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Introducing the SRPR Illinois Poet
George Kalamaras

George Kalamaras was born on the southside of Chicago, where he lived a few years before growing up in northwest Indiana. After years in Colorado and upstate New York, he returned to the Midwest where he is associate professor of English and director of creative writing at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne. He has published two chapbooks, *Heart Without End* (Leaping Mountain Press, 1986) and *Beneath the Breath* (Tilton House, 1988), as well as poems in many places such as *Best American Poetry 1997*, *Epoch*, *The Iowa Review*, and *Sulfur*. He received an NEA fellowship in poetry in 1993, and he spent several months in India in 1994 on a Fulbright Indo-U.S. Advanced Research Fellowship. He lives in Fort Wayne, Indiana, with his wife, the writer Mary Ann Cain, and their beagle, Barney. He has practiced yogic meditation for many years.

Meditation and Poetry—
A Discussion with George Kalamaras

SRPR: The exotic unfamiliarity of the India world is in your poems like an onrushing train. The images, shocking and unfamiliar, come at the reader with the regularity of train cars.

George: I am hoping to evoke the experience of what India is like to a Westerner. Everything is strange when one first arrives, and it took me time while there to stop seeing this difference as exotic and get into the flow of the assault on the senses for which India is famous. It's not that you do not feel for immense poverty, with the openness of disease, and the daily presence of death in the streets and at the cremation grounds. Rather, I think you begin to feel it on deeper levels in which that "other side" of our sanitized existence is balanced with those hidden elements in our culture.

SRPR: The elongated lines, sentences meandering across the couplets—sometimes across five or six of them before one's eyes rest on a period, give a kind of sameness to the onrush of images. But even when the sentence stops at a period, the syntax does not—it continues at the same pace. Silk stalls and bead sellers are on the same level with a dead man being eaten by dogs and the "brown river moon" of a waist.

George: I hope that the lines achieve both a heightening of the senses and a neutralizing of opposites. That's one reason the couplets, as a structure, are so very important to me—they connect to my practice of yogic meditation. One basis of all the yogic techniques is to neutralize opposites so that one may not be bound by binaries and the changing tides of "good and bad," "right and wrong," "inner and outer," "you and me"—those tricks of conceptual thought that block a deeper psychic reciprocity with the universe.

SRPR: Some object at hand—the central image of a poem, like the black bowl—becomes, through the images pouring through and from it, a kind of center of the universe. Karmically perhaps.

George: Yes, but of course that center "never holds." This idea of a "decentered center" is common to both Hinduism and Buddhism, although my poetry is grounded chiefly in Hindu-Yogic rather than Buddhist thought. This dynamic practice works more directly on the Kundalini energy in the body as a focus for spiritual development. That you see the "bowl" as a center of the universe fascinates me, for in the pure yogic moment there is indeed a "still point of the turning world," as Eliot described.

SRPR: There's a spiderweb of connections in the kaleidoscope of images shifting into each other in "A Theory of Astronomy as Inscribed in the Book of Blood." Is there a real "Book of Blood?"

George: No, although this connects to your previous question. One reason for the web of shifting connections is to evoke a sense that we are always in the process of writing and rewriting those codes—the Book of Blood if you will, those inner answers that, if decoded just right, could help us find inner peace. The "self" is a dynamic condition distinct from dualities like time and space, subject and object.

SRPR: The question in "Cygnus and Olor," "A young swan in the courtyard/ of a prince knows instinctively to extract// only milk from a mixture of water and milk,/ but how does one learn to live/ / in the world and not be touched by it?" seems to reverberate in all these poems. The world spun out of them is over-rich, sensory-

laden to the point of object bombardment. What was your process of sifting to make these poems?

George: I wrote some poems in India. The first few I wrote were clichéd and touched with “colonial” overtones. I was just too close to the experience. I gave a reading at Poona University during which I read a poem about being touched by a leper girl, and later an Indian friend told me that the poem was a cliché. That was an immense gift. On my return to Indiana, I totally reworked that poem into a central poem in the first India collection. It explores not only my own despair regarding the young girl's condition and my disgust over my undesirable fear of her, but also the dilemma of trying to speak about India's suffering without colonizing it.

SRPR: How can the “skeleton of a mosquito outweigh that of a rhinoceros?” Your form makes that happen with its train of syntax running over the couplet-tracks, making everything the same weight, almost like a koan, a kind of spiritual riddle.

George: The perspective of paradox is central to the collection and to meditation in general. It is similar to a koan, but I prefer not to see koans as riddles, because riddles imply a specific question and answer. It is the process of the koan that is the transformative agent by its structure, and not the answer. The koan, like poetry, can momentarily short-circuit one's rational hold on the universe and evoke a meditative state.