Russell Atkins

on the life and work
of an american master

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An Introduction

Just a little bit past Chester Avenue, right before Stokes Boulevard intersects with Euclid Avenue, is Fenway Manor. It had once been a grand building, rising thirteen red brick and sandstone stories over Case Western Reserve University on one side and the Cleveland Clinic on the other. Today it provides subsidized apartments for "senior and disabled living" run by a group called ABC Management. Across the street is an empty park: a cluster of trees, patchy grass, no benches. The wide streets around it are chaotic with traffic.

The sign below the red awning says "Private Property" in large, black letters and the door opens onto a white hallway, a couple soda machines, a closed business office, three restrooms, all locked up tight. To the right is another door and another room, this one suggesting something of the building's turn-of-the-century grandeur, a richly carpeted floor, a grand chandelier, little clusters of well-used furniture before each large, arched window. Sometimes, an old man dozed in one of the armchairs. More often, the room is empty.

On the eleventh floor of Fenway Manor, overlooking the Cleveland Children's Museum, is Russell Atkins' apartment. These days, he spends most of his time in an unadorned living room, where he's got a sofa, a twin bed of the kind designed for hospitals, a walker, a wheelchair in the corner and a flat screen TV that chatters on in the background. He hasn't many possessions on display—a few books, a couple black and white family photographs. The most treasured of his items he keeps in six or seven tattered cardboard boxes, some stacked in the closet, others placed at the foot of his bed.

Mr. Atkins is nearing ninety. He can't walk easily anymore and is sometimes attended to by a young, businesslike, very quiet nurse. He is thin and small, with a swirl of fluffy, uncombed gray hair. He has a slightly high-pitched, gentle voice, a voice that strains a bit to be heard. Visitors surprise him and he seems a little perplexed and astonished that several American poets think highly of his work. When he learned about the volume you are holding in your hands, he said, "Why, who would want to read about me?"

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Russell Atkins was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1926 and raised by his mother, his grandmother, and his Aunt Mae, whom he affectionately calls A'Mae, and whose portrait still sits on the table beside his bed. His father deserted the family and was, Atkins writes, "never seen by me." (In one conversations, Russell Atkins referred to him as "a maniac.") In a short autobiographical sketch, Atkins, who is African-American, describes his early days growing up on 76th Street: "a room kept with the shades down to protect my eyes when I was sick with diphtheria; a toy automobile which I pedaled violently up and down the sidewalk in front of our house." Atkins' aunt was a dressmaker and his

mother earned a living doing housework for wealthy families in Cleveland, some of whom, Atkins recalls, gave him gifts of expensive clothing and toys.

Although his mother and aunt seem to have been dependable parents for the young boy, his grandmother, who thought of herself as a "light-skinned lady," was far less stable, increasingly becoming obsessed with the presence of a ghost (a "hant," she called it) bent upon darkening her complexion or, as Atkins describes it, "making her black." This hant, Atkins recalls, would also extend its malevolence to him, darkening his skin as well. "I remember her constant murmuring to herself all day (talking with the 'hant') and then, suddenly, leaping up and demanding that it leave the house and be quick about it! She turned race into such a ghost story of goblins and devils and religious quotations that it was impossible to take her seriously." This, Atkins says, reached a head when the delusional woman kidnapped him, the two of them hiding out in a set of dilapidated rented rooms until the police rescued him. "It was clear," Atkins recalls, "…that the 'little light-skinned lady' could not be trusted to take care of me." (Later, the old woman became obsessed with religion, and, after preaching and ranting in storefront churches, would disappear, Atkins says, for months.)

However, his mother and A'Mae seem to have created in Atkins a love of music and the arts. "They didn't necessarily encourage me to *write*," he told Kevin Prufer during one of their conversations in his apartment, "but they encouraged me to have a kind of freedom." He recalled that the household was full of music. His mother, who preferred classical, played the piano, and even bought a player-piano. Atkins remembers being fascinated by her sheet music, taking it out of the piano bench and spreading it on the floor, looking at the rows of little black dots. His A'Mae, like his mother a Southerner, was fond of blues, spirituals, gospel

and would play those records on the phonograph. Meanwhile, Atkins picked out tunes on the piano or sought out jazz records, music his mother had no time for and distrusted, generally, as "naughty."

