

poetry as you've
never seen it before!

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John Wright

Pearl Cleage

Czesław Miłosz

Jim Northrup

Wanda Coleman

Peter Spiro

Lysinka

C. D. Wright

Clara Harryman

Rev. Pedro Pietri

Lois-Ann Yamanaka

Maggie Estep

Thyllias Moss

The United States of Poetry

Paul Beatty

Dan Powers

Ruth Forman

Derek Walcott

Jimmy Carter

Luís Alfaro

Miguel Algarín

Sawyer Shefts

Sean McNally

Lou Reed

Michael Franti

Michael S. Serros

Matt Cook

Genny

Marc Smith

Sylvester

in Cook

Javier Piña

Sheryl Noethe

Bessell Leong

James S. Hall

Ai

Keith Wilson

Robert Creeley

Joseph Brodsky

Jeff Tagami

Hal Sirowitz

Juli Yancy

Amiri Baraka

ayagam

Emily XYZ

Vess Quinlan

Quincy Troupe

Robert Chambers

Allen Ginsberg

Linda Hasselstrom

James Still

Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Real Bird

Sue Wallis

George Ella Lyon

Rita Dove

John Trudell

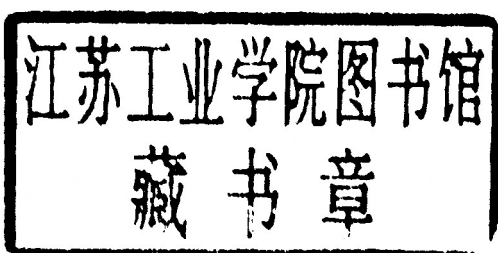
Tracie Morris


Maureen Owen

Shihab Nye

IF IT AIN'T A PLEASURE, IT AIN'T A POEM

-WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

