



Ellen Bass

ELLEN BASS' most recent book of poetry, *MULES OF LOVE*, published by BOA Editions, won the 2002 Lambda Literary Award for Poetry. In 1973, she co-edited the groundbreaking book, *NO MORE MASKS!: AN ANTHOLOGY OF POEMS BY WOMEN* and has published four previous volumes of poetry. Her non-fiction books include *I NEVER TOLD ANYONE*, *FREE YOUR MIND*, and *THE COURAGE TO HEAL*, which has sold over a million copies and been translated into eleven languages. Among her awards for poetry are the Elliston Book Award from the University of Cincinnati, the Pushcart Prize, The Pablo Neruda Prize from Nimrod/Hardman, the Larry Levis Prize from *Missouri Review*, the New Letters Poetry Prize, the Greensboro Award in Poetry, the Chautauqua Poetry Prize, and a Fellowship from the California Arts Council. Her next book of poetry, *THE HUMAN LINE*, is forthcoming from Copper Canyon Press in 2007. She lives in Santa Cruz, CA where she has taught creative writing since 1974. www.ellenbass.com

Photo: Joan Bobkoff

Introduction to Mules of Love

- BY DORIANNE LAUX

While with an eye made quiet by the power of harmony, and the deep power of joy, We see into the life of things. – Wordsworth.

Poet Ellen Bass sees into the life of things, creating a poetry that goes straight to the heart, in a voice that speaks to us clearly and intimately about the subjects of daily living: community, family, domestic life and sexual love. There are poems of political consciousness, personal, cultural, historical and environmental awareness, all of it handled with humor and grace. *MULES OF LOVE* is luminous with the ordinary: an afternoon in the garden, a family car trip, a visionary moment on the front lawn with a neighbor, moments we are apt to miss the deeper significance of if we don't pay careful attention.

What is the poet's job but to help us to become aware of life's transience, love's power, and the subtle manifestations of hope to play for us again the ancient themes. When she speaks, her authority is clear, her wisdom and compassion evident. To her lover she

offers her strength: "Bring me your pain, love. Spread/ it out like fine rugs, / silk sashes, warm eggs, cinnamon/ and cloves in burlap sacks. Show me..." She commiserates with the goddess Demeter: "In the story it sounds like sorrow's over./ They don't write how it never leaves, how it sounds in every/ wind, in every rain, soaks/ your heart like rains soaks the fields." In a poem to her daughter she recognizes the complicated weight of our love:

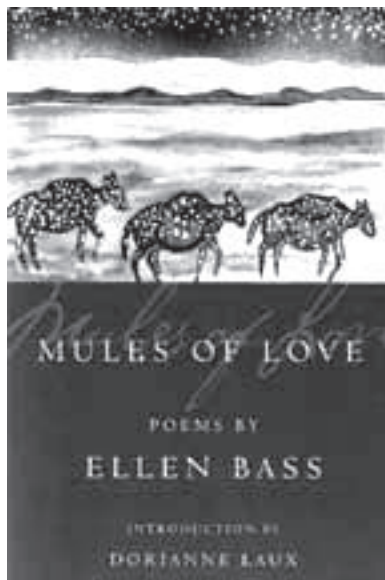
You dug me out like a well. You lit the deadwood of my heart. You pinned me to the earth with the points of stars....

Love this massive is the burden we must learn to bear, like mules of love.

Unafraid of the full range of human emotion, Bass also applies humor to the taboo subjects of sex, religion and death: "If this were the

last/ day of my life, I wouldn't/ complain about the curtain rod..." and in "Birds Do It": "The young imagine lovers young,/ sleek as tapers, waxy, gleaming. And worry that their own lumpy legs,/ pimples, hair thin as cilia-- / will shut them out,/ tick them off the assembly line like seconds." In "God and the G-Spot," she positions herself firmly between the sacred and the profane: "Belief and disbelief/ are a pair of tourists standing on swollen feet/ in the Prado-- I don't like it./ I do-- before the Picasso."

Bass is a poet of the elemental, always struggling to manage the science and biology of life with the mysteries of religion, philosophy and consciousness. It's as if she is so startled to be alive, she can't help asking every moment to stop and let her examine it, ask it a question. In



"Insomnia" she finds herself awake while the world is at rest and commiserates with others afflicted with similar hungers: All over the world, people can't sleep./ In different time zones, they are lying awake,/ bodies still, minds trudging along like child laborers./ / ...may something/ comfort you--a mockingbird, a breeze, the smell/ of crushed mint, Chopin's Nocturnes,/ your child's birth, a kiss,/ or even me--in my chilly kitchen/ with my coat over my nightgown--thinking of you.

Compassion and connection are among her gods, and so she exhorts the sleepless masses to seek the consolation of their own interwoven and quietly miraculous lives. In this age of violence and disconnection, as we spend more and more time looking for a technological fix, this kind of poetry is a necessary reminder to see our lives as a continuum of ordinary days, each bountiful, spacious, precious. Ellen Bass has created a woman who stands on the edge of her life, looking for the moment that might change us all.

DORIANNE LAUX is the author of three previous collections of poetry. She is also the coauthor, with Kim Adonizio, of *THE POET'S COMPANION: A GUIDE TO THE PLEASURES OF WRITING POETRY*. Among her awards are a Pushcart Prize for poetry, two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, and a Guggenheim fellowship. Laux is an associate professor in the University of Oregon's Creative Writing Program. She lives in Eugene, Oregon, with her husband, poet Joseph Millar.

WHY PEOPLE MURDER

I found out why people murder in the kitchen of our house in Boulder Creek where we'd made soybean patties, dozens of soybean patties ground up in our vitamix blender and stacked, in Saran Wrap, in the freezer.

He was in the living room. In navy blue sweat pants and sheepskin slippers and his pipe—he was tamping tobacco with his thumb and looking for matches.

I picked up the knife we'd used to chop onions— onions and carrots and whatever else it was we put in those hopeful dry little cakes.

The details of this particular fight are lost. But trust me, they don't matter. Just imagine need, primitive, a baby screaming for the tit; lust, the clawing into another, wanting to part the other like water, and be taken in.

And desperation, that's the big one. You're shaky as a junkie, the pain hums, an electric current. You're frozen to it, a dog who's gnawed on a cord and must be kicked off. Save me. I'm frantic. I'm on my knees, prostrate. I'm flat as wax across the linoleum floor.

The knife is clean. I washed it after the onions. I lurch into the living room. My breath comes out visible, like in cold weather. When he sees me, he's startled, doesn't know if he should be scared. I'm emanating like a rod of uranium. He says my name, tentative. I look down at the knife, as if I were carrying it to the drawer and took a wrong turn.

"Why People Murder" and "God and the G-Spot" were first published in MULES OF LOVE. "Evolution" was first published in *Ploughshares*. "Gate C22" was first published in *Missouri Review*. "Asking Directions in Paris" was first published in *New Letters*.