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In 2007, Michael Dumanis moved to Cleveland to become the Director of the Cleveland State University Poetry Center, a literary press. There, he first encountered Atkins' work in the form of the collection *Here in The,* published in the Poetry Center's early years. The book was strikingly different in content and style from many of the Poetry Center's publications of the time, which tended toward narrative and first-person meditative lyric. Atkins' poems were formally experimental, elliptical in their phrasings, audibly influenced by jazz and in dialogue with a wide range of modernist and postmodern poets, alternately bringing to mind Marianne Moore, Langston Hughes, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Hayden, Michael Harper, Frank O'Hara, and d. a. levy, though to be truthful he didn't really sound like anybody else. This was a poet interested in music and silence, favoring the fragmentary and disjunctive over the linear or finished, capturing distinctive diction and the mood of an instant.

At the time, there were fewer than twenty copies of Atkins' book left in the Poetry Center's offices (now, only archival copies remain). Michael thought it would be interesting to bring Atkins back to Cleveland State University's campus more than thirty years after the book's publication, but found out that Atkins was in poor health and not interested in making public appearances. He called him on the phone and arranged a meeting. At the time, Atkins was still living in a small, freestanding house at 6005 Grand Avenue, filled with shoeboxes and crates of manuscripts and

correspondence. When Michael asked Russell if he had copies of all of his poems, Russell replied, "Yes. They're all over this house. You'll have to find them."

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The third time Kevin Prufer visited Russell Arkins—in 2012—he asked if he'd haul down a couple of his cardboard boxes.

"They're very heavy," he said as Kevin dragged one from the top of the stack and set it on the carpet in front of his couch. Then another. He wondered if they'd been opened since Russell had moved into Fenway Manor a few years before. Russell certainly couldn't have budged them by himself.

"Here," he said, "is a concerto," paging through a brittle, handwritten stack of sheet music. And here was one of his many "Spyrytuals." Then came the music that accompanies his verse-play *The Abortionist*, then another thick selection of his compositions for piano. Page after brittle page, hundreds of pages of intricate, neatly written music.

And then drafts of poems, poems folded into poems. "Could you put the poems in one pile and the music in another," Mr. Atkins asked, and soon both piles were large, the first box nearly empty.

And from among the folded up drafts of poems fell a series of letters to Russell Atkins from Langston Hughes, perhaps a dozen written over many years, some quite lengthy. They were filled with news of Mr. Hughes' travels to Florida and California, to Berlin and Yaddo. Sometimes Hughes asks after a poem or two. Other times he offers suggestions for possible publishers.

A little pile of neatly typed letters from Marianne Moore is next. These offer Atkins bits of advice ("Practical, somewhat inexpensive paper is the kind to use, I feel, rather

than foppishly elegant keepsake rag and silk varieties") or criticism (of a draft of "Elegy on a Hurt Bird," she rather archly writes, "This shows what you can do. The motion and mood are secure—eloquent. Only the words detract.") Still other letters are more introspective. "One must not laugh at one's self, i.e. deprecate or ruin a hypothetical excellence by being tongue-in-cheek," she instructs him. "Few agree with me about this, clowning is the mode; but I am sure of what I feel—for myself. And I am in revolt against profanity and its false emphases … and I think I infer that you share my austerities."

A group of letters from Clarence Major are generally more succinct and direct. "You are," Major asserts, "one of the best poets I know."

"Do we have a stack for the letters?" Russell asks, and soon that stack is thick, too.

In the second box, there are more letters, more handwritten music. Old issues of *Free Lance*, of *Experiment*, of *Beloit Poetry Journal*. A photo of the poet as a smiling baby boy, another of his Aunt. One of a very pretty African-American woman; Mr. Atkins says with a smile, "Oh, her? She was a magician friend of mine." And nothing more.

After two hours, these two boxes are organized and Russell is tired. Sometimes, he can't quite hold onto the papers and they slide from the couch to the floor. Sometimes, he needs a little help getting the rubber bands around the stacks of letters. After a while, he asks if Kevin would repack the boxes and place them at the foot of his bed.

