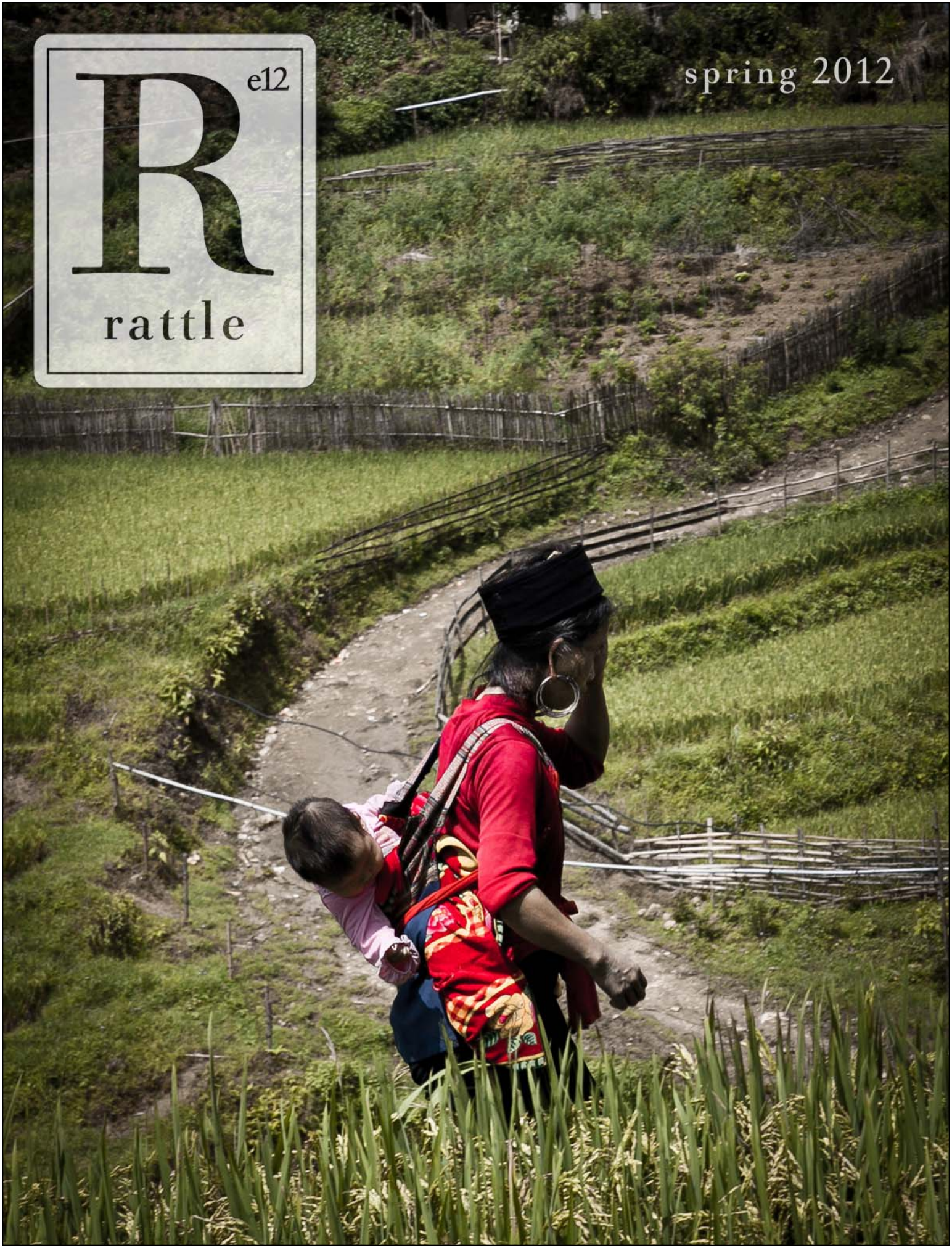
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 Print issues of *Rattle* are 4-color, perfect-bound, and include about 200 pages of poetry, essays, and interviews. Each issue also features a tribute section dedicated to an ethnic, vocational, or stylistic group. For more information, including submission guidelines, please visit www.rattle.com.

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The 2012 Neil Postman Award for Metaphor

In honor and remembrance of Neil Postman, who died on October 5th, 2003, we have established the Neil Postman Award for Metaphor. The intention of the award is simple and two-fold: To reward a given writer for his or her use of metaphor and to celebrate (and, hopefully, propagate) Postman's work and the typographical mind. Each year the editors will choose one poem from all of the submissions Rattle received during the previous year. There are no entry fees or submission guidelines involved. The author of the chosen poem receives $500.

Rattle is proud to announce the 2011 Neil Postman Award for Metaphor Winner, Danielle Spratley for her poem "Prayer for an Inmate of RVJDC."

Danielle Spratley

Prayer for an Inmate of RVJDC

God is probably a Belgian endive,
which is a vegetable I don't believe in.

A fist-sized, tender, lettuce-looking thing
that sprouts from chicory, under covering

of dust and darkness. If it's lopped from the root,
another grows and grows, until some rot

takes hold. That's the point, most likely,
when someone cleans and grinds the chicory

to make the coffee you're drinking, which looks
almost good—thick as ink on a handmade book—

but lots of things appear as what they're not.
Once you've snapped the endive's huddled

leaves from their whiskered base, there's no hiding
the kind of bitterness you've got.

Photography

by
Jarrett Blaustein

Jarrett Blaustein is a full-time doctoral research student at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. His research focuses on the sociology of policing and the relationship between police reform and liberal statebuilding initiatives in "transitional" and "developing" societies. His photography reflects his inquisitive approach to criminological research and his interest in the role that individuals and institutions play in actively interpreting and mediating the power structures that surround them. In 2011, Jarrett published a photo reportage examining social attitudes towards the prospect of EU accession in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia for CITSEE, an EU-funded research project <www.citsee.eu/content/are-we-there-yet>. In 2010, his photography was also featured in a publication by NHS Scotland on the accessibility of dental care for the homeless. Having recently completed his doctoral field work in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Jarrett currently resides in Scotland where he is writing up his thesis. His photography can be viewed on Flickr <www.flickr.com/photos/jbblaustein>.

His photography is also used as the cover and divider art for *Rattle* #37.

The 2011 Rattle Poetry Prize Winner

Hayden Saunier / photo by Abby Brooks

For the first time in 2011 the Rattle Poetry Prize winner was selected from 15 finalists by subscriber vote. To prevent ballot-stuffing, only those with subscriptions prior to the announcement of the finalists were eligible. Of roughly 3,000 possible voters, 680 cast ballots, and Saunier's poem earned 14.4%. Here is what some of those readers had to say about their choice:

In one sparse page, Hayden Saunier has let three nameless, wordless, ordinary people stir up in the rest of us a tart chaos of generosity, cheer, despair, shock, regret, and respect. I am deeply impressed by the skill with which she did that.
–Anne Ward Jamieson

I choose "The One and the Other" by Hayden Saunier because of its telling details, its form (in contrast to the awful, out-of-order scene the child finds), its use of sound, including the irregular rhymes, and the fact it is one sentence, cascading downward to that placement of the cake. This is a poem that stays with me.
–Mary Makofske

It was a difficult choice, but ultimately the images of the boy with his lemon-glazed cake and the woman hanging from her chandelier refuse to leave me alone. The (relentless) repetition of the phrase "too late" adds to the urgency/tragedy, and details like the boy 'on tiptoes, avoiding the cracks', are heartbreaking.
–Sudasi Clement

I vote for Hayden Saunier. What an ending! Wonderful that you guys have a prize like this.
–Chase Twichell

You know a poem is a winner when it makes you read and re-read it again and again and each time, you say 'wow'!
–Lynne Thompson

Hayden Saunier

The One and the Other

The child hums as he carries, too late,
his grandmother's sugar-dusted lemon-glazed cake

down the street to the neighbor who needs to be cheered,
too late for the neighbor

who's stepped into the air
of her silent front hall from a ladder-backed chair

her church dress just pressed, her head in a loop she tied
into the clothesline, too late

he unlatches the gate,
walks up the brick walk on his tiptoes, avoiding the cracks

toward the door she unlocked, left ajar, who knows why
or for whom, if on purpose

or not, but because he's too late
she's gone still when he reaches the door and because

he's too late, as he calls out and looks, brilliant sun
burns through haze

pours through sidelights and bevels
through chandelier prisms, strikes white sparks and purples

on ceiling and walls, on the overturned chair, on her stockings
her brown and white

spectator shoes on the floor
and because he's too late he remembers both terror and beauty

but not which came first. But enough of the one
that he ran

and enough of the other
to carefully lay down the cake at her feet.