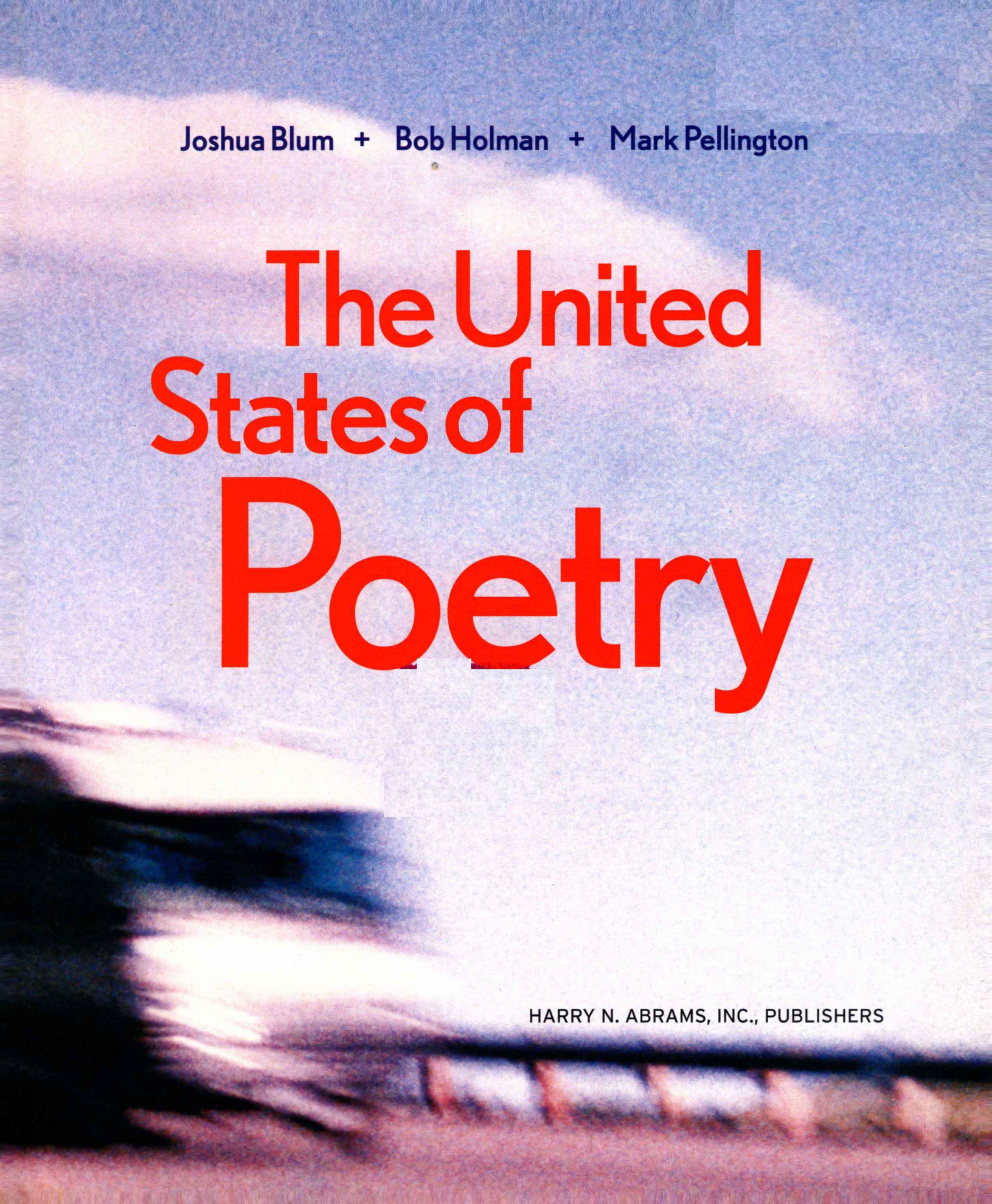




LISTEN TO THE SKIES, LISTEN TO THE SOUNDS

SOMETHING ON THE LAND, SOMETHING GOING DOWN

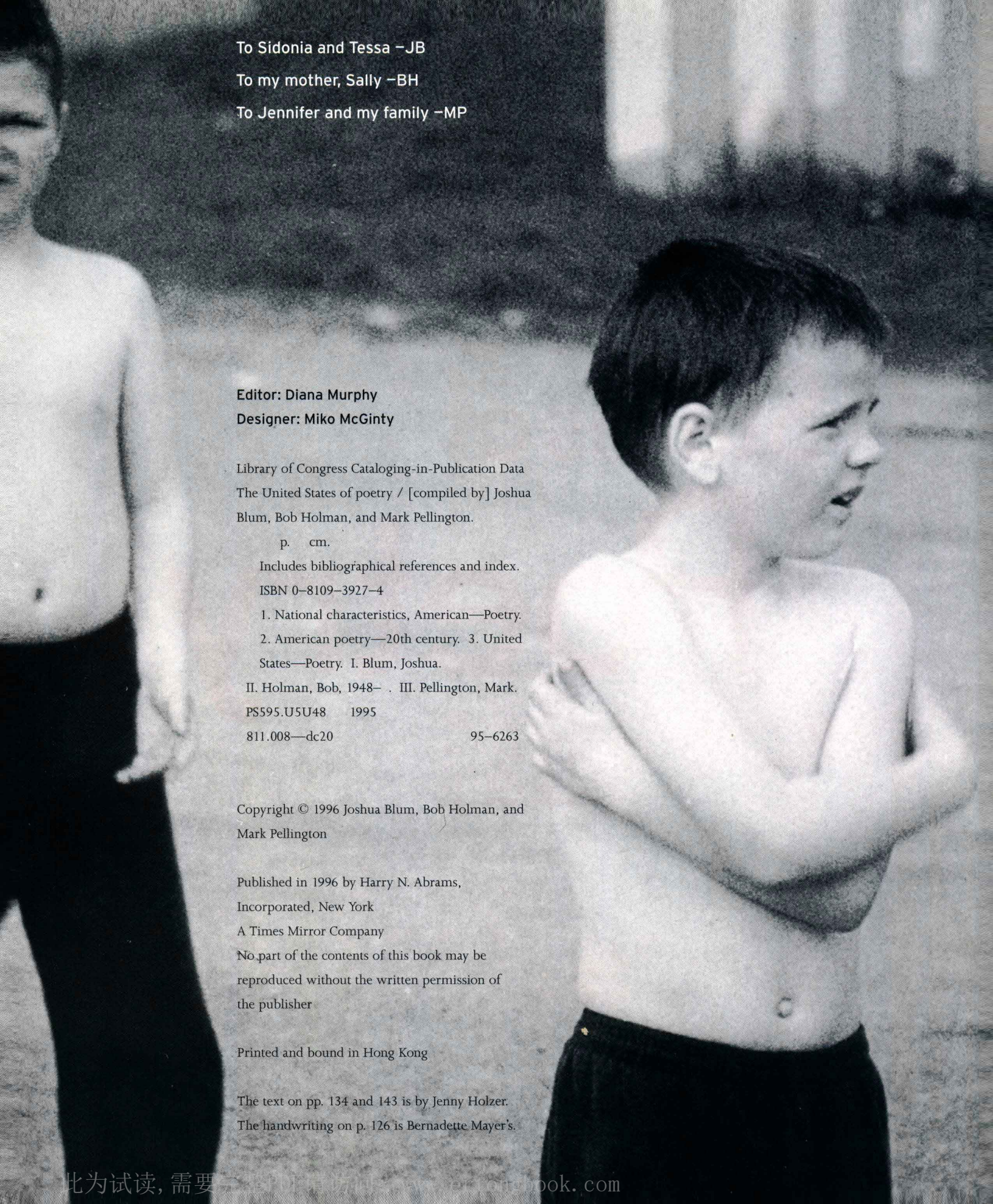
-JOHN TRUDELL



Joshua Blum + Bob Holman + Mark Pellington

The United States of Poetry

HARRY N. ABRAMS, INC., PUBLISHERS



To Sidonia and Tessa -JB

To my mother, Sally -BH

To Jennifer and my family -MP

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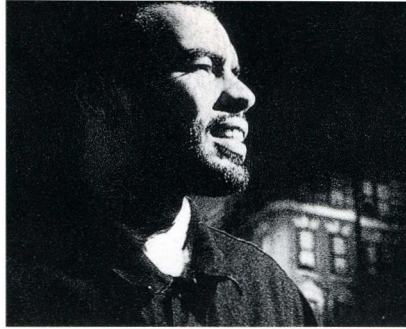
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Bob Holman