When Kevin rises to leave, there are still five or six unexplored boxes in the closet.

"I'm sorry I can't walk you to the door," Russell says.

———

As a young man, Russell Atkins had already benefited from not only his family's artistic interests, but those of several good teachers in the Cleveland public school system—teachers who took him to the art museum, who taught him something of the craft of puppetry ("I fell wildly into puppet making," Atkins writes), painting, composition. He memorized poems and took to reciting passages from Shelley, Bryant, Shakespeare—but never, he recalls, Byron. Byron was frowned on by teachers though, he told Kevin during one of their interviews, "I liked to imagine I *was* Byron." A moody child, he would often burst into tears for no clear reason, confounding his teachers and family. He writes of being stunned by the film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, of running around town seeing it over and over again, obsessively reciting from it, drawing pictures of it, going from classroom to classroom performing scenes for other children, "using all the voices," he writes. "I was Doc, Sneezy, Grumpy, and so on, including the Wicked Queen." He resolved to practice the arts, to study poetry and composition for the rest of his life.

But Atkins' high school years would prove tumultuous. He loved his music classes, loved the fact that the choir teacher was so powerful he could pull students out of other classes in order to practice their singing. He says, "In school, the teachers thought I had promise, that I was talented … whatever they meant by that."

Generally, however, Atkins refused to do required coursework and bridled at the restraints imposed upon him by many teachers. He was, he recalls, "a selfish child. A terrible person, at least by most people's opinions." At the same time, he was quickly moved by new, challenging poetry, having discovered Pound, Eliot, and Moore in Louis Untermeyer's seminal anthology *British and American Poetry*. He grew fascinated by the modern, dissonant composers, the avant-garde, Wagner, the works of surrealist photogra-

phers, Picasso's *Guernica* (which he saw at the Cleveland Museum of Art). Of his troubles at school, he writes, "I was never able to explain to people that *I* was in charge of myself and listened only to *me*. This caused me to be thought of as someone without gratitude for 'opportunities' which I had not had a chance to examine."

Even after high school, Atkins could not settle down. Unable to hold a job for long ("I could never again do anything like that! Hours away from my thoughts, art, self-fulfillment," he complained at the time), Atkins took courses at the Cleveland Institute of Music, hung about with other intellectuals, practiced his piano. "During this interim," he writes, "I couldn't quite decide on a focus for artistic practice … Finally I concluded that I would emphasize sound in my poems and … I would 'sketch' music to hold it in thought until I could notate it. Also, having become avant-garde (by others' definition), what was to prevent me from writing these poems as shapes? Thus, the dichotomy was put in my mind in which I would 'compose' like a painter and write poems like a composer."

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Cleveland seemed a provincial, remote place for an up-and-coming avant-garde poet and composer, one who increasingly saw his poems published in highly regarded journals across the country. Although Russell Atkins rarely left the city, he felt increasingly isolated from the hotbeds of literary and musical creation, places like New York and Boston. He found salvation, though, in *Free Lance, a Magazine of Poetry and Prose*, which he launched in 1950 (modeled on the earlier avant-garde literary magazine *Experiment*) and co-edited with his longtime friend Adelaide Simon. Two decades later, *Free Lance*, still under his editorship, would be described by *Black World* magazine as "the only Black liter-

ary magazine of national importance in existence." Through *Free Lance*, Atkins corresponded with writers from across the country, including LeRoi Jones (the future Amiri Baraka), his early supporter Langston Hughes, and Conrad Kent Meyers, whose first work appeared in the magazine. And Atkins himself would publish much of his most challenging work in its pages, including his verse drama *The Abortionist* ("It cost us some subscriptions") and his ongoing meditations on *pyschovisualism*.