Fan Mail for the Finalists

Though Hayden Saunier was the clear winner of the 2011 Rattle Poetry Prize, each of the 15 finalists had their own loyal fans who voted accordingly. We'd like to share what a few of them had to say. Read their poems now in Rattle *#36, or online at rattle.com this summer.*

Pia Aliperti
"Boiler"

"Boiler" is a distillation of "sweeping narrative," marrying past to present, present to past. Using Vincent's letters as a springboard, Aliperti skillfully links people and place together so seamlessly that her poetic devices are hardly noticed until the steps of the poem are retraced, time and again. Ms. Kee's "No, never," becomes everyone's as does the white-hot anger which clanks all night long like the boiler. Yellow figures appear as a foil, but even as such the speaker and her characters never reach that serene place where one's soul can finally rest. Parallels continue throughout this poem—from the sibling references to the unapologetic clamors of angst-—delighting and surprising the reader, all, while tracing the life-steps of Van Gogh and his timeless art. Few poems I know of blend more than one narrative successfully in such a curious and entertaining way. Pia Aliperti, you make me want to know about all these lives that inhabit this poem and to read the Van Gogh letters. Thanks for writing "Boiler"!

—Ginny Thompson

Kim Dower
"Why People Really Have Dogs"

"Why People Really Have Dogs" is a serious poem, a voice of someone on the brink of something. A voice of anger and isolation. And yet, able to play with her—I am presuming that Kim is female as is the speaker of the poem, but I have no certainty about that—dog as she gouges into the wounds of loneliness. This is a person I would like to know. She is deeply wounded. But at the same time can see the ridiculousness of her interactions with her dog. The seriousness lies in the plea for a voice. Why does she have to imagine conversations with her dog? Why can't she have conversations with her friends or family? Who knows. It doesn't matter. She can't. But she knows she wants out. Out of whatever bondage, self or other imposed, that makes her feel un-voiced. I'm picking this one because it creates a world for that is compellingly authentic with a spirit that is courageous.

—Robert Weston

M
"To a Husband, Saved by Death at 48"

It is minutely and accurately observed. I think the clipped diction suits the subject matter. It is grounded in very specific, local details giving it the feel of complete veracity. It sets you up with a little dose of humor, right before demolishing you utterly, with the last line—which reminds you that in many ways, or one very big way, when you are in love, it is a kindness if the gods take you *first*.

—Michael Ferris

Andrew Nurkin
"The Noises Poetry Makes"

Nurkin gives us a detailed account of a sandwich that is so rich in his memory he cancels out the rest of the relationships in his family, also excluding the woman whose reading her poem about her father. We go along with his story as he personifies this sandwich, brings it out into the world through his repetition and imagery so that we become the sympathetic tasters of his story, and live in its "lightly toasted sourdough" for a few minutes. His rhythm provokes a certain cadence and wit that adds to its humor. We hear everything except for the poet reading her work.

—CR Bolinski

Tony Barnstone
"Why I Am Not a Carpenter"

While several of the finalists touch me, Barnstone's poem reaches out to wonder and brings it home. I'm usually suspicious of poems about poetry, but this one goes so far beyond poetry as a subject, and so beautifully, that I'm captivated. The poem is many-layered; it is musical; it connects ancient times and contemporary life; most of all, in the end, it's a very moving piece about big issues: creativity, daily life, its passing, and its beauty as it passes. A terrific poem.

—David Cavanagh

Courtney Kampa
"Self-Portrait by Someone Else"

As hard as it was to decide on a poem to vote for (and it really was!), this is my favorite. It's simply beautiful. The imagery. The descriptions. The poem is written so tightly, while telling a humorous and fun story. It's like the author stuffed as much description into a stretched rubber band and eventually tied the tightest knot with it. It doesn't break. Loved it!

—Jeremy Wisniewski

Charlotte Pence
"Perfectly Whatever"

I am immediately drawn to the energy and confidence of the speaker's voice. The tone is perfect, the pacing masterful. The poem is an awakening, a revelation, with surprising language, knowledge, and humor; the reader can't helped but get pulled along, or perhaps more accurately one should say opened up. It is "world expanding," and quirky to boot.

—Michael Schmeltzer

Laura Read
"What the Body Does"

Unlike other poems that seem reticent to give up what is invested in their words, Read's poem seems gentle, understanding, and overwhelmingly human. The imagery is potent but not overwhelming, and the poem is crafted well. More important than craft, though, is the story here. The portraits Read draws of her characters feel fair and, well, humanizing. "What the Body Does" is a poem filled with unwavering empathy, while still locating a border where that empathy ends.

—Brandon Amico

Craig van Rooyen
"The Minstrel Cycle"

This poem does not call attention to itself as a poem, does not mention poem, poet or poetry (thank God), is conversational, humorous, poignant, sad, ironic, tender, scary, lyrical and real. It is, in short, all that a poem should be and seldom is, these days.

—Laurie Clemens

Bryan Walpert
"Objective Correlative"

Despite a strong group of poems this year, "Objective Correlative" stood out for me immediately. The reflective, circular quality of a poem describing its own creation was attention grabbing, but could have quickly turned gimmicky. Not in this poem. This poem is more like the infinite reflections created by parallel mirrors where there is no end to how much deeper you can look—each reading takes you further in.

—Anthony Princing

Diane Seuss
"What Is at the Heart of It…"

The eloquent, elegant, fiery train of thought never derails, and the thematic transitions are seamless—but saying this sort of thing can't come close to saying how this poem achieves its power, or how deeply I've been impacted by it. I am delighted to discover this poet, and am ecstatic to find more of her work online. Her mind works in magical ways that prose writers as well as poets would do well to study.

—Gaby LeMay

Jeff Vande Zande
"The Don'ts (An Incomplete List)"

Why? It is witty, sharp, yet the ending is so genuinely touching. For three-quarters of the poem, you feel the narrator is aloof in his authoritative jabs about the quirks of the world, but the conclusion says something very different: the narrator does in fact care about you and how you're affected by this contradicting world.

—Molly Jansen

Anna Lowe Weber
"Spring Break 2011"

I like the way this reaches for an ambitious theme, but still lives in its own skin. It comes alive with its own life.

—Art Beck

Maya Jewell Zeller
"Honesty"

The topic seized, and held, my attention. There were no excessive words or drifting-off-topic phrases. The subject is both unique and accessible.

—Peg Quinn

Rice Paddies
Jarrett Blaustein

Debriefing the Reader Vote

by
Timothy Green

If the 2011 Rattle Poetry Prize competition was an experiment in poetic democracy, it was a rigged experiment. Do the readers of a literary magazine have the ability to decide for themselves which of the poems in a selection they enjoyed the most? Would they bother to vote? From the start we knew the answer to both questions would clearly be, "Yes." We all read literature because we all love literature—and that love makes us all worthy and impassioned judges.

The far more interesting aspect of this experience, as editors, was that rare opportunity to receive a high volume of both qualitative and quantitative feedback. How many of our subscribers read each issue closely and quickly? Would our favorite poem be the majority's favorite? Would there even *be* a majority favorite, or are opinions too subjective? It allowed us to explore more nuanced questions, as well—for example, does the order in which the poems appear effect how strongly a reader will respond to them? Would a well-known poet receive a boost through name-recognition alone?

Of course, this wasn't a controlled experiment—no placebos or double-blinds—so the results are mostly speculative, but what follows is a summary of what we might have learned.

Out of some 3,000 subscribers, exactly 680 took the time to vote—it's no small task to read 15 poems very closely, over the holidays, and then remember to send in a ballot, so I was pleased with that number. Anyone who goes through an effort like that is more than just a reader—they're *dedicated* readers, and we're thankful for that.

About half of our subscriptions come through the contest, and an impressive number of poets were able to swallow their pride and select one of the poems that edged their own work out. Going in, I expected to receive a good number of sour grapes "no votes," along with comments that their own poems were the only ones worth a prize—but there were only two in the entire ballot box that were bitter enough to voice it. Poets, on the whole, are gracious, discerning, and genuinely care about poetry. Who would have thought?

As for the winning poem, however, our readers were very divided. Hayden Saunier's "The One and the Other" was the clear winner, enough so that I knew about halfway through counting ballots that she would probably end up on top—but she only received 14.4% of the votes: 98 total, 17 more than the runner-up. Even the "last place" poem (and I put that in quotes because here "last place" is really 15th out of 6,000) received 31 votes. In other words 1 in 23 would have voted for any of the 15 poems—that's a massive standard deviation, and about as close to a split decision as I could imagine. Each poem had a roomful of ardent supporters; each had readers that were *sure* their choice would win, some of them saying they couldn't conceive of any other poem winning. Read the blurbs for each poem—these are real fans.

