



NORTH BEACH POET

Still railing against The Man

Text by Amelia Glynn : Photo by Peter Chang

George Tsongas lives to write and writes to live. It's a simple formula for a feisty, full-blooded 80-year-old poet, and it works. He writes from his small, two-room studio, favoring hard work over inspiration. He owns nothing that plugs in. The only way to reach him is to leave a message with the baristas at Cafe Trieste, his favorite North Beach hangout.

I arrange to meet Tsongas on a Sunday afternoon at Trieste. He tells me he will be wearing a black hat.

When I arrive, there are no fewer than four over-60, could-be poets in black hats. I finally spot Tsongas sitting alone at the end of a round table piled with the morning's newspapers. His bushy white eyebrows reach out from beneath his worn felt hat like tentacles and his curious, bright blue eyes and smooth, clear skin give him a youthful glow. He is slightly hunched (from writing on his old Olivetti typewriter) and well layered in an oversized grey jacket with tattered cuffs, wool sweater, and plaid shirt.

I expect this poet of the Beat generation to have an audience as he pounds his fists on the table and gesticulates wildly, bestowing snippets of virtue and wisdom to customers as they down their daily dose. I quickly learn that this is the antithesis of Tsongas. Although he has rubbed elbows with Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg, he's quick to separate himself from the herd. "I didn't have much respect for the Beats," he says. "I found them vulgar and not as learned as they tried to appear."

When I ask if he's friends with Ferlinghetti, he snorts, "I'm not a fame worshipper." A contrarian with a smile, Tsongas has been railing against The Man for more than 60 years. He is gracious and unassuming—and also self-obsessed like any true poet.

"Very few people have been able to do what I've done and still maintain themselves," he says. In his youth, he hitchhiked alone throughout the United States to learn how other people lived. "You observe things better by yourself and do what you feel is necessary to understand where you are," he says.

Born an only child in Long Island, New York, Tsongas came to San Francisco in 1945. With the exception of a few years spent overseas, he has called San Francisco home ever since.

By the late 1950s he had started a family. Of his four sons, his youngest, Taurus, still lives in San Francisco.

ouzo - ouzó

i'm getting
to the age
when
i'm thinking
how
do i get
to a hundred

my grandfather
lived to 94
died
of smoke inhalation
after 4 days
in an oxygen
tent, smoked
2 packs
turkish cigarettes
a day, fell asleep
on the couch
with one in his
fingers, crawled
50 feet to the door,
and collapsed

but he lived
to 94
drinking a shot
of ouzo
before each meal
breakfast
lunch
dinner

worked
12 hour days
into his 80's

—George Tsongas,
courtesy of *Thin Ice Press*
(thinicepress.com)

Tsongas has worked the shipyards, swept the streets of San Francisco, and put up displays with the conventions union to afford a simple

lifestyle of travel and writing. "I'd like to have more money, but I don't need a lot to be happy," he says. "When I read at the North Beach Library for over an hour, no one left and people stayed afterward wanting more. That's enough for me."

Every morning, Tsongas writes in his small, two-room studio in North Beach, favoring hard work over inspiration. He owns nothing that plugs in, but dreams of having his own photocopy machine; he likes to enlarge his words, sometimes poster size. His "filing system" consists of stacks of papers piled on naked wood planks.

Much of his writing is steeped in politics, which is in his blood. (He recalls babysitting his cousin, the late Massachusetts senator Paul Tsongas). One of his collections from 2004 is titled, *The Candidates: A Political Handbook or The Bumbling Dwarfs in Pursuit of the Presidential Fruitcake*. He says that he votes "giraffe" because the donkeys and the elephants don't have what it takes in the 21st century.

Tsongas doesn't know how many poems he's published, and he doesn't much care. To him, poetry is about "envisioning a future that goes beyond annihilation" and his job as a poet is to "describe reality beyond sight." It all comes down to sharing ideas. "People exist to exchange information, not to assume that they always have the answer," he says. "I don't need to slap the table."

Editor's note: You can find George's poems in the September issue of the Beat journal *Beatitude*, or hear him read at North Beach's Live Worms Gallery (1345 Grant Avenue, 415-307-1222) in mid-October. His book, *Wild Broccoli*, the first of a trilogy he completed in 1985, will also be in bookstores this fall.

—Amelia Glynn is a freelance writer and editor whose work has appeared in *Dwell*, *Hemispheres* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*.