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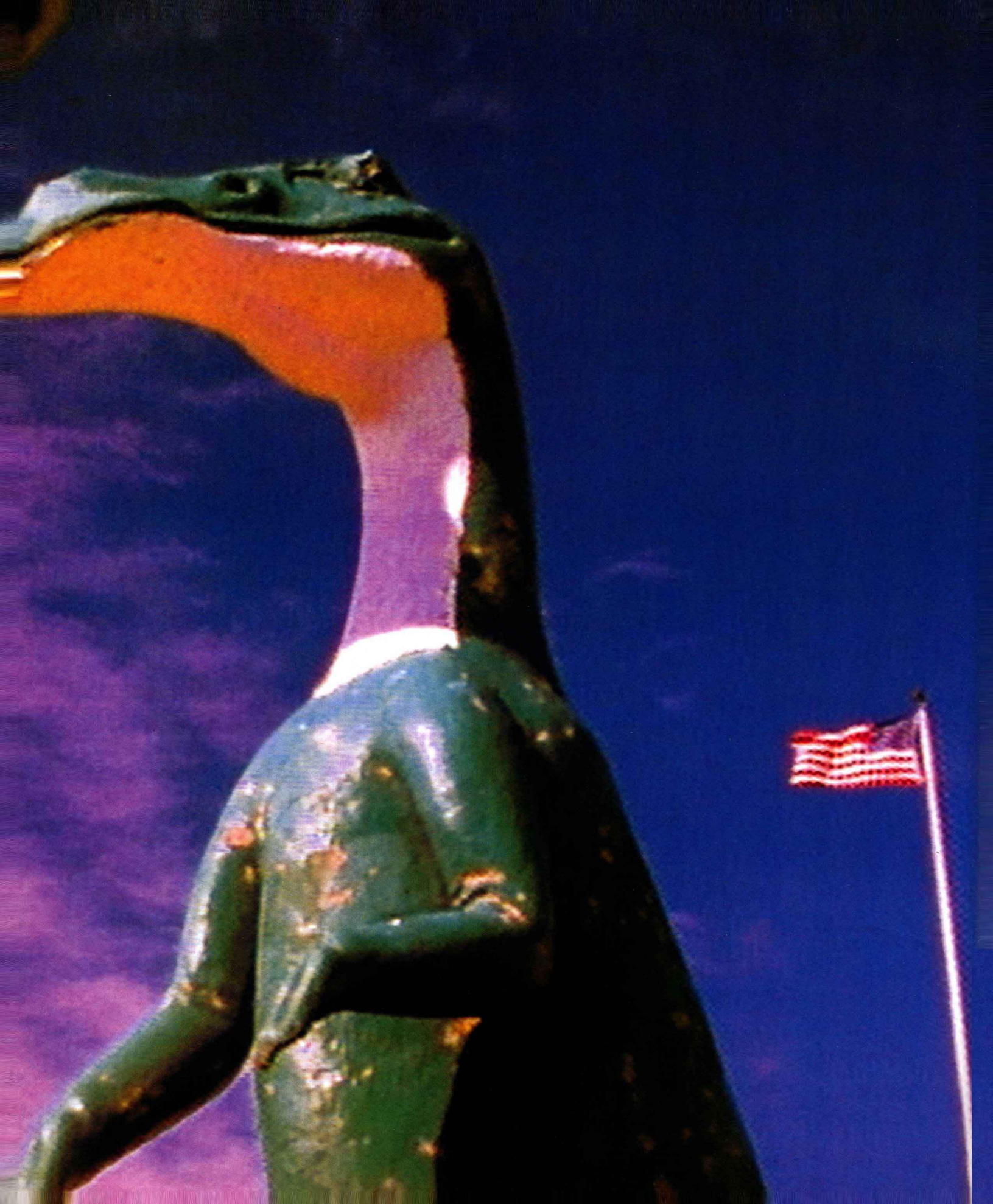
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Welcome to **The United States of Poetry!**



In the waning days of the Second Millennium, in a time of madness and plague, it is extraordinary and heartening to begin to hear, through the noise of rhetoric-by-committee and the purpose-of-language-is-to-sell-something, the reemergence of the singular voice of the poem. Poetry, until recently considered an art all but extinct, is being reborn. No longer necessarily thought of as the dense and impenetrable domain of an elite, poetry is reentering our culture as something as familiar as a schoolyard rhyme, as exciting as the discovery that love can mean the same thing to two people.

This is a book of two firsts.

This is the first book of poems ever to be based on a television series.

And this is the first book containing every style and tradition of American poetry allowable within the abhorrent and anti-poetic limitations of space and time. Poems so varied they make you think of the plural, "poetries," or of music: jazz poems and classical, rap poems, country and western poems, rock and blues and experimental and...

Here, finally, is a collection of the "varied carols" that Whitman heard America singing.

These two firsts are related. Now that you can reach millions of TV viewers with a single poem,

Which poems would you choose?