The lesson: Our personal response to any given poem is entirely subjective. Or maybe all of the finalists were just *that good*. It would have been nice if we could have included a "control poem," written by a computer program or cribbed from a real W.C.W. shopping list. Maybe next year…

While the reader response to the group of poems as a whole was overwhelmingly positive, there was one consistent criticism that desperately needs to be addressed. Dozens of readers complained that the styles of the finalist poems were too similar. Howard Price is a former Rattle Poetry Prize finalist, and we love his work, so we'll pick on him. He said, "The Lyric poem is askance at *Rattle*, at least in the contest mode." Others complained that meter and rhyme were almost entirely missing. On her blog, Writer's Island, Amy Miller described the selection this way:

> [The editors] favor long poems—only 5 of the finalists fit on one page, and there were several three-pagers. They also seem to like stream-of-conscious poems, ones that take the reader down unexpected alleys in long, convoluted, sometimes poem-length sentences. Narrative story-telling and complete sentences are the order of the day; few if any poems featured sentence fragments. Only one poem played inventively with white space; all the others were one long stanza, a few long stanzas, or consistent couplets, tercets, or quatrains.
>
> <www.writers-island.blogspot.com>

What Miller and Price and so many others noticed is, of course, entirely true—all of our 2011 finalists (I wouldn't even qualify it with a "most") fit into the same general aesthetic camp. Medium-to-long, narrative, free verse, and an emotion-driven subject matter. No sonnets. No short lyrics. No abstract Language School experimentation.

The false assumption, though, is that the finalists ended up having so much in common *by design*. As first judges for the contest—and as editors of a magazine in general that only publishes from the "slush pile"—we're always at the mercy of the work we receive. We always see our task as being to select the most interesting and engaging representative sample of what's been sent to us.

If not 1 in 15 finalists is a formal

poem, it's only because not 1 in 15 of the poems entered was formal. Without taking a survey of the entries, I would have to guess that only 1 in 50 featured meter or rhyme, with a similar rate for lyrics and other styles. The vast majority of poems submitted for the contest have always been longer narrative poems—so the winners always tend to be longer narrative poems. It wouldn't be fair to pick a lesser poem simply because it's the best example of pentameter in the batch—we have to choose what resonates.

It's worth noting that, as Howard Price implies, this imbalance is a symptom of "contest mode." I think what happens is that those who enter the contest, somewhere in the back of their minds (or maybe right out front), assume that for a poem to be worthy of $5,000, it *has to be* on the longer side of the spectrum. When Aram Saroyan received $500 from the NEA for his poem "lighght" in 1970, outrage made the mainstream for the simple reason that the poem was so short. "$500 per word? And it's not even spelled right!" It's only natural to assume that more length equals more work equals more worth.

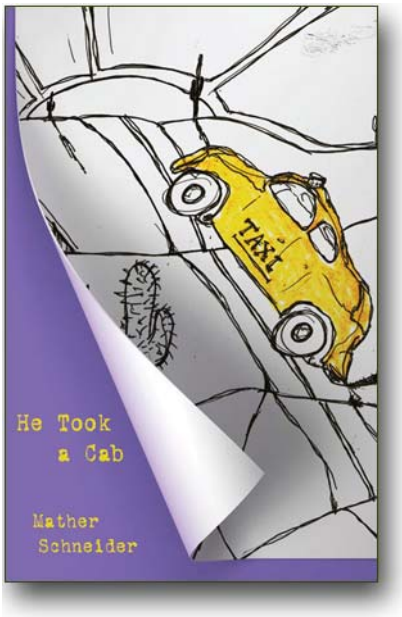
But that doesn't mean it's true.

If the editors of *Rattle* had to get together and decide on a consensus favorite style of poem—and fortunately we don't!—it might just be the short lyric. At least this week. We *do* like meter and rhyme. We *do* like linguistic playfulness. We even like meta-poetic experimentation, when it's interesting (see Jeanann Verlee's "Wherein the Author Provides…" in issue #36). We even like sing-songy folk ballads, when they're interesting (see Al "Doc" Mehl's "Graduation" in issue #33). But for those poems to win a Rattle Poetry Prize, you need to submit them for the Rattle Poetry Prize! Next year, please do.

Otherwise it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: You suspect that longer poems have a better chance of winning, so you send longer poems, so we choose longer poems, so you see that longer poems *are* in fact winning, and your original suspicions are confirmed. Let's break the cycle. For years, *Rattle*'s regular poetry guidelines have said, "If you notice a style or subject matter that we don't seem to be publishing, send us that!" Well, it's true for the contest, too.

For all of the excitement of a reader vote, one of the things that I didn't anticipate was what a drag the lag would be. Six months is too long to make the finalists wait, and nothing beats the excitement of September 15th, when the winner might be anyone. So for this year's Rattle Poetry Prize, the editors will resume selecting the winner and finalists right away. But the subscriber and entrant vote was too much fun and far too insightful to give up, so we're going hybrid and adding a new Reader's Choice Award. See page 37 of this e-issue for details.

Showers
Jarrett Blaustein



He Took a Cab

by

Mather Schneider

The New York Quarterly
PO Box 2015
Old Chelsea Station
New York, NY 10113
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116 pp., $14.95, Paper

www.nyqbooks.org

Mather Schneider was born in 1970 in Peoria Illinois. He has since lived in Arkansas, Washington State and currently Tucson, Arizona, where he drives a cab. He has published hundreds of poems and stories in the small press since 1994. *He Took a Cab* is Schneider's second book-length collection. His first, *Drought Resistant Strain,* was published by Interior Noise Press.

From the Publisher

Mather Schneider's second full-length collection of poems, *He Took a Cab*, takes the reader on an unforgettable ride of a lifetime. With each poem, Schneider propels the reader into a mindset of having just hailed a cab in a David Lynch movie—one where seemingly simple stories resonate deeper and deeper within the reader every time the book is read. Schneider's voice is in control, honest, and in your face while reserving an underlying concern and caring for both humanity and language. Schneider is clearly in the driver's seat, but you are safe in his backseat. Reading *He Took a Cab*, you have the feeling that you will get where you are going—one way or another. Sit back and relax.

Praise for *He Took a Cab*

"Mather Schneider, thankfully, is not a poet's poet. Instead, he's a poet for everyone. His poetry seems simple, almost stripped, but it contains the only kind of music that matters—the one that lingers and resonates long after you've heard it. In *He Took a Cab*, Mather Schneider drives us around the hard realities of Tucson and life. It's well worth the fare. This cabby always knows where he's going and the best way to take you where you need to be.

—James Valvis, author of *How to Say Goodbye*

"Mather Schneider is not only a sage and accurate observer of the way we live, he's also a first-rate heart in a flinty body; a poet that isn't afraid to engage life on whatever level he finds it, revealing things we don't even know about ourselves in words and poems clear enough and cold enough to shock us anew. This fine book of poetry deserves and rewards repeat reading. Put it next to a faker's books and see how it shines in comparison.

—Rusty Barnes, author of *Redneck Poems*

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Note: One book feature appears in each eIssue, every fall and spring, including an interview with the author and sample poems. If you'd like your book to be considered for a feature, send a copy to: Rattle, 12411 Ventura Blvd, Studio City, CA 91604. All books not selected for a feature will be considered for a traditional review.

All poems are reprinted with permission of the author. They first appeared in the following journals: "He Took a Cab" in Silt Reader, *"Cock Boy" in* Chiron Review, *"After Taking a Wrong Turn" in* American Dissident, *"Shannon's Oasis" in* Camel Saloon, *and "1325 N. Lana Hills" in* Chiron Review. *"Susy Q Ranch" was first published in the book.*

Book Interview with Mather Schneider

by
Timothy Green

Note: The following interview was conducted by email during February of 2012.

Green: One of the fundamentals behind *Rattle* is the idea that no one needs a degree in literature to enjoy reading poetry, or even to become a great poet—that's why we have tributes dedicated to various professions, as proof that real poets live all sorts of lives both inside and outside academia. No one is a better example of this, in my opinion, than you, writing some of the most engaging poetry I've found, while driving a cab for a living. How did you come to be a taxi driver? And then, how did you come to be a poet?

Schneider: Well, I was a poet long before I was a cab driver, but I'll answer your questions in the order you asked them. I of course have my own long list of crappy jobs. I was working at a collection agency here in Tucson and I hated it, finally quit. One day I decided to inquire about cab driving in Tucson, because I had done it in Bellingham, Washington, years before and really liked it. So, I called the closest one to my apartment, the only one within walking distance because I didn't have a car, and walked over. The crabby owner was in her little office and hired me, of course, because they hire everybody. I worked the first day, the customary 12 hour shift, and I think I made 50 bucks. Soon I got the hang of it and made a little more money, and just kept at it. There were times when I only made 8 bucks for a 12 hour shift, and there were other days when I brought home 300 bucks. It's a lot like gambling. That was seven years ago. Now I work for a medical transport company, so I only pick up people and take them to the doctor and back home, and I make an hourly wage, so no street hacking anymore for me. At least for now.

