawa

"rather than writing with an overriding political agenda. Perhaps it's partly because I am Native American, and what's important to the Native community are our stories, the stories of who we are, the story of how we have survived this culture."

Gould was published in CALYX's 1984 anthology of Native American and Latina women's work, *Bearing Witness/Sobreviviendo*. "When I began looking to be published," she

have substantial women's lists.

"I do CALYX and so do the rest of us because we believe women's voices continue to be overlooked in the world," Donnelly said. "We believe in giving voice to those who would not otherwise be published."

I imagine the multi-million dollar publishing world as shiny white offices full of windows and soft lighting. CALYX's office walls are gray. The company is hidden over a clothing shop, up a long flight of stairs and down a dark hallway. The entryway is stuffed to the ceiling with books.

"This is where we keep other small press journals that are sent to us," Donnelly said with a wave of her hand. The other two rooms were dim and full of papers, awkwardly placed tables and desks, and more books. "And here is my office," she announced. The room we stood in was about 15 feet long and 4 feet wide. As Donnelly spoke with me, a few sunbeams crept through one of the few windows and moved across her shoulders. Her desk was brimming with notes on grant writing and fund raising. These days, Donnelly is primarily concerned with financial survival.

"CALYX is keeping literature alive in America," Goldberg said. "For some time now the publishing world has been very generic, only shooting for best sellers. Small presses are the underbelly of that world, the ones supporting real literature and supporting voices [that are] distinguished and varied."

Gould agreed, noting that CALYX is committed to literary writing that is "interesting, intense, innovative and experimental." That kind of work has a smaller audience of readers who are choosy about what they're going to read, she said. "CALYX is a place where that hunger will be met."

The press has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Oregon Arts Commission. Several of their publications have been nationally recognized, including *Forbidden Stitch*, which won the American Book Award.

CALYX continues to move against the tide of the publishing industry. "The changes in the industry have been horrendous," Donnelly said. "Since the introduction of superstores like Barnes & Noble and Borders, we've lost 50 percent of our independent bookstores." Small booksellers sell the majority of CALYX's work.

Still, CALYX continues. The press recently released a book of poems by Carol Guess, *Femme's Dictionary*, the next issue of *CALYX Journal of Art and Literature by Women* will be out this winter and they are set to release a revised edition of Barbara Scot's book, *The Violet Shyness in Her Eyes: Notes from Nepal*, which won the PNBA book prize.

I asked Donnelly about the consistent quality of CALYX, something both Goldberg and Gould remarked upon. "We have always been committed to publishing a literary journal of good quality to show that women writers are serious and important writers and artists," she said. "We let the work stand for itself." ★



PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

Szyborska titled "Drinking Wine." "I am dancing, dancing/ in astonished skin, in/ an embrace that creates me." Szyborska won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1996.

Portland author Janice Gould was very comfortable on stage, and she had a sweetness about her. She read several newer poems, and one from *A Fierce Brightness* about the death of her grandmother. Later, after the other women had read, Gould came back on stage and strummed flamenco from a borrowed guitar. It was great.

"I've always written my story," she said,

said, "it was small presses like CALYX that were seeking the unheard voices of Native and lesbian women. It was part of a political and social commitment. Today they still provide an alternative voice to the big, well-known established world of publishing."

Small presses continue to push radical literature into the mainstream by distributing work that lies outside the norm. For example, the feminist literary movement of the late 20th century created a market for women's writing that had not existed before. Today, most corporate publishers