These poems were selected to illuminate a country. Ours is a crucial mission, a healing mission. The U.S. has become a nation divided, splintered into a hundred nations. Without exception, the poetry of these cultures has been passed on within the individual cultures, defiantly, from voice to ear, often without being written down, and generally without being thought of as poetry. These traditions have been locked out of literature, while poetry itself has been relegated to a corner, painted in by definitions that have reduced an art to a footnote.

So here, of course, you will find the three U.S. Nobel Prize-winners for poetry (none of whom were born in the States) and our Poets Laureate. But you will also find rappers, slam poets, cowboy poets, street poets, poets who write in Spanish and Pidgin and Tlingit and Tagalog. Former President Jimmy Carter, whose first book of poems was published in 1995, is a citizen of The United States of Poetry, as is Robert Chambers, President of the Los Angeles Homeless Writers' Collective, and seven-year-old Sawyer Shefts of Salmon, Idaho.

The poets in The United States of Poetry are not "experts" explaining their traditions. Archibald MacLeish's famous lines,

**A poem should not mean
But be**

come roaring in at this point: some of the poems in this series may be emblematic of the poets themselves, of their varied voices; many are not. The integrity of the poem is what is essential, is what gives the poem force, as the poem is translated through another art. And it is respect for the individual, the individual voice and vision, that is the basis of poetry's power.

**Through these poems we can hear each other,
begin to know each other, become acquainted with each other.**

As we regain respect for the poets of our own cultures, we can begin to hear, understand, and respect the cultures and traditions of others.

**It is within television's power to reach into the nation's living rooms
and reclaim our country's soul with poetry.**

The Millennial Moment draws nigh! Are Yeats's spinning gyres (whose points, when they touch on 1/1/00, are to launch a New Age) actually Poetry and Television, those opposite arts?

Poetry is a single voice, TV is a hundred people performing arcane technical tasks behind a camera....A poem is words scribbled with a pencil nub on a bar napkin, a TV show is a million-dollar advertising opportunity....Poetry books are mimeo'd, hand-sewn, published by university presses; TV series are debated in popular magazines and spin off huge subsidiary industries....

The Beats and Plato

On November 30, 1959, the Beats were mentioned on the cover of *Life* magazine (although the cover image was from a story on "The Beauty of Postage Stamps"). The Beats created the notion that there was a lively alterna-

tive to the canon, an outsider tradition of anti-traditionalists centered in poetry, but since the early 60s, poetry has not been heard from on the national stage.

It was Plato, in fact, who banned poets from his Republic. Because the poets' Truth refused to be acculturated, they were to be tolerated as powerless outsiders, whose words were important, but only as a kind of chorus outside the walls. In this country, for generations, poetry has been a creak on exhibit at the Dust Museum, something written by the Dead.

Why are poets being heard from now?

Poets today are beginning to face the center of the problem, the hole in the middle of the country where its soul once was. These poets are connecting with each other through the technologies that were to have spelled the end of literature. It's one thing to find Gwendolyn Brooks on the thirty-second band on an old Caedmon Spoken Word record; it's another to use a CD, or CD-ROM, point, click, and read the text as the poet reads to us.

So television and other media are providing a way for poetry to be seen and heard. There are five hundred channels with nothing on, and here is a group of people called poets who have so much content they can't be stopped. Shall we dance?

Rap, Slams, Cowboy Gatherings, ASL Poetry, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E

Of all the phenomena connecting poetry to the popular culture, the most powerful is rap. A richly rhymed and rhythmic verbal construct that grew from the Hip Hop world created in the Black community of the South Bronx in the late 70s, rap is a new poetic form, between *pantoum* and *sonnet*.

To say "Poetry" in a high school class has been to induce immediate gagging motions followed by a glazed, zombie-like stupor. To say "Rap" is to be barraged by half-hour recitations from each student. To say "Rap is poetry" is to draw skeptical looks from both hard-core rappers and poetry purists, yet it is at the center of a new definition of poetry. Whether a certain rap is good or bad poetry is another question, but to deny a place in our nation's literary traditions to a brawling, sprawling, language-based art is to deny ourselves our heritage and our possibilities. Let us celebrate the richness and vigor of the American grain as it grows and changes to meet the Future. Or let us gag like zombies watching a gray box of Nothingness.