As for becoming a poet, I have been writing poetry since I was twelve years old, as pretentious as that sounds. I used to copy the forms of Robert Frost, then Thomas Hardy and others. I began to write stories and tried to write several novels over the years. Even though I read Cummings and William Carlos Williams and those guys, I never really thought about writing formless poetry until I read Bukowski when I was around 20, 22 years ago—and that was it. Since then I have been struggling to maintain the energy and fire I found in Bukowski while trying to escape his influence in order to find my own voice and style. I'm still working on it.

Green: Do you think driving a cab is a good job for a writer to have? Maybe I'm just romanticizing it, but you mention in the book that there's a lot of down time, and you meet (or invent) so many interesting characters. I'm imagining you with your own *Spoon River Anthology* in the backseat, daydreaming in traffic, writing poems in a notebook between fares. Other than the Tucson heat, it seems like a pretty nice place for a poet to be. How far off base am I?

Schneider: I feel that most good writers need a variety of experiences, but I don't think there is any perfect job for a writer to have. I certainly didn't pick this cab driving job or any other because I thought it would be a good job for a writer to have. It's just the way my life has gone. I will tell you I meet a hell of a lot of people, and if you like to write about people, which I do, it's helpful and sometimes very inspiring. If I preferred to write about trees it wouldn't be such a good job, I guess. I rarely write in the cab, but I do get ideas and I jot them down on the backs of the business cards. I also read quite a bit in the cab. I am learning Spanish right now, and I am in the middle of my fifth big-boy Spanish novel, all of which I've read in my cab over the last year or so. I read poetry journals and other English books in there too. You are right about the heat, though. In mid-June when it's slow in the afternoon, it's so hot sitting in that little metal oven with wheels, too hot for me to read, or do anything except lay back, put my foot out the window and try not to think.

Green: At the beginning of the book you explain that "he took a cab" is an old jazz euphemism for death. Can you explain a little about what you meant by that and how you chose it as the title?

Schneider: I read somewhere that the old jazz guys used that phrase, "he took a cab," when someone died. Like, "What ever happened to Dexter?" "Oh, he took a cab, man." I don't remember where I read it or when, or how popular a phrase it ever was. Considering no one I have met has ever heard of that phrase, I guess it wasn't too widespread. Anyway, I thought it was a perfect title, especially considering the opening poem and title poem of the book is about a cabbie who got himself shot while chasing down a fare for a measly amount of money. It made the national news. I used *He Took a Cab* as the title for this poem and for the book. It seemed right.

Green: Ah, I was over-analyzing it—I was trying to figure out how it might be an extended metaphor, that we all have to take our cabs at the end of the day, and so on. I guess I've been programmed by the latest trends to look for the thematic arc in every poetry book. As a coherent collection of individual poems, it does create the sense that you could go on forever and still keep us engaged. Strangers will always be getting into the cab, and you'll always have interesting things to say about them and life at the wheel. Are you still writing poems that could have been in this book? Are you trying to go in a new direction? Or do you not even think in terms of books, just write what you write and see what you have when the stack is large enough? How does the book process work for you, now that you have two under your belt?

Schneider: Well, it can be seen as an extended metaphor, of course, not just for death, but for life, too. Cab driving as life, the stream of life, like floating on a river, and I think everyone who drives a car at all can see that. Driving is a huge part of American life, and cars have always been great equalizers. I think these things are suggested throughout the book.

Yes, I'm still writing poems about cab driving that would have fit in the book, but I am wondering how many I can write that will still be interesting. I'm getting bored with it, and bored with the cab driving life, too. I need to find another job! With writing, I do sometimes go in different directions, and right now I am working on a new book that will be out this fall called *The Small Hearts of Ants.* This book will be maybe half full of cab driving poems and half some other kind. I often write in a more lyrical style, and am experimenting more for this next book. I don't know if the mix will work or not, but Dave Bates, the editor of Interior Noise Press, who published *Drought Resistant Strain*, my first book, and will be publishing the next book, seems to like it. I already sent him the manuscript for a once-over and I am just fine-tuning it now. It will be out late this year. I would love to say that this will be the last book with cab driving poems in it, but who knows. I might still be doing this and writing about it when I'm 60, but I hope not.

You're right; I usually don't think in terms of books, I just write. My main concern with a book, when I have enough poems, is not that the poems are thematically linked but that there are no *weak* links. I have read, or tried to read, many books of poetry where the poems are thematically linked and I can see where the author has put more emphasis on the theme than the quality of the individual poems. I try to make sure there are no poems in the book that suck, period. When I read a book of poems, I really don't give a crap if the poems are thematically linked; in fact I think I prefer they weren't. I just want every poem to be powerful.

Green: What is it that makes a poem

Hmong
Jarrett Blaustein

powerful? You mentioned admiring Bukowski earlier, and that's a word I'd use to describe both your work and his. What is it about his work that resonates with you, and how do you try to create that within your own poems?

Schneider: Well, as far as Bukowski goes, I liked him for the same reasons many young men liked him: the women, the booze, the craziness, the humor, the readability, the fun, the battling against an absurd society, the feats of strength. I don't think much of his stuff was very memorable, but he as a whole was such a larger-than-life character that he will always be a hero of mine, even though I don't read him anymore. As for how to get out from under the weight of an influence, I think it's important to get back to basics, to the basics of good writing, the clean line, the clean sentence, the natural flow, the image that comes naturally and not from outer space or from some idea of what a poem "should be." What most powerful poetry has, I think, is conflict. Conflict followed Bukowski like the grim reaper. Conflict is necessary, I think, maybe not danger (although that's good too), but at least emotional conflict. Plus there also has to be harmony. Conflict in harmony.

I prefer poetry that is immediate, that comes from immediate life. That doesn't mean the poem needs to be absolutely true, but that it springs from our current world, preferably a part of that world that isn't written about all the time. I also prefer poems of a high emotional quality, and immediate poems are more emotional it seems to me. Somehow the poem must have force, and movement, and must seem alive and not dead on the page. Pretentiousness also gives me a headache. If I see any sign of pretentiousness in a poem I just can't go on, and I have seen it in much of my own work and I try to eliminate it from any books I might publish. I like poems to say something, to do something, and to feel that the author really cares about what he's writing about, really knows it and really feels it. The craft of writing is important too, but I think this kind of thing can only be learned from writing a lot, not from going to school, and while voluminous reading can help, I have known many people who claim to have read almost everything written and yet they can't write a solid sentence.

Really this is an impossible to answer question, what makes a poem powerful. It's 90 percent personal and instinctual.

Green: Well, I had to ask at least one impossible to answer question; that's the rule.

And maybe here's another. If *He Took a Cab* was a memoir that shared all of these insights and told all of these stories, you'd have at least an outside chance at selling a million copies. As poetry, you'd probably be happy selling a thousand. Why isn't poetry more popular? Is it the pretentiousness of much of what gets published? Is it less relevant now, with so many other mediums available? I've heard a lot of theories, but as someone who writes both engagingly and accessibly, I'm curious to know your take.

Schneider: Funny that you mentioned a memoir, because I have been working on a manuscript of prose stories that is almost entirely autobiographical fiction about the cab driving life, and I think I've found a publisher who will take it on when it's finished. So, if I could sell a million copies I'd be ecstatic. And as for the poetry book, I'm not sure how many copies I've sold, but it's a long way from a thousand.

As far as why poetry isn't more popular, I think it's all those things you mentioned. I don't know if there is a single most important factor. I don't know when poetry was more popular in this country, but I've been alive 42 years and it's never been popular in my life. Kids hated poetry in school; it's always seemed like a game of tricks and secret handshakes. I mentioned before that my major influences as a young man and even now have been prose writers much more than poets. I think popular music has taken over most of the audience for poetry, and if I want to be honest about it, some of the poetry written as country music songs, etc., is actually pretty good, clever, funny and touching, though of course rhyming poetry. Most poets and poetry seem to be written by and for the elite, or the hip, or the ultra-educated. MFA programs, of course, really help this along, and the fact that so much bad poetry has been held up as excellence for so long. The lack of popularity for poetry, to me, just seems part of life, and it doesn't bother me much, doesn't surprise me; I never thought I'd get famous writing poetry. The same thing could be said for short stories; nobody reads short stories much anymore, either. With all of this said, however, I do believe there is always room for an exception to rise up and break the rules.