The publication of his essay on his theory of psychovisualism, Atkins would later assert, made *Free Lance* seem like "the ultimate in avant-garde incomprehensibility," though it attracted the curiosity and admiration of a number of musical types, among them Stefan Wolpe and Geoffrey Sharp, the editor of *Music Review*. Psychovisualism grew out a disagreement with his friend Hale Smith, a jazz arranger then studying musical composition at the Cleveland Institute of Music. Atkins would assert that musical composition was essentially *visual*, the mind comprehending music through image, creating image-based compositions to which sound was applied. Smith would assert the opposite, that composition was not an extension of visual thought. "Can serious composers honestly compose FOR such an organ as the ear?" Atkins would ask. Or, later, he'd write of so-called 'musical' composition: "We see comprehension machinery at work by which the tones attach themselves, although we fail to notice much of it because of the force of sound stimuli. Composing is a *deconstruction* method that is fixed for the 'mind's eye.'"

It was during this period, the 1950s and early 1960s, that Atkins began seeing himself as a poet whose work was filtered through his highly individual sense of the deep visual ground beneath what we call music, the idea that the word "music" is itself "basically meaningless." He would rarely leave Cleveland, but continued living with his various older

female relatives, his Aunt Mae, his increasingly neurotic mother (he describes her obsessive cleanliness, her abruptly painting everything in the house white), his grandmother, who would be obsessed with her *hants* until she died. He still refused to take on a full-time job because that would get in the way of his need to create new things, to think and read and write music that might "get rid of melody—that lingering concept of a single line of tones." He worked briefly as an office manager at a small music school, but quit when the job appeared to become full-time, spending his hours in the Cleveland Public Library's Philosophy and Religion Division, reading voraciously, seeking out friends who could help him translate German texts that piqued his interest. He had to decline an offer to attend the Bread Loaf Writers Conference when he realized that what little money he had would have to go to his grandmother's funeral expenses.

Ultimately, Atkins' strange concrete poetry, his flights of audio-visual intensity, his idiosyncratic word-play would bring him some measurable success, a little withering criticism, and, generally, increasing obscurity. From the beginning, Langston Hughes, Clarence Major and Marianne Moore (among others) took real interest in his work and career, performing his poetry on the radio, teaching it now and then, offering, over many years, sound advice. *Western Review, Botteghe Oscure*, and other impressive literary magazines published his poems and verse dramas, though equally impressive book publishers seemed unattainable. And Atkins himself seems as amused by his rejections as he is pleased with his small acclaim. (When *Accent* magazine rejected his poem "Four of a Fall" with the complaint that its "restless, perpetual ingenuity acts to overwhelm rather than reveal," Atkins proclaimed, "My 'conspicuous technique' approach was working!") And as the era of the Beatniks and the Black Arts Movement helped to define the

work of Atkins' contemporaries, Atkins himself, unwilling to bend to the style of the day—and seeming a little hostile to the Black Arts Movement's single-mindedness—fell increasingly by the wayside, ever more out of step. When asked about his relationship to it, he brings up the poet LeRoi Jones. He says he didn't resent the attention that Jones got for his work, but he took notice of it, and he recognized that his lack of interest in it undercut his ability to publish widely. "I was more interested in technique," he says. "People said 'racial problems are more important than technique,' but I couldn't agree. They were interested in conveying a message; I was not."

In one of the occasional reviews of his poetry, *Negro World* magazine noted in 1969 that Atkins' *Heretofore*

> … is an unusual book of poetry in that if Brother Atkins' picture were not on the cover, one would have a difficult time knowing he is a black poet. The evidence is not in the poetry—not in his use of the language; nor in his use of the so-called "vernacular" (the swearing, when it appears, is white intonated); nor in the rhythms he uses (the iambs and other footage metres range from Shakespearean to Eliotian with some Keats thrown in for good (?) measure…the two poems which are black-related, "Christophe," about the Haitian brother, and "Narrative," about John Brown, are both written as if by a Victorian era observer, and not a blkman dealing with his history as he should be about doing (blkartists are responsible to the blkcommunity).

A mere four years later, Leatrice W. Emeruwa would disagree in the pages of *Black World* magazine, complaining of Atkins' increasing obscurity, comparing his gift to Robert Hayden's, and asserting that we should not expect him to

restrict his work to "racial rhetoric." "Clevelanders who remain in Cleveland," she suggested, "are usually omitted when it comes to national recognition in the arts" though she also noted that Atkins "has been to poetic, dramatic, and musical innovation and leadership what John Coltrane has been to jazz avant-gardism. His influence upon both Black and white artists has been tremendous for the past quarter century locally."

