

Pacific Standard Time: the Surf Noir Poetics of Kevin Opstedal

written by Mike Sonksen | February 7, 2017



Poet Kevin Opstedal was born in Venice in 1956 and after living his first two decades there he made his way up the coast to Santa Cruz where he's spent the better part of the last four decades. Opstedal's new book on Ugly Duckling Presse, [Pacific Standard Time](#) is 216 pages and almost 170 poems. Culling together close to 40 years of poetry, this volume is the closest thing to a collected poems from this writer of Surf Noir.

Before discussing his poems and the life story that informs his work, a brief moment needs to be taken to outline Opstedal's poetics and his philosophy of "Surf Noir." He states that it is not a strict theoretical framework, it is more a state of mind and in accordance with his lifelong obsession with the Pacific Coast. "Surf noir plays like a sub-genre of film noir, just as dark, menacing, and fatalistic, only set at the beach," he states. "It's the measure that my poems are written in. A meter that is considerably looser than iambic pentameter, but just as relentless. Having lived all my life at or near the California coast, I often wonder how anyone living east of the San Andreas Fault could understand anything I write."

Opstedal's career trajectory does not follow the traditional route of most 21st Century poets. Rather than getting his Master of Fine Arts or apprenticing with poet-professors, Opstedal is an autodidact veteran of the small press poetry scene that forged his literary destiny through prolifically reading and writing poetry and meeting his poetic heroes and mentors out in the real world rather than academia. As the last sentence in his publishing bio states: "As identity and ideas duke it out in the back-alley of academia, Opstedal surfs an oil slick off Malibu into the apocalypse of style."

Laid Back Surf Ghettos

According to Opstedal, Venice and Santa Cruz are "both laid back surf ghettos that get a massive influx of beach goers during the summer." Considering that Opstedal has lived most of his life in between these two cities, it is no

surprise that most of his poems mention water or somehow intersect with the ocean. His youth in Venice is where it all started. "Venice, when I lived there through the 60s and 70s, had a bit more of an edge," Opstedal recalls. "It was a working class, lower and middle class town, and tough, not just because of the gangs, but among surfers and others there was a fierce territorial thing going on. It was where the pavement met the sea, an extension of Los Angeles, so there was a heavy urban vibe."

He believes Santa Cruz is different than Venice because it, "isn't attached to any large urban center. There's a huge population of transient and homeless folks here, mostly druggies looking to rip off anyone they can, and a lot of rich techies spilling over from Silicon Valley, plus students from UC Santa Cruz, but there's more of a rural feel than the urban edginess of Venice."

The open space around Santa Cruz is one of his biggest inspirations. "Santa Cruz is a small town and you only have to drive about 15 minutes to get to an unspoiled rural coast or redwood forests in the mountains," he says. "Rural in Venice when I was growing up," Opstedal laughs, "was the wetlands between Venice and Westchester, or driving up to Topanga Canyon." The interrelationship between man, the uncut land and sea is a motif that runs through dozens of his poems.

Among many of Opstedal's poems, one that especially captures this spirit is, "Curse of the Surf Zombie." His register of ocean vernacular is uniquely his own. Couplets like: "Seagulls calling from the jetty speak the same language as Aeschylus/though with an accent that is straight from the surf ghetto," epitomize his technicolor California patois. Moreover he reminds us that, "Palm trees hovering like divine scripture," are the, "only way to pinpoint the/exact coordinates that will transport us to the/here & now." Opstedal finds the divinity in the maritime landscape and sings its praises again and again in his poetics. Another poem that echoes these sentiments is "Salt Water Credentials." In this poem, Opstedal says, "ideas of heaven are/always skyward why? /when the gods all live in the/ocean & we know it."

The Small Press Scene

Opstedal caught the poetry bug in elementary school and never looked back. "When a priest at St. Marks Grammar School told me that I shouldn't be reading *Leaves of Grass*," he recalls. "That's when I knew that poetry was something I needed to look closer at. Then I guess just discovering all the poets as I pursued "The Poems" on my own." He read as much poetry as he could, particularly all the big names in the canon, before stumbling on the local Los Angeles poetry community in his formative years.

"An important event was seeing Charles Bukowski read in the early 70s," he remembers. "I hadn't read any of his poetry at the time, but he blew me away. I had been reading Edgar Allen Poe, Dylan Thomas, and William Blake, but here was a living breathing poet who lived in L.A. reading these strong, beautiful words. It was like the needle in my brain skipped a groove." Opstedal heard Bukowski read in 1973 at UCLA and at this time Buk was at the height of his powers, recently liberated from his career with the U.S. Postal Service.