Green: Thanks, Mather, this has been great. In one blurb on the back, Rusty Barnes says, "Put [this book] next to a faker's books and see how it shines in comparison." I couldn't agree more; I hope our readers decide to check it out.

Schneider: Thanks, Tim!

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Rattle #37: Available June 1st
(See preview on page 32)

from He Took a Cab

Mather Schneider

He Took a Cab

A cabby got shot last night.
Another cabby found him.

He was already dead.
It was over where Geronimo

hits Main, between Larry's Hardware
and El Corral, thirty

feet from his cab. Our guess:
fare refused to pay

and fled; cabby pursued.
You know the hope

in your life is the same
as your hesitation,

before you stand up
to chase a man

down a dark alley,
for fourteen dollars.

After Taking a Wrong Turn

I'm a cab driver, which means I deal
with traffic.
To avoid traffic
is to avoid the herd: impossible.
But to try to avoid it
is the ultimate challenge.
Whatever the herd would do,
do the opposite, but I can't just go
in the opposite direction all
the time, I'd wind up
in Yuma or somewhere, lost, no, I need to get
to where I need to get to,
I need money, I need fares,
I need to go about
the same old thing, only differently. I'm a city
person, I know how
the herd thinks,
and stinks,
but sometimes there are simply no
alternative routes outside
of driving across
the courthouse lawn.
I'm in a trap and I can't get out
of my own way—
the stoplight does
its macabre swing
and I end up idling on Main Street and Congress
with the rest of the honking
fuming dipshits, pinned to our hot seats
like death moths,
like pigs jammed onto the spit
screaming and tubercular, coughing the
stars to shreds.
The smell of exhaust like death
follows me
all the way
home.

from He Took a Cab

Mather Schneider

Shannon's Oasis

Shannon was born 4 months premature
to a crack head mom.

She was so small
you could see her heart

like a goldfish
under paper-thin ice.

The hospital lights ripped and ruined
her tiny retinas

and the doctors didn't give her
a month

but somehow here she is
30 years later

blindly limping toward my taxi on
taffy legs

with Lloyd,
her loyal yellow lab

guiding the way.
Lloyd climbs into the cab,

sinks to the floor
with a happy huff

and then Shannon feels her way
like a spelunker.

When she's comfortable
I drive her to the public pool

where she will sit, so peaceful,
under her dark umbrella,

moving her hand in
and out of the shade.

Cock Boy

The Foot City grocery building
is massive and solid
in the fat-boiling summer afternoons
around here.
Sometimes I'll park my cab
in its shade.
It's nice to have a few moments
to myself
just breathing
and daydreaming
out of the heat of the sun.
On the side of the building
someone has spray painted
"COCK BOY"
in parrot blue
two foot tall lettering
about head high.
Sometimes I think
the writer was interrupted
and the thought
was left unfinished.
Other times I am certain
it's complete
and whole
as it is.

from He Took a Cab

Mather Schneider

Suzy Q Ranch

This guy climbs into my cab at the airport
and he wants to go to the nudist retreat
out in the desert.
It's about twenty minutes away.
On the drive out
I think about that poor guy I saw
last year.
It was a Saturday night at Upper Crust
and I was having a slice of pizza
when this completely naked guy ran in.
He tried to order a calzone
like he really needed
it badly,
but the service wasn't fast enough
and a bunch of cops ran in
and jumped him and dragged
him outside.
Three cops got the naked guy
face down on the concrete sidewalk,
knees in his back,
while people of Saturday night
looked on,
well dressed people gasping and gawking
and laughing
the ugliest of laughs
and the cops leaned into him harder as he
squirmed and cried.
I felt bad for him.
This nudist retreat out in the desert
has a wild west theme
with bungalows and a fake saloon with
swinging doors,
like a ghost town haunted
by naked people.
It costs two hundred dollars a day,
but that includes
everything.

1324 N. Lana Hills Drive

Sorry if I stink, he said,
I wear a colostomy bag
and they gave me the wrong liners
last time.

I don't smell anything, I lied, as I pulled
my cab out of the wide
smooth driveway
twisting away from the huge millionaire's house
on the little hill on the
west side of town.

It's my mother's house, he said,
I'm living with her because
I'm dying.

He was around 45.

She's a bitch, he said, rich people
are all fucked up.
I just want a small room
with a computer
and enough money for food.
I want to start eating good,
he said.

I took him to the store
where he got a gallon of milk
and colostomy liners.

He chugged the milk on the way home
leaving white foam around his mouth.

When I stopped the cab inside
the pearly gates
he thanked me, paid, got out and
went back in the house.

It's a huge, beautiful house. I had
always wondered who lived there.

Writing at Roethke's

by
Jeff Vande Zande

From where I sat at the Roethke dining room table, I could look up from my laptop into a large, antique mirror on the wall opposite of me. Every time I did, I anticipated seeing the ghost of Otto Roethke standing behind my reflection, glowering at me like Clint Eastwood's character in *Gran Torino*. It was an unsettling feeling to say the least. Still, I needed to write. It's why I'd been invited. It's what I'd told everybody I'd come to do.

It was all pretty surreal…or maybe just pretty ridiculous.

I was working on a novel entitled *American Poet*. Theodore Roethke's boyhood home in Saginaw, MI, plays a big part in the book. Roethke, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, was born and raised in Saginaw and often returned to Saginaw to write in the house in which he was raised. The house is still there and preserved by a dedicated group of people known as the Friends of Theodore Roethke. Annie Ransford, president of the organization, learned that I was writing a Roethke-oriented novel. She invited me to take a day and write in the actual Roethke House. It wasn't long after that she said I could even spend the night if I wanted to.

Hearing about the offer, my wife said that she wanted to spend the night, too. She used to watch a television show called *1900 House*. In the show, they took a contemporary family, stripped them of their modern conveniences and technology, and then had them live in a house that only had the amenities of a house from the year 1900. "It will be something like that," she said, having learned that the Roethke House had been built in 1911.

I liked the idea of company, but I wasn't crazy about the idea of distraction. "What will you do while I write?" I asked, cautiously. She smiled. "Oh, you'll get work done," she said. "I'll just curl up on a couch with my Kindle." It didn't sound as though she planned to strip herself of modern technologies, but it was pretty clear that I was going to have my time to write. More than anything, that's what I wanted. Writing in the Theodore Roethke House. I imagined that it would be quite inspiring and productive.

When Annie Ransford made her offer, I'd already written the first draft of the novel. In fact, by the time the day arrived for my overnight stay in the house, I was already three quarters of the way through a second draft. That ended up being my plan: I would revise the last 50 pages of the novel—perhaps the most crucial pages—in the very space where Theodore Roethke wrote and revised his greenhouse poems. Where he penned "My Papa's Waltz," I would key in stylistic changes to my novel. If I needed inspiration, I could walk into the very kitchen in which the waltzing of "My Papa's Waltz" took place. What an opportunity! I lamented the fact that I'd already done so much rewriting. Fifty pages didn't seem like enough work for what the occasion warranted. It was the perfect storm…an entire night allotted to writing, and an absolutely inspirational place to do that writing.

Place. It was all about place.

The day arrived: October 22, 2011. One of the board members of the Friends of Roethke met us at the house to give us the key and show us how the security system worked. Right before he left, he looked at my wife and said, "How the hell did you get talked into spending a night here?" The days prior to our adventure, my wife had been quiet on the subject and, on the drive to the house, even more so. I'd sensed a growing apprehension in her. Even the fact that her parents had come to watch the kids, giving us a rare night of time alone, hadn't done much for her mood. A few weeks before, I'd made the mistake of telling her what I'd heard… that the Roethke House was haunted.

Annie Ransford, along with others, guessed that it was Theodore Roethke haunting the place. My own best guess would be to figure otherwise, but my best guess is based on ghost folklore, which suggests that spirits will only haunt the location where their bodies died. Theodore Roethke suffered a heart attack in a swimming pool on Bainbridge Island, Washington. He was nowhere near Saginaw. If anybody died in that house and had the fortitude to make haunting it his afterlife's work, it was the father, Otto Roethke, the industrious, Prussian florist.

Otto. Theodore. It didn't really matter. What I realized was that I should have kept the story of the haunting to myself. It doesn't help that the Roethke House has a very gloomy feel to it. White and black, pragmatic, and looming, it looks foreboding from the outside. The inside is no better with boxy, dark rooms and the musty odor of the past.

Roethke House
Courtesy of Friends of Roethke

I glanced at my wife after the question. The look on her face said, "Yeah, how the hell did I get talked into staying the night here?" My mind was saying, "Remember, though… *1900 House*. You were excited, too. You were." Another voice in my head—the voice that always sees the writing on the wall—was saying, "She's going AWOL on you, chump. You'll be staying here alone…just you and Otto."