These assessments would, in some ways, echo advice Langston Hughes had given the poet in a letter twenty-five years earlier, when Atkins was in his early twenties: "It I were you, I would not worry about being a social poet. My feeling about poetry is that each poet should write as he chooses and not try to be something that he is not. Only if you think and feel socially should you try to write in that way."

In all, Russell Atkins would publish a handful of short poetry chapbooks, some from his own Free Lance Press, others from similarly small, often avant-garde leaning publishers, most notably Paul Bremen Books in London. His verse dramas (often accompanied by the directive "to be set to music") would appear in similarly small, saddle-stapled, "homemade" editions. His only "full-length" poetry collection, *Here in The*, would be published by the Cleveland State University Poetry Center and Cleveland State University would also offer him an honorary doctorate, citing Atkins as "an example to aspiring writers, a promoter of racial understanding through the arts, a lifelong Cleveland resident…."

He would go on living in his Aunt's house for sixty-two years in all, moving to Fenway Manor in 2010 when the house was seized and demolished to make room for Cleveland's growing industry.

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One of the great pleasures of editing a book like this is discovering, along the way, that a writer we once considered obscure has, in fact, many ardent admirers who bring to his work a wealth of sensibilities and fine intelligence. Five of these have contributed essays directly to this book—Alden Lynn Nielsen, Tom Orange, Evie Shockley, Sean Singer, and Tyrone Williams. Many others offered support and encouragement in other ways.

Every year that Michael represented the Cleveland State University Poetry Center at conferences and book fairs, someone would walk up to him and ask, "Hey didn't you guys once publish that book by Russell Atkins?" Despite the book now being over thirty-five years old and completely out of print, it continues to attract critical attention. Poet and critic Joshua Ware, a lecturer at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, just this month enthusiastically reviewed *Here in The* for a literary blog, asserting:

> Atkins addresses the decay of a once great city and foretells the Rust Belt's continual decline as a result of the difficult economic effects of moving our country's manufacturing and industrial jobs overseas. Everywhere through *Here In The*, the poet surveys the city, its residents, and surroundings, noting how even traditionally beatific images, such as a sunset, can transform into something less gorgeous in the crumbling urban cityscapes…. [Atkins] creates a singular Cleveland-based beauty in his language and the sounds it produces.

To spur further interest in Russell's poetry, Michael began to give copies away to poets and editors he thought may be particularly interested in reviving the work. This is how *Here in The* first made it into Kevin's hands and how they began to contemplate a Russell Atkins volume for the

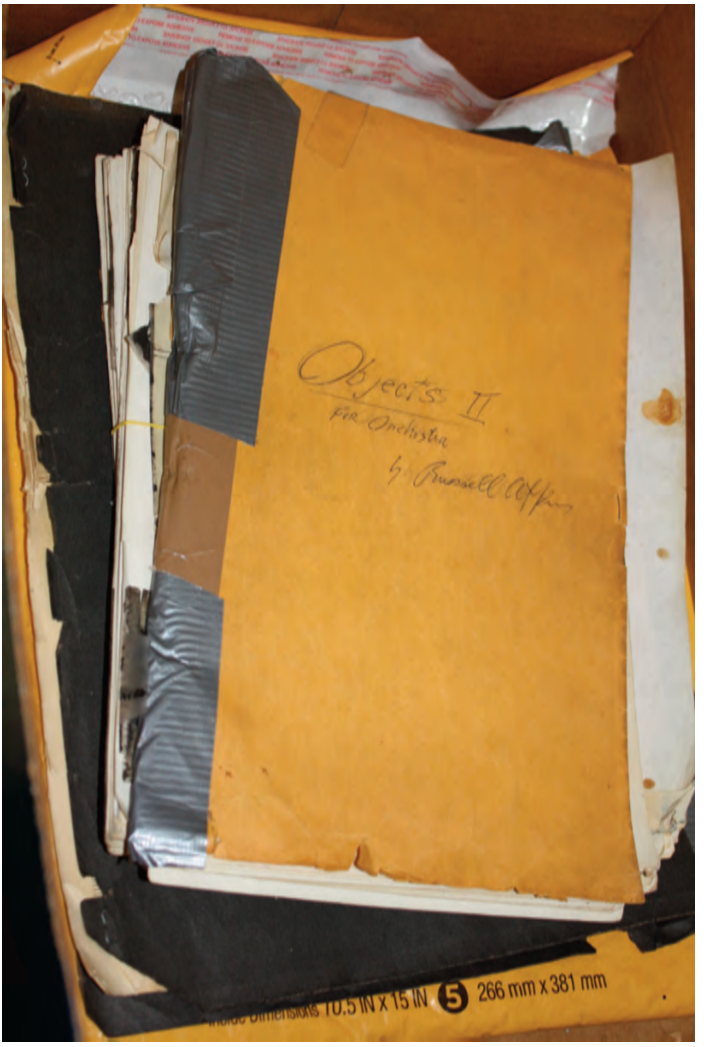
Unsung Masters Series. As news of this volume has spread, both editors have received quite a few notes to the effect that *finally* a book would appear that might bring more attention to this brilliant, idiosyncratic, highly original writer, musician, and thinker.