Another strand of new poetry began at Chicago's Green Mill Tavern in 1987, when Marc Smith found a home for the Poetry Slam. Smith, an ex-construction worker, loved poetry and its possibilities, and finally screwed up the courage to cross the cultural divide and attend a poetry reading—and lo, he was bored therein, and so did Smith create "Slam"!

Yes, the Poetry Slam, whose very name sends terror into the civilized. The Poetry Slam, those mock Olympics with judges selected randomly from the audience, judges who dare to score the poem between zero ("a poem that should never have been written") and ten ("a poem causing simultaneous orgasm throughout the audience"). But please use the Dewey Decimal System of Slam Scorification—if there's a tie, we must resort to the Dreaded Sudden-Death Spontaneous Haiku Overtime Round! With tongue in cheek (usually), and competition itself competing with irony and hype, the Slams have brought Whitman's "muscular art" pow upon the ear of the populace. The Slam is now the most potent grass-roots arts movement in the country, existing in over thirty cities, with an annual National Slam that attracts hundreds of poets. Chicago retains its position as Slam Central and even has an annual poetry-video slam and festival, organized by Michael Warr of

the Guild Complex, Jean Howard, Quarish Ali, and Kurt Heintz. More than anything else, at a time when “poetry readings” connoted a beard chained to a podium, a muffled voice, and an airless ear, Slams allowed a generation to attend a poetry reading without saying they were going to a poetry reading.

The Nuyorican Poets Café in New York’s Loisaida (Lower East Side) is a magnet for poets from all genres as well as being a springboard for the diverse collection of poets who have appeared on MTV and other networks, and as the center for a spoken word movement that is transmitted through tapes and CD’s, CD-ROM’s, live tours, and the continued publication of small press chapbooks and magazines like Steve Cannon’s *A Gathering of the Tribes*. Co-directors Miguel Algarín and Lois Griffith, Roland Legiardi-Laura, Willie Correa, Sonia Lopez, and I preside over live music and theater programs, film-script readings, and visual art exhibitions, as well as the twice weekly Slams.

The largest poetry event in the country is probably the annual Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada—“The Middle of Nowhere in the Middle of Winter.” Organized by Hal Cannon and Sue Wallis and others at the Western Folklife Center, the five-day fest draws ten thousand people. Here poetry readings start promptly at 9 AM, with six readings per hour, five poets per reading, plus an open mike till 5 o’clock. All day you’ll see western couples hunched over their programs, figuring out which reading to go to next. A tape duplication system is whirring away—you can grab up a cassette of your favorite reading just moments after it’s over. In the evening, line up for the Big Show in the two-thousand-seat auditorium, which is completely filled—once for the early show, again for the late night. And while cowboy poetry is dedicated to revealing (and preserving) a way of life, it is as filled with just as many opinions on how to do that as any other poetry aesthetic. Check out the range wars between the classically rhymed poets like Wallace McRae and the free versification of Rod McQueary and Paul Zarzyski in John Dofflemeyer’s *Dry Crick Review*.

In Rochester, Jim Cohn, Kenny Lerner, Debbie Rennie, and others began the American Sign Language Literary Conferences, which are a perfect metaphor for the new poetry: being composed in a visual language, the *only* way these poems can be “published” is on film. Or videotape. Clayton Valli, Patrick Graybill, Sam Supalla, Terrylene, Ben Bahan, and others are creating a new literature from this “new” language.

In Boulder, Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman, and Andrew Schelling oversee the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute. Here Beats’ “spontaneous bop prosody” is taught in the only degree-granting Buddhist institution in the country. In many ways precursors of much of the current new energy of poetry, Naropa is a model for carrying on traditions that have heretofore been homeless.