The mood, though, quickly changed to whimsy. It was still sunny outside, and the light shining through the west-facing windows counteracted the gloom. Along with her Kindle, my wife had brought her digital camera. She told me to go write; she was going to take pictures. I retreated upstairs to the back porch writing room. It amounts to a three-season room with a roof, wall-to-wall casement windows, and a beautiful dark-stained hardwood interior. Imagining that Roethke must have done much of his writing there, I quickly opened my laptop to get started. While the computer warmed up, I listened to my wife going through the house. By the time I was a few sentences into rewriting, she creaked up the stairs and peeked into the room. "I got some great shots of the basement and the first floor rooms," she said. She told me her plan was to shoot the second floor rooms and then the attic.

I eased into my writing. My wife was making herself quite at home. Her mood seemed lifted. My own spirits were high, too. "I'm writing in a room where Theodore Roethke wrote," I kept telling myself, stopping often to gaze around the space where I imagined he had gazed. I was pretty pleased with myself and my surroundings. It wasn't long before I heard my wife's footsteps coming down the attic stairs. She peaked into the room again, took a few shots of me writing, and then said, "I'm bored. Let's go get dinner now."

I had rewritten six pages.

North of Flint, Saginaw is the closest thing there is to a city. Crumbling, violent, and poor, it's pretty much a bonsai version of Detroit. Still, there's a section of the city called Old Town that's home to some cool bars and unique restaurants. Eating out with our kids for the past few months, we'd had our fill of Applebees and McDonalds. We were ready for some local flavor. Hungry for Asian food, we decided on Pasong's on Michigan Ave. My wife enjoyed her noodles, and we had a great waiter that really knew his trade and came across as very metropolitan. Throw in the traffic—both foot and motor—going by on Michigan, and it wasn't hard to pretend that we were in a vibrant city. It was a good time. Near the end, however, I could feel the apprehension creeping back into my wife. Although we stopped to pick up a favorite movie of ours, she was pretty quiet all the way back to the

Roethke Kitchen
Jennifer Vande Zande

Roethke House.

"I can't stay here," she informed me after about five minutes of being back in the place. By this time, it was dark outside, and the house felt very different. "It's just creepy," she said. "I don't like how it feels." I tried to talk her out of leaving. She pointed out to me that the place had no couches. "Where am I supposed to read?" she asked, when I brought up her Kindle. I told her that she could read in bed. It wasn't the best suggestion.

The only bed in the Theodore Roethke Home Museum is Roethke's bed…the actual bed that he slept in as a boy. I'll admit, the idea of sleeping in it is a little creepy. We went upstairs to see what the bed was like. First, it was very small. "We'll snuggle," I said. She didn't look convinced. Then, we each tried to sit on the bed, under the false notion that we were going to try to lie down. The sitting was scary enough. The mattress felt like it was going to sink right to the floor. We both stood up quickly and watched the bed shimmy and shake for what felt like five minutes before it finally stopped moving. When it did stop, my wife looked at me. "I want to go home," she said.

Honestly, I wanted to go with her. The house, especially at night, does have a very haunted feeling to it. I found myself purposely not looking in dark corners, for fear I might see something ethereal. Still, I couldn't leave. I hadn't gotten much of anything done on *American Poet*. Plus, I'd called a reporter from the *Saginaw News* to do a story about my stay in the Roethke House. She was going to interview me the Monday after. Sure, I could have lied and told her that I'd stayed the night, but that would be…well, lying.

No, I was going to have to spend the night in the haunted Roethke House alone.

On the drive home, my wife was pretty chatty. I could tell that she was relieved. For myself, I was planning. I knew I needed to grab my army cot and a sleeping bag so I would have somewhere to sleep. I wasn't about to get back into that spring-loaded deathtrap of a bed in Roethke's bedroom. For that matter, I wasn't about to sleep upstairs. Again, my knowledge of ghost lore told me that ghosts were much more likely to haunt second floors. Silly, I know, but I clung to the idea like gospel.

"You could just stay home," my wife said. "You don't have to go back."

But I did have to go back. It wasn't just that I'd told people that I was going to spend the night. It wasn't only about pride and being true to my word. I really had planned to use the night to rewrite those 50 pages. The next week, I had stacks of papers coming in from students. The week after that…more papers. The next three weeks would be very busy with grading. All of that would be followed by the holidays.

Simply put, I needed to rewrite those 50 pages to stay on track with the completion of the book.

So, I drove the twenty minutes back to the house. I stood in the front yard and studied the ominous place, trying to come to terms with the idea that I would be sleeping there. I averted my eyes from the second floor windows, wanting desperately not to see a shadowy figure looking down at me.

It was ten o'clock by the time I was seated at the Roethke dining room table. It was then that I noticed that the ground floor windows didn't have curtains. It wasn't enough that the place might be haunted; it was also located in a somewhat dicey neighborhood. I imagined people walking or driving by and being able to see me sitting in there as though I were in a fishbowl. I could hear them thinking, "Hey, that sissy-looking, poetry-type guy is in there all by himself. I could break in, kill him, and take his laptop."

Despite such cheery thoughts, I pressed on with the writing.

In fact, I pressed on until midnight. For two hours, while I revised, I waited to hear the sounds of a haunting from upstairs. At the same time, I listened for the sound of shattering glass—an intruder coming in to rob me. I drank from the bottle of red wine my wife and I had brought. It worked to settle my nerves, but I had to restrain myself or risk dulling my revising skills. I spent most of the two hours balanced precariously in a state of "productively tipsy." I finished what I'd come to do.

Truthfully, it was miserable. It wasn't romantic. It wasn't inspiring. It was work.

It was writing.

Later that night, I lay in an army cot next to the Roethke fireplace, watching the movie *The Fighter* on a portable DVD player, and trying desperately to feel sleepy. I thought back over the night and realized how stupid I'd been to think that writing in the Theodore Roethke House was in any way going to make writing easier. If anything, writing is almost always like what was happening on the little screen on my chest. It's a fight. It takes perseverance. It takes the ability to take punishment.

Nothing about our writing space is romantic. It's like any ring. It's a place where we sometimes win, more often than not lose, and almost always take a beating. When we're writing, we're fighting…fighting to get the words down in just the way they need to be, which is always a battle. If it's not a battle, then we're probably not writing, at least not anything that anyone would want to read.

After my creative writing classes have ended, I often see my students in the hallway during the next semester. Inevitably, I ask them if they're working on anything. I get responses that have something to do with waiting until they have time or waiting until they are inspired. Some tell me that they just can't get inspired writing in their parents' basements. It's such answers that make me think, "Oh, well, then you'll never be a writer."

Time. Inspiration. These are luxuries for writers. Successful writers do what successful writers have always done. They find time. They make do with the space they have. They park their asses somewhere, and they write…inspiration be damned.

It was silly of me to think that I was

going to be inspired by Theodore Roethke's house. Still, I'm glad that I at least did what needed to be done. I wrote. I found myself with time, and though the circumstances were far from perfect, I put down words. It's really the formula that would-be writers should come to expect.

Uncomfortable circumstances + inconvenient timing + lack of motivation = time to sit one's ass down and make some words.

I remember once I was writing at one o'clock in the morning. I was awake because our daughter had been feverish and cranky earlier in the evening. I knew she was going to wake up crying and, knowing that, I couldn't sleep. Trying to do something with my insomnia, I took a baby monitor down to my computer, and I wrote. She let me have a full 50 minutes before her wailing came through the tiny speaker. It was some of my best writing.

I could have stayed in bed. I could have felt sorry for myself, lamenting the fact that my daughter was the only child in the world to ever be visited by such ailments.

Instead, I wrote.

Even though my writing experience at the Theodore Roethke House was far from ideal, I don't in any way waiver in my support of the Friends of Roethke <www.roethkehouse.org>. They have grand visions of the house eventually functioning as a full-blown museum and retreat for writers. It's a great cause, especially for a town like Saginaw, which could use a few more bright spots.

In fact, I was inspired in the Roethke House…for the short time that I was on the second floor writing porch. Of course, that only lasted until my wife dragged me away to have dinner. That's the way it is for many writers, though. If we are in any way doing our marriages correctly, then spouses come first. Children come first. Paying jobs come first. Furnace filters come first. Burned out light bulbs come first.

Hell, almost everything comes before writing.

So, when time does come our way, we have to use it…come Hell or high water, or even Otto Roethke's ghost.