At the same time, it pains us to think that so much of Russell Atkins' material—hundreds of pages of handwritten musical compositions, drafts of poems, letters, photographs—are piled in dilapidated boxes and stacked in a closet in a subsidized apartment where even Mr. Atkins himself is unable to access them. (They are heavy and he is too frail to move them.) We feel privileged to have been allowed by Russell to examine his manuscripts in such detail, to share with readers some of his recollections and theories and concerns—and we are saddened by the realization that Russell Atkins now seems to have no family and only limited contacts with former friends who might see to his papers' preservation. It would trouble the world of the arts if the uncollected work of this already marginalized poet and musician were lost to future generations.

Kevin Prufer & Michael Dumanis
Houston, Texas & Bennington, Vermont
May 2013

The background material for this Introductions comes primarily from Russell Atkins' entry in *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, the contents of his boxes, Joshua Ware's appreciation of Atkins on the blog vouchedbooks.com (dated May 6, 2013), and Kevin Prufer's interviews and conversations with him during 2012-2013.

A Folio of Poems
Russell Atkins



Looking into one of Russell Atkins' boxes of music, poems, letters, and ephemera, 2013

ABSTRACTIVE

I came upon that gate
that tracery'd gently into open

there lay the sum of the dearest
once belonging, the memoried
that scattered, then, compilingly
length',d into the poor pale

no place to bring one's birth
this hill they let run down
among them where the scant
droops to astray with dearth'd

the one and one,
a four, or ten even and seldom'd
wisp'd across listened into grass

there where only
as a grey amount
coming on with swerve
solemns afar whole family
again
my dear ones

from *Here in The* (1976)

AIR DISASTER

under
more of sky
appearanced
a crack quick'd
then roses of horror
whole dimension's plumb
swift flecks air

alarm plumes up stark'd
against all boards
abuzz fainting
of wives with children
mothers' mothers

there in a thunder
a too thick of aghasts of dust
over the field—
ambulances, fire's fire!!!
roundabout clang
and a siren flamingly
eeeeeeeeeeeee s

from *Here in The* (1976)

ANGLES

they are patient and hold grudges
somewhere far down old transit lines,
or crossings, where an oncoming diesel
dangerouses; involuntary looking streets,
mum of a dark window framework

the all directions of afraid
—compasses, measuring tape,
one angle in particular
from the head and shoulder
then feet-first straight
a few inches, openly small

—the time at which lines make a point

having closed in a matter
of minutes

from *Here in The* (1976)

CHANGING SEASON

Arrives as if to drive a hard bargain
around the first of November—
that in a plain dark suit the hair
greying in a flurry he fends off
complaints with cold authority,
willing to listen—but, he says,
the contracts have been drawn
—opens his briefcase,
hands out statistics to reporters
—things look bad,
like stocks falling, banks crashing,
he'll meet with all:
"I know," he says, "but that's
the way things are—"
he is angered,
his body tightens up in a breezy
overcoat he has other appointments
and much ground to cover:
a conveyance pulls up (a woman,
with vermilion hair, sits
in the back seat)

there's no getting around it:
he has the last word

from *Whichever* (1978)