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By Bart Bull

Words of Mouth

"The really nice thing about it," he said, "is that it's subject to formal literary conventions too," and it seemed like he really believed it, believed that that *was* the really nice thing about it. There was no reason to doubt his sincerity—they were over across the street drinking beers at the Mexican food place after the Bobbie Louise Hawkins/Anne Waldman reading at Cody's, and Anne Waldman's end of the table was talking something else entirely. This guy was down at the other end, next to Bobbie Louise Hawkins, and he was obviously much impressed with her stuff. People usually are. He was telling her how she fit into the *oral* tradition, the *storytelling* tradition, and how he'd been reading this sociological work by a noted scholar—have you read him?—who'd done an analysis of indigenous black folk phenomena (including, if I interpreted his description correctly, what is known both within the critical literature and down on the corner as *The Dozens*), and how those phenomena, as crude and... *un-schooled* as they may be, address formal literary concerns. He thought that was the really *nice* thing about them.

He felt Bobbie Louise Hawkins' work addressed those concerns as well, and I was pleased to hear it. He wanted to use something of hers in this freshman text he was putting together, and I was pleased to hear that too. It would probably do everybody involved some good. Storytelling and the oral tradition—no, capitalize that; the Oral Tradition—



Photograph by James Lerager

TAKES

are due to climb the literary Big Board any day now, he was nearly certain of that, and the only problem seemed to be how many shares to buy. "As a writer," he said, "it's difficult to keep track of these things."

The first time I saw Bobbie Louise Hawkins read was in Bisbee, Arizona, a pretty much defunct little copper mining town twenty

miles this side of the Mexican border, and I probably said something dumb about the oral tradition to her too. She was reading at the Bisbee Poetry Festival, opening for the greatest bearded harmonium-playing poet the Beat Generation ever produced, and she was somewhat of an unknown quantity. *More* than somewhat of an unknown quantity. Nobody expects much out of un-

known opening acts at poetry festivals, they're just the penance you pay for wanting to wait around long enough to get the big-time Saturday night headliner to autograph your copy of *Howl*. Anyway, Bobbie Louise Hawkins gets up there and begins to read, read her stories, and somehow the sulphurous yellow cloud that hangs over most poetry readings gets sucked out the window like somebody had hit it with an industrial strength vacuum cleaner. She kept making people laugh, laugh really hard, and not the way you laugh at a good one-liner somebody's gotten off, but the way you laugh when there's only one other option. She read some stories about visiting her Texas relatives and she bothered to get the inflections right, the pauses and the phrases and everything else came out intact. (That's difficult enough for anyone, but all the more admirable when set in the context of the contemporary academic poet's carefully/declaimed/breath-driven/precisely/uninflected/flurry/of/soapbox/snow/—the best parts of such readings, if best is a word that can be stretched so far as to mean least sleep-inducing, are the ten or fifteen minute long introductory statements that precede each work and take the place of footnotes.) She did the story that's called, I believe, "The Child," which has some laughs in it and also a small body that's blue when they pull it out from beneath the swimming pool cover right at the beginning of the story, and when she was finished with that one—it's longer by far than most of hers, took her five or ten minutes to read, might be a couple of thousand words long—you could look around you at people in the room and see that it had made

some of their hearts hurt. After that, after as good a reading as Bobbie Louise Hawkins gives, it's difficult to work up much enthusiasm for bearded Beat harmonium pumpers.

I'd say that Bobbie Louise Hawkins is probably about the most distinctive short story writer in America today, but the fact that she reads her work so well, the fact that you can hear her read something you've already seen on the page and have it sound like a brand new story each time will probably prove to be an enormous obstacle for her. Actually, I don't see how there's much of a chance of her ever achieving much success, academically speaking; too many subordinates. The guy with the formal literary concerns was telling her about them when I took off; he was shocked by the number of subordinates she used. As a writer, you've got to keep track of those things.