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<www.jeffvandezande.com>

Roethke's Bed
Jennifer Vande Zande

The Impertinent Duet:
Translating Poetry with Art Beck

#6: Versions and Forgeries: Deliberate Departures from the Text

Note: A previous article in this series began with some background on Catullus and his love life that I don't want to reiterate here. Rattle *readers who may want more about Catullus, can access that article, "#2: Odi et Amo," at:* <*www.rattle.com/poetry/extras/beck/*>

I: Idle Pastimes

In the first century BCE, Catullus produced a striking Latin translation of a Greek poem written some 600 years earlier by Sappho. His poem, catalogued as "Catullus 51," begins with an almost image-by-image re-creation of Sappho's fragment "31." The Sappho poem, known in its native Greek to most educated Romans of Catullus' class, remains popular in multiple English translations today. In transliterated Classical Greek it reads:

phainetai moi kênos îsos theoisin
emmen' ônêr ottis enantios toi
isdanei kai plâsion âdu phonei-
sâs upakouei

kai gelaisâs îmeroen to m' ê mân
kardiân en stêthesin eptoaisen.
ôs gar es s' idô brokhe' os me phônai-
s' oud' en et' eikei,

alla kam men glôssa eâge lepton
d' autika khrôi pur upadedromâken
oppatessi d' oud'en orêmm' epirom-
beisi d' akouai,

kad de m' idrôs kakkheetai tromos de
paisan agrei khlôrotera de poiâs
emmi tethnakên d' oligô 'pideuês
phainom' em' autai.

Alla tan tolmaton, [epei kai penêta] ...

Wikipedia posts a literal translation attributed to the Classics scholar Gregory Nagy:

He appears to me, that one, equal
to the gods,
the man who, facing you,
is seated and, up close, that sweet voice
of yours
he listens to

And how you laugh your charming
laugh. Why it
makes my heart flutter within my breast,
because the moment I look at you, right
then, for me,
to make any sound at all won't work
any more.

My tongue has a breakdown and a
delicate
—all of a sudden—fire rushes under
my skin.
With my eyes I see not a thing, and
there is a roar
that my ears make.

Sweat pours down me and a trembling
seizes all of me; paler than grass
am I, and a little short of death
do I appear to me.

The poem, as is the case with all extant Sappho poems, is a fragment, and the last Greek phrase (not translated above) reads roughly: "But all must be endured/dared, being poor…"

A 20th century translation by William Carlos Williams begins:

A Cast of Characters:

Sappho (b. circa 612 BCE): Only fragments of her poems survive, but today, as in antiquity, she remains a revered epitome of exquisitely refined, bittersweet eros.

Catullus (84 – 54 BCE): His 100-odd surviving poems are a young man's storm of love, frustration and vituperation, their energy as complex as nature. His life was short, but he survives even the Latin language, retranslated in every era since.

Li Bai (701 – 762): One of the major poets of the Tang Dynasty, considered China's golden age of poetry. A poet, honored in his lifetime as an immortal fallen from heaven. But a brawler and duelist in his youth, and notably fond of wine. Tradition has it that he died, falling from his boat into the water, trying to embrace the reflection of the moon.

Ezra Pound (1885 – 1972): An icon of the Modernist movement, he influenced nearly every American poet of his generation. A friend of Hemingway, Eliot, Yeats, James Joyce, and on and on. And an expatriate supporter of the Axis, charged with treason for his wartime broadcasts in Italy. An enigma impossible to characterize because of the beauty of his verse and the ugliness of his self inflicted wounds.

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875 – 1926): An Austrian poet who once characterized America as soulless. And who now seems to be suffering a purgatory of countless posthumous American translations.

Robert Lowell (1917 – 1977): A founder of the "confessional movement" and a pivotal figure in mid-twentieth century American poetry. He was the 1947 – 48 U. S. Poet Laureate; received a 1947 and 1974 Pulitzer Prize; and won the 1960 National Book Award. He taught at prestige universities and was the cover subject of a 1967 Time Magazine article that called him "the best American poet of his generation." His personal life was as troubled as any poet's.

That man is peer of the gods, who
face to face sits listening
to your sweet speech and lovely
laughter...

And if we were to continue, compositively, with other recent translators:

...my heart flutters in my breast, whenever
I look, quickly for a moment.
—Diane Rayor

...underneath my skin the tenuous flame
suffuses;
nothing shows in front of my eyes,
my ears
are muted in thunder...
—Richard Lattimore

...I convulse, greener than grass, and feel
my mind slip as I
go close to death...
—Willis Barnstone

"Sappho 31" is often cited as a "poem of jealousy" in which Sappho, the legendary poet of the Isle of Lesbos, watches a young woman she's entranced with interacting with a man. Some commentators even attribute the origination of the concept "green with envy" to the grass in this poem. And, of course, since it's the woman, not the man, who Sappho is jealous of, there's a complication of gender politics—maybe different, but probably no less real in ancient Greece than it would be today.

One aspect that sets "Catullus 51" apart from Sappho is that his translation is addressed to his married mistress, "Lesbia"—generally identified as the aristocratic libertine Clodia Metelli. So the Latin necessarily lacks a certain undercurrent of same sex possessiveness implicit in the Sappho poem. But otherwise, the images seem to follow the original closely and would have been certainly recognizable to most upper class contemporary readers. A knowledge of Greek and the Greek classics was a cornerstone of Roman education. Here are the first three stanzas of Catullus' four stanza version, followed by my relatively loose translation (the paranthesized phrase is a standard emendation that fills in a lacuna):

Ille mi par esse deo videtur,
ille, si fas est, superare diuos,
qui sedens adversus identitem te
spectat et audit

dulce ridentem, misero quod omnis
eripit sensus mihi: nam simul te,
Lesbia, aspexi, nihil est super mi
(vocis in ore;)

lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus
flamma demanat, sonim suopte
tintinant aures, gemina teguntur
lumina nocte.

That man seems like a god to me.
The man who, sitting face to face
with you—if such a thing can be—
surpasses the gods,

hearing your sweet laughter
every day. While I wallow, senseless
in misery. Lesbia, when I catch sight
of you, all at once

my voice deserts me, my tongue
goes numb and a delicate flame
suffuses me. My ears ring and night
buries the light.

So far, so good. It's reasonable to infer that Catullus' Clodia may have had more than a passing interest in love poetry and/or Sappho, since he dubbed her "Lesbia," a soubriquet that evokes Sappho's island of Lesbos. What better compliment to Clodia than to set her as the subject of one of Sappho's greatest poems?

But Catullus continues. The Latin poem, like Sappho's fragment, has four stanzas. Replacing Sappho's last stanza in which she approaches a pale/green, jealous death, Catullus goes somewhere else altogether:

otium Catulle, tibi molestum est:
otio exsultas niminumque gestis:
otium et reges prius et beatas
perdidit urbes.

Idleness, Catullus, that's your problem.
You revel in idleness and achieve nothing.
Idleness has been the ruin
of bygone kings and rich cities.

II. You Have Three Choices

Learned and amateur essays comparing "Sappho 31" and "Catullus 51" abound. Catullus' fourth stanza, coming apparently out of nowhere, lifts a lot of eyebrows. One school of thought speculates that the stanza doesn't belong there, was part of another poem, a scribe's mistake.

Another accepts that at stanza four Catullus stops translating and begins to berate himself for his mooniness. That view creates a real challenge if the contemporary translator wants to convey the right tone. I think Rosanna Warren's version of the stanza, as quoted in her *Fables of the Self,* presents this view as well or better than most:

You're wasting your time, Catullus,
laying waste to your life. You love it.
Whole cities and blissful kingdoms
have wasted away like you.

And a table-talk quote of the exiled Napoleon, preserved by his secretary on St. Helena, resembles a paraphrase of the fourth stanza so much that you wonder if the fallen Emperor wasn't reading Catullus. "Love is the business of the idle man, the recreation of the warrior, and the ruin of the sovereign."

But there's a third, albeit idiosyncratic, choice that occurred to me. Before talking about it I can't help mentioning another peculiar variant found on the Web. An Oxford scholar, Armand D' Angour, suggests that Catullus may have had the—since lost—fifth Sappho stanza and that his fourth stanza is actually a translation of the end of the poem, improperly copied by a scribe somewhere along the way.

Substituting a Greek epithet for Aphrodite (Kupris, i.e. Cyprian) for *otium*, he translates Catullus loosely into Classical Greek, and then from Greek back into English to produce:

But all can be borne since you, Kupris,
would subdue nobleman and beggar in
equal measure:
for indeed you once destroyed kings
and flourishing cities.

But D'Angour doesn't provide any convincing rationale for Catullus's omission of the Greek fourth stanza. What he does present, however, is an example of the extent to which even erudite scholars can speculate. His credentials provide a sort of permission slip for further speculation.

