

Morton Marcus remains a pro's poet

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Sentinel staff writer

Actually, I'm neither a pessimist nor an optimist. I just envision the clean-up for the birthday party before we order the cake, and the stacks of dirty dishes before we set the table.

— Morton Marcus from "What's in a Name"

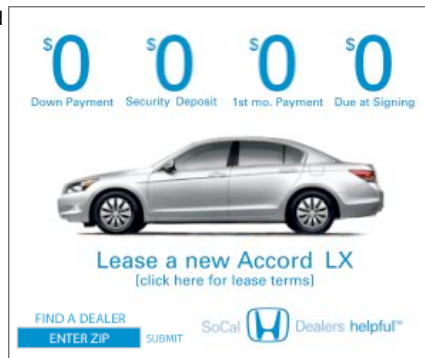
Morton Marcus writes with a pen in his hand. He doesn't clack away at a computer keyboard; his words don't need to be processed. He writes longhand because he believes that his arm in the act of writing serves as a conduit for the strange and misunderstood electricity of creativity.

He evokes an idea that artists, composers and writers have embraced for centuries: that creativity is an act of divine dictation.

"There's a lot of voices in me that want to speak," said Marcus, who will read from his book of prose poetry, "Moments Without Names," on Monday at Bookshop Santa Cruz.

"It's like going down to the docks in the morning to find workers. You say, 'OK, who wants to work?' And the guys who say 'I do' the loudest get the job."

The voices in his subconscious vie for attention, and the loudest and most persistent he will heed. It is this summoning of the imagination, regardless of what it yields, that marks Marcus as a champion of the poet's wider view, a vision noticeably out of fashion in an Oprah-esque culture that treasures the personal over the universal.



Marcus is a voice in the wind, raging against the dumbed-down, literal-minded, self-indulgent, confessional tone of American culture.

The imagination, he says, is getting dangerously short-changed.

"My vision is not just being home with the kids, or that I suffer so much," he says. "It's that poets should be involved in the world. This book is my cosmology. It deals with war, prejudice, suffering, everything that is human."

It's shaping up to be a landmark year for Marcus in his long career as a poet. The internationally recognized literary figure and Santa Cruz County Artist of the Year (1999) is girding for a publishing gold strike this year, no small feat in times of dwindling opportunities in the poetry business:

- First is the recent publication of "Moments," a selection of prose poems, new and previously published (65 of the book's 110 poems are new).
- Later this year comes "Shouting Down the Silence," a selection of new verse poems.
- Then, in 2003, comes the collected works, the poetic life-force of Morton Marcus captured in one volume. He plans to call it "Bear Prints."

The irony of Marcus's fame as a poet — he's published eight volumes of poetry and one novel — is that he is clearly much more than a Man of the Page.

A famously dramatic reader and storyteller, Marcus is a bearish presence in person. Thirty years of teaching literature and film studies at Cabrillo College and leading countless poetry workshops around the country have given the 65-year-old Santa Cruzan not only a nimble mind, but the authority of a speaker.

No dreamy, inarticulate lyricist, this guy.

Over coffee and Passover honey cake he made himself, Marcus and I discussed the life of the poetic imagination and his efforts to tap its riches.

"Moments Without Names" is a generous offering of prose poems (200-plus pages), a form that has captivated Marcus since he found free verse in 1959.

A prose poem is a poem that doesn't look like one. It's free from the line breaks that characterize the verse poem.

With their unaffected, journalistic plainspeak, Marcus' prose poems read as breezily as a newspaper clipping or a storyteller's monologue. But read closer and the snatches of text open a dimension unavailable in workday prose.

"A lot of these things almost sound like essays, but then they go where essays don't go," says Marcus.
"Metaphor takes over.

"A lot of others are narratives. They could almost be short, short, short stories, or parables.

"What's happening here is, I am using every single technique of poetry except the use of the line in these poems: metaphor, assonance, rhythm, internal rhyme."

Marcus moved to Santa Cruz in the late 1960s after growing up in Brooklyn in a family of Slavic Jews and a stint in the Air Force. He studied at the University of Iowa, home of the famed Writers' Workshop before coming to Stanford to study under Wallace Stegner.

Since shifting to Santa Cruz, Marcus has been deeply involved in the community as a teacher and union activist. He's also a film critic and historian, as co-host of KRUZ's "CinemaScene," and leads a film discussion group at the Nickelodeon.

But poetry is central to Marcus' sense of himself as a creative person, and he believes deeply in the mystery of self-expression.

The old dictum millions of undergrads learned in their first creative-writing seminar — Write What You Know — is antithetical to the Marcus artistic perspective.

Marcus once taught a class called Write What You Don't Know.

Marcus saw firsthand how damaging the write-what-you-know mentality could be when he was invited to give one-on-one consultations to poetry students in the graduate program at the University of Arkansas.

"They really had no concept of what poetry can do," he said. "Everything was confessional. And they said, 'Isn't that what poetry is?'"

"No, there are all different kinds of voices in poetry. But, boy, did they resist that notion. 'Well, a person can't just take a step and leap 20 feet in the air!'"

"Why not?"

In the poems of "Moments Without Names," Marcus consistently takes a big-picture cast of mind. He talks of the universe, fate, extinction — all in concrete images from the sensual world.

"Writing is a matter of health for me," he said. "I really have to do it. It's not that I want to write. It is necessary for my health that I write."

Marcus is impatient with poets satisfied to plumb the corners of their interior emotional world. The events of Sept. 11, he maintains, are a slap at that insular way of thinking.

Marcus has visited Bosnia and Croatia several times over the last few years (his wife's family roots reach back to the area). Clearly, the experiences have not only inspired his work, but solidified his belief that poets must be involved with the messy, sometimes ugly, sometimes horrific workings of the larger world.

In "Vacation," he turns the image of a tourist trying to make sense of a foreign-language newspaper into a metaphor for willful ignorance of the world.

Writing, said Marcus, is an act of surrender. Though his latest volume contains prose poems, he's never stopped writing verse poems. He lets the poem dictate its form, and he claims never to know where a poem will lead.

"I never write ideas," he said. "I write an image or the beginning of a story, and I go wherever it goes. That it has meaning that can be extracted in the end is as much a surprise to me as it is to the reader."

Still he insists to students, audiences and anyone who will listen, the horse has to come before the cart. It is not art that is important in itself, but the living, the experience of life that art reflects.

To illustrate the point, Marcus tells the story of a reporter's visit to the Italian sculptor and painter Alberto Giacometti's small hut on a cold winter's day.

In the firelight of the wood stove, the reporter caught sight of Giacometti's cat rubbing against stacks of countless canvases. The reporter asks the old artist which of the paintings he would grab if the fire were suddenly to engulf the old hut.

"Giacometti blinked and looked back at him," Marcus slows down for effect, '... the cat.'

"This is what every artist has to keep in mind. It's not your work that counts. It's life."

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If you go

WHAT: Morton Marcus reads selections from "Moments Without Names."

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Monday.

WHERE: Bookshop Santa Cruz, 1520 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz.

COST: Free.

DETAILS: 423-0900.