Moreover, Black Sparrow Press published several Bukowski books during the 1970s and he was also writing a popular column for the *Los Angeles Free Press*, "Notes from a Dirty Old Man."

As any California poetry aficionado knows, Bukowski ruled literary Los Angeles from the late 1960s until he passed in the mid-1990s. His legacy remains towering two decades after he passed. Nonetheless, Bukowski was not the only poet during the early-1970s and there were many great small bookstores and independent poetry presses and journals thriving during the reign of the celebrated "Dirty Old Man." This was the landscape Opstedal was steeped in.

Opstedal got his inspiration from not only Bukowski, but also bookstores and local libraries. "It was libraries at first, the Venice Branch, Mar Vista, Santa Monica," he says. "Then later Martindale's Bookstore in Santa Monica, Either/Or in Hermosa Beach, Papa Bach's in West L.A. and Small World Books in Marina Del Rey. Either/Or and Papa Bach's were especially great because you could find small press publications there. I first read so many great contemporary poets in those small press books and magazines and it really opened up "The Poems" to me."

These small press books and magazines made a huge impression on Opstedal and he read them voraciously. He fell in love with many of the West Coast imprints in both Southern and Northern California. Opstedal left Venice in the mid-1970s and has been in Santa Cruz and other nearby locales like Half Moon Bay ever since. His love of poetry stayed with him and he continued to write, read and make connections across the poetic landscape. "In the late 70s I was living in Half Moon Bay," he says, "and there was a great bookstore there, Half Moon Bay Books, in a big old building on Kelly Street. They had tons of small press books in stock and I was reading everything." This early research led him to eventually publish his own small press titles, but first a few paragraphs need to cover Opstedal's love affair with Bolinas.

The Lower Eastside on the California Coast

Bolinas, California is only 15 miles north of San Francisco across the Golden Gate Bridge but due to the undeveloped coastline it takes close to an hour to get there. Opstedal slowly became aware of Bolinas during the late 1970s because many poets had located there. "I came to realize eventually that many of the poets that I was most interested in had one thing in common – Bolinas," he recalls. "They had all lived in Bolinas at one time or another. I kept that in the back of my head as I continued to read their works and finally I drove up to Bolinas to check it out in the early 80s. A scruffy little rural beach town on a remote stretch of the Marin County coastline. It was like a trip back in time, as it seemed the place had never left the 60s. A true hippy vibe and to this day I always hear the Grateful Dead playing in my head when I cruise around Bolinas."

He explains further: "in the 1970s a huge number of poets from New York City's Lower East Side wound up in Bolinas, and in the poetry that came out of that scene any differences between West Coast and East Coast really merged or were erased." These poets and their collective ethos became a huge

inspiration to him and he decided to document them as much as he could. "I thought that someone should write the story about all of the poets that made Bolinas their home in the late 60s through the 70s and why not me," he says with a laugh.

"So in about 1985 I began interviewing all of the poets I could hunt down including Robert Creeley, Philip Whalen, Joanne Kyger, Lewis MacAdams, Bill Berkson, Alice Notley, Tom Clark, Lewis Warsh, and Duncan McNaughton. It was and is a remarkable story and many of these poets became good friends over time. It wasn't until 2008 I think that I finally finished writing the Bolinas poets history and it was finally published online by Michael Rothenberg's *Big Bridge*. These poets were and are very important to me, not only in that their work has served as continual instruction and inspiration, but in getting to know them personally it helped me to learn how to live in the world as a poet. A kind of confirmation."

As the years went on Opstedal found himself in the same circles as his heroes and they would often read together around the Bay Area. "One time the San Francisco Poetry Center," he shares, "had Joanne Kyger, Lewis MacAdams, and I read together and Joanne decided that we should have some ukulele music playing before and after the reading. So I created a CD that had a bunch of mostly Hawaiian ukulele tunes, but some classic surf guitar tunes played on a ukulele as well. It was pretty great, and the fact that the Poetry Center folks couldn't quite understand what was going on made it all the better."

High Octane Poetry

During the same period that Opstedal was researching and befriending Bolinas poets, he started publishing poetry magazines and small books of other writers' work that he admired. "I always wanted to publish a little poetry magazine and in 1990 I had the chance through a really sketchy arrangement with New College of California in San Francisco," he explains. "I won't go into the lurid details but I put together 3 issues of the magazine, *Gas: High Octane Poetry*, under the auspices of New College, but they withheld funding after I refused to publish a particularly lame story by one of the faculty members, so I said OK, but I'm taking the magazine with me." Opstedal then published 7 more issues on his own before starting up Blue Press Books with poet Michael Price. He started Blue Press he says, "Mainly because I wanted to print the first installment of Lewis MacAdams' epic book, *The River*."