At The Electronic Café in Santa Monica, Merilene M. Murphy holds court around the country via her vid-phone Telepoetics, and there are poets slamming on the Internet thanks to Sherry Rabinowitz, Kit Galloway, Dan McVeigh and his Senator Pobot, and Chris Funkhauser of *We* magazine. This blend of hi-tech ideology and lo-fi culture springs from the varieties of PerfPo that Ed Sanders instigated in the 60s and 70s, and continues on his one-man poetry-TV show, “The Sanders Report.”

At the Ear Inn in New York, at universities from Buffalo to Berkeley, you will find the highly energized asyntactical purveyors of the Language School. Drawing from Charles Olson, the Objectivists, and Deep Image poets, these writers offer a rigorous, text-based, politically aware, and demanding aesthetic. The poets most influenced by Semiotics and Deconstructivism (although the sampling techniques of some rappers, and poets as diverse as Paul Beatty and Ted Berrigan, might belie this), the Language writers have found a way to outflank the academy with an avant-garde poetic rich in theory and exciting in practice. “Difficult” is one characterization of this work, but as Mark Pellington’s treatment of Carla Harryman’s “Fish Story” conjures, it is

full of rewards when attacked boldly. Many well known writers here, to mention a few: Charles Bernstein, Barrett Watten, Lyn Hejinian, and Ron Silliman.

And what of the Academy? Surely, in the five hundred universities and colleges across the country, there are degree-granting writing programs that appreciate the flame of a new poetry. Many of the poets in The United States of Poetry teach, and the harder one tries to find the Academy, the more it disappears into a shroud of dust. The point of this book is to open up the definition of what a poem is, to have a chance to hear poets who speak to you, personally, to tune across an FM dial of poetries the way you can find music on the radio. Listen in to the alternative literary centers found in many locales—from Joe Flaherty's Writers and Books in Rochester to the National Writers' Voice Series organized by Jason Shinder, with outposts at Y's across the country, from Ed Friedman at the St. Mark's Poetry Project to Ray González at the Guadeloupe Arts Center, from Judith Roche at Seattle's Bumbershoot Festival to the Taos Poetry Circus of Anne MacNaughton and Peter Rabbit. "Poemfone," begun in New York by Jordan Trachtenberg, can now be found in San Francisco thanks to Gary Glazner and in L.A. thanks to Jayleen Sun and Mud Baron. Andrew Carroll has created the American Poetry and Literacy Project from the idea of then-Poet Laureate Joseph Brodsky and managed to put poetry anthologies in hotel rooms—over twenty-five thousand of them! ("The Bible can stand the competition," notes Brodsky.)

The poets are in town. The town is the country. The country is The United States of Poetry.



A Brief History of The USOP

When Josh Blum walked into the Nuyorican Poets Café in spring 1990, collaring me at the Slam to say that “this ought to be on TV,” he set in motion an extraordinary chain of events. But first, as we say,

Flashback

In fact, up to the mid-80s, I had refused to own a TV or to allow a camera to record my readings. *TV was The Enemy*, the Skull Dozer, the Passivity Inducer. But when poet and friend Roberto Bedoya suggested TV producer Danny O’Neil contact me as a resource for a poetry TV series, my view of TV made an abrupt switch. Instead of the opponent, TV was to become an ally, a means of transmission, a collaborator. I had been involved with Rose Lesniak and Laura Vural in some early proto-poetry videos, but here was the chance: *If you can’t barge into the nation’s living room and put a book of poems in everybody’s hand, how about if they turn on their TV’s and find a poem there?* (Footnote: Danny O’Neil died of AIDS in 1988; “Poetry Spots” had six seasons at WNYC-TV, where it won three local Emmys.)

From Josh’s and my connection came a demo, “Smokin’ Word.” Co-directed by Joel Blumsack (aka Baron von Blumenzack aka Zero Boy) and Rick Reta, and hosted by Matthew Courtney, “Smokin’ Word” was a fistful of poetic energy. MTV turned down the idea (although allowing, “We think you’re right. Meaning is making a comeback. Content will be big in the 90s. But poetry will never be on MTV!”), but the people at Public Television’s “Alive from Off-Center” were enthusiastic. “Words in Your Face” was born.



Bob Holman, Allen Ginsberg, and Josh Blum, meditating.



Mark Pellington (standing, above)

is a central figure in this drama. Mr. Pellington is a visionary who saw immediately that pushing poetry through a camera would push the camera itself to a new place. After years at MTV creating what to many is that network's finest show, the freestyle international image-driven "Buzz," the very essence of what would become "MTV style," he began to look for the next step. "Words in Your Face," the first collaboration of Pellington/Blum/Holman through Washington Square Films, was hailed as a breakthrough for poetry and television. "Words" became the basis of our next project.

The United States of Poetry

For two years, while new poetry was building across the country like a wave of words, Josh and I sat in the office of Josh's Washington Square Films conspiring to get the wave into a TV studio. We were joined by Colette Coyne, whose extraordinary dedication and energy made us seem to be a whole office. We sent out many a copy of "Words in Your Face," which itself is still being used as a teaching tool in facilities across the country, from prisons to hospitals, high schools to literary centers. We wrote many proposals for funding. Mark was



Front row: Salmon, Idaho, poetry workshop. Middle row: Anne Mullen and the USOP road crew. Back row: Bitterroot Range of the Rocky Mountains.

hard at work on “Father’s Daze,” an expressionistic portrait of his father’s battle with Alzheimer’s disease. He would call in regularly with bursts of inspiration and to check if poems were still being written.

We received early support from the New York State Council on the Arts and the Greenwall Foundation. Things were looking grim, though, when, two years later, fall of 1992, we decided to, one last time, apply to Independent Television Service (ITVS) of St. Paul, who had already rejected us once for a single one-hour special.

The proposal was for a series. And as Josh developed the structure, certain concepts became immediately clear: to divide the country by region or aesthetic would preclude the very basis of what we were most excited about—variety, energy, voices. The themes we settled on are the chapters of this book.

Let’s cut through the months of honing and phoning. The gradual turn from the utterly impossible (321 proposals were sent to ITVS) to the remotely possible (cut to 111) to the “why are we spending so much time on this, which will repay nothing” (9) to our being green-lighted, one of three proposals actually to be made.

After three years the prospect of making this thing was too scary to consider. Mark suggested we bring in a very talented producer, Anne Mullen, whom he had often teamed up with before. She set to work getting the project in gear, collaborating closely with Mark to put together the creative team that would fulfill the vision of the series. Over the next five months, eighty treatments were written, crews were hired, and arrangements were made for a twelve-week, 13,400-mile trip on a Dolly Parton tour bus accompanied by a fifteen-passenger van and a yellow Ryder truck full of equipment. USOP hit the road!

There are eighty poets and three editors in this book. But the images you’ll be seeing are the result of extraordinary work by a talented and dedicated team of professionals acknowledged on the credits page. Particularly, however, the work of Director of Photography Thomas Krueger and Production Designer Steve Kimmel must be pointed out. Working closely with Mark, they helped create a look that’s as dynamic as the poems they illuminate.

See the credits! Read the poems! Find poetry on your TV!

And hear, at last, the Book itself. The subtext of bringing poetry to television *is the text*: the hidden agenda is the Hidden Book, to bring people back to the rewards of reading poems for themselves.

For all of you who have been moaning about the unsingability of “The Star Spangled Banner,” we herewith offer not only a **new national anthem but a new nation, conceived in language, and dedicated to the proposition that poets define it better than politicians**, *if only we could find the ears to hear with, the eyes to read.*

Bob Holman
New York City, 1995