Opstedal went on to publish 8 issues of Blue Book magazine, and to-date there are 62 books under the Blue Press imprint. Over this time he has also published 6 one-shot magazine with titles like *Cleavon Little's Magazine*, *Yolanda Pipeline's Magazine*, and *Little Horse's Magazine*. The great thing about publishing magazines and chapbooks, he says "is that it puts you in touch with the poets you admire and you get to see what they are working on in real time. I made many lifelong friendships with many poets through my small press ventures and that has had a giant impact on me personally as well as on my own dance with *The Poems*."

It was during these first forays into publishing that he met his close friend and publisher Noel Black. "During the 90s a number of poets who orbited the

New College scene in San Francisco were telling me about this student there named Noel Black who wrote really strange poems. I don't remember if I asked Noel for poems or if he just sent me some on his own, but they were great and from then on I regularly asked him for poems whenever I was putting together a magazine." They connected at a poetry reading in San Francisco and he published a couple of chapbooks of Black's poetry over the years. Black's Angry Dog Press published Opstedal's book *Like Rain* in 1999 and now Black's current press, Ugly Duckling has published, *Pacific Standard Time*.



Black characterized the literary style and ethos of the poets in *Gas* and how they contrasted from other poetic schools at the time in this book's Introduction. Black writes that the poets in *Gas* had "a distaste for the ideology, theory, and jobs in favor of wit, style and jokes." These poets epitomized a spirit more aligned with Punk Rock and Bohemian culture. One of the archetypal poets from this era that personified this spirit was F.A. Nettelbeck.

F.A. Nettelbeck was a poet born in 1950 who grew up in Inglewood, near the Los Angeles airport and also moved up to the Santa Cruz area in the early 1980s. "F. A. Nettelbeck, is probably the most important avant-garde poet you've never heard of," writes Stephen Kessler. "Through his 23 books, countless magazine publications and quite a few infamous readings; Nettelbeck since 1970 established himself as a truly outside-the-law literatus, a man who, if not for poetry very likely would have ended up in prison."

Opstedal first read his Nettelbeck in the late 70s, early 80s and was really blown away at what he was doing. Though they were both living in SoCal at the same time and haunted the same bookstores, Either/Or in Hermosa Beach and Papa Bach's in West LA, they did not meet for a few decades. "I first met him in the early 90s and printed poems by him in my magazine *Gas* as well as *Blue Book Magazine* and other one-shot mags I've published along the way." Opstedal also published two chapbooks of his poems. "We must have crossed path many times in the early 70s," he says. "In the 80s Nettelbeck was living in Santa Cruz when I was living just up the coast in Half Moon Bay and we still never managed to hook up. But we finally did meet and it was like discovering a

long lost brother.”

They wrote to each other almost every day, “trading poems and shooting the shit up until the day he died,” writes Opstedal. Nettelbeck passed in January 2011 and they read together one last time in Santa Cruz in 2009. “The collaborations we wrote only exist in email, playful extensions of our ongoing correspondence,” he says. “Nettelbeck had a huge heart and a pure poetic imagination that never failed to astonish and inspire. I miss him more than I can say.”

LA to the Bay and Back Again

Opstedal has done hundreds of readings over the last 40 years and some of the most memorable have been not only in Santa Cruz/San Francisco area, but also in Venice. “The first time I read at Beyond Baroque was great,” he notes. “It’s my home town after all, Venice, and I grew up only a couple of blocks from there. My dad came to the reading, and afterwards he stood out front smoking a cigarette. I asked him what he thought and he said, ‘I couldn’t hear a goddamn thing.’”

“At Beyond Baroque, I read with Lewis MacAdams and after we each read some poems we both got on stage and together took turns improvising a long collaborative poem. The theme of the poem was water, so it was the river (Lewis) versus the ocean (me). While we improvised the words, the Japanese Butoh dancer, Oguri, improvised a dance in response to the poem behind us. It was amazing.” To Opstedal this type of collaboration and experimentation is what poetry is all about. He revels in spontaneity. He will be reading at Beyond Baroque again on February 10th to celebrate the release of the new book.

Pacific Standard Time captures the spontaneity and transitory spirit that defines Opstedal’s work. Like a set of waves melodically crashing on the coastal shore, Opstedal in poems like “Vapor Eyes,” reminds us: “‘It’s all about the music’/ even when it isn’t.”