III. A Third Possibility

Another way of looking at the poem might be to first decide that what Catullus is doing is only tangentially translating. That, rather, he's *appropriating* Sappho into his own "after poem." And that his poem includes not only Sappho's voice, filtered through Catullus' voice, but—in the Latin fourth stanza—still another voice. Maybe the voice of "that man," presumably Clodia's husband, Q. (Quintus) Mettellus Celer. The Catullus translator and classical scholar Peter Green describes him as "a rigid and pompous aristocrat from a family rich in consuls, but now beginning to disintegrate," and "not an attractive fellow." Clodia's marriage was, like many if not most aristocratic unions, a marriage of political and family convenience. Clodia was his younger cousin. When she met Catullus, she was in her early thirties and Catullus some ten years younger.

For whatever it's worth, one thread of Sappho legend has her ending her life by leaping from a cliff into the sea—impelled to suicide over the loss of a much younger male lover named Phaon, a humble boatman below Sappho's class. Does this also play into Catullus' "Lesbia" epithet? Catullus came from a respectable family, but he was over his social head with Clodia's clan of fading one-percenters.

But rather than looking backward to Sappho, reading the problematic fourth stanza, I find myself replaying the 1960s film, *The Graduate*. Where the young Dustin Hoffman character, Ben, is seduced by Anne Bancroft's Mrs. Robinson. At a party, young Ben, nervous as a cat, is pulled aside and asked to step out to the pool by Mr. McGuire. (A grave faced contemporary of Mrs. Robinson's husband, who could just as well have been her husband for purposes of the scene.) His lecture begins: "Ben, I just want to say one word to you: plastics." Then goes on to discuss Ben's "future." That scene, for those old enough to recall it, became an anthem of our generation gap. It's strange: there are several YouTube clips of that "plastics" scene. But, for me, it resonates so much more richly in memory than it does in re-run. Maybe because when I "remembered" the scene it was Mr. Robinson, not Mr. McGuire, lecturing Ben about a responsible future in plastics.

Is Catullus's situation with Clodia—and her husband—all that much different from the dynamics of *The Graduate*? Wouldn't forty-something Q. Mettelus have been just as prone to spout advice to

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young Catullus?

…idleness,

Catullus, that's what's wrong with you.
You cultivate idleness and get nowhere.
Idleness is what ruined all those
old kings and rich cities.

Well there is one difference. Catullus had no Katherine Ross character—Mrs. Robinson's daughter—to fall in love with. His Mrs. Metellus was only some ten years older than he was, not twenty plus. And Q. was not only a generation older than Catullus, but probably somewhat older than his restless wife as well. Having young Catullus for a playmate may have made Clodia feel a somewhat girlish innocence at the heart of the illicit. So for both of them—wasn't Q. Metellus "the man," and the enemy of their sweet game?

If you wanted to spin the translation that way, why not start with the first stanza? You could argue that this kind of interpretation is implicit in the Latin. Don't each of the first two lines begin with *ille* ("he," or "the man," or "that man")?

And why not start by emphasizing this with a title:

That Man

seems like a god to me.
The man, who sitting, looking
at you—can such a thing be? —
surpasses the gods

enjoying your sweet laughter
every day…

Why not push a little bit on the ambiguity of *si fas est*—"if such a thing can be"—a phrase inserted by Catullus that's nowhere in the Sappho. So that finally, Catullus adds his own lover's layer to Saphho's jealous misery: "That man"—as taken with himself as a god, who lords it over us with his crude pomposity.

Read this way, "Catullus 51" is an entirely new poem that uses the dynamics of translation to *appropriate*, rather than simply interpret, the "translated" poem. Maybe more importantly, the new Latin poem seems to arise from Catullus' own inner need. It goes beyond being an exercise in translation. It's an evocation of Sappho as an ally—more concrete, human and powerful than a stock evocation of Venus.

That Clodia Metelli was widely believed to have gotten rid of Quintus by poisoning him in 59 BCE doesn't detract from the plausibility of the above scenario, although it does interfere with a too sentimental reading.

IV: Inventions and Versions

English has its own long tradition of literary translators who found themselves inspired to go beyond re-creation to re-invention. In some cases, the re-invention of a poem. In others the re-imagining of a culture.

These colonialists have their rightful critics, but their versions often become icons. *Ossian*, James Mc Pherson's 18th century "pseudo-translation" of an invented ancient Scots Gaelic poet, became a seminal influence on the budding Romantic movement. Although recognized at the time as, at best, dubious, "Ossian's" poems were in turn "re-translated" into various European languages. They influenced painters and composers such as Ingres, Schubert and Mendelssohn. Denounced as a fraud by Samuel Johnson, *Ossian* was still enthusiastically taken up by writers as diverse as Walter Scott and Goethe.

Edward Fitzgerald's 19th century versions of the medieval Persian poet Omar Khayyam became a textbook and anthology staple. But Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat* was, in his word, a "transmogrification" rather than a translation, the original serving only as rough source material, a stage setting, as it were, for a new English poem.

What happens when a translator feels inspired enough to subordinate the original to that new inspiration? Where is the line crossed? Is there such a thing as an honest forgery? An honorable theft? Does calling something an "imitation" or "version" cut you some slack? Or does it raise the bar to a level where the version produced has to be at least as good as the original?

Published in 1915, Ezra Pound's *Cathay*, a collection of classical Chinese poetry, primarily Li-Bai's (then known as Li Po or Rihaku in Japanese), became another standard textbook source with poems such as "The Jewel Stairs' Grievance" and "The River Merchant's Wife, a Letter." Although nominally translations, Pound didn't know Chinese and depended (as he noted on the volume's original title page) on the "notes of the late Ernest Fenollosa, and the decipherings" of two other "professors." Pound never met Fenollosa and received the material from his widow, who was trying to preserve his work. Fenollosa note's derived from his studies in Japan, with the Chinese poets already filtered through Japanese scholars. Despite these obstacles and many subsequent "more correct" translations by Sinologists, Pound's versions remain vital and bright. Wikipedia quotes one noted anthologist-scholar, Wai–Lim Yip, as crediting Pound with somehow getting "into the central concerns of the original" with "a kind of clairvoyance." And perhaps *because* of these obstacles, the result was some of the most beautiful and memorable lines in American poetry. The lament of the sixteen-year-old river merchant's wife, as poignant as Sappho:

...You dragged your feet when you
went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the
different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow
with August
Over the grass in the West garden;
They hurt me...

Ezra Pound, more than any other Modernist poet, has his unquestioning venerators, and dogged questioners. And nearly 70 years on, we're still too close to the Holocaust to simply shrug off his anti-Semitic rants on Italian wartime

radio. How much of his work will still be seminal in another generation or two; whether the Pound canon, taken as a whole, will be less or more than the net sum of its parts are questions best left to academic discourse. He wrote so many undeniably beautiful poems. Whatever his idiocies in life, his critical acuity in poetics is unquestionable. He can't be dismissed no matter what you think of him. But solely as a matter of taste—and it may just be my almost allergic bias against pronouncements in archaic language—much of his work seems also plagued by demons of self-inflation. Virtuosity's shadow? Because the final clear-eyed humility that seemed to visit him near the end coincided with a growing silence.

In mid-life, still fertile with poetry, he was diagnosed with a grandiosity grown pathological enough to spare him from a trial by relegating him to the mental ward. That was in his 60s. But even 30-some years earlier, around the time of *Cathay*, a slow flowering hubris seems to be already putting out tentative poetic buds in pieces like 1913's "A Pact." Pound's lines, "I make a pact with you Walt Whitman—I have detested you long enough…" float down from the mountain, a pronouncement from a guardian of *Kulchur*. The poem doesn't tap issues innate in many, if any, readers. "A Pact" is considered a classic poem, and deservedly so. But the reader's response is to admire and learn, not participate.

Paradoxically, that proud brilliance seems soothed when he "translates" Li Bai. Maybe the sheer bravado of translating a national icon, third hand from a dead man's notes, out of a culture and language he didn't know, was enough, in itself, to satisfy even Pound's primal need for vatic glory? Maybe a sense, while writing, of being a cultural interloper, a burglar, not lord of the palace? Something seems to happen to young Old Ez when he becomes Li Po, or—take your choice—when Li Po becomes Old Ez. He relaxes into an unstrained aesthetic and seems to escape the need to present himself as a great poet by simply writing great poetry. A satori of sorts?

Monsoon
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V: Imitations: The Diversion of the Version

I don't think most errant poetic translators begin by attempting to reinvent the original. As with any new marriage, there's an initial attempt at fidelity. Maybe even conscious vows. It's only later in the relationship between original poet and translator poet that frustration begins to wear and the temptation to wander insinuates itself.

Not lightly, but with the seductive irresistibility of art, the translator passes through all the stages of infidelity. Denial, annoyance, elation, shame, nerves—then a sudden peace in the midst of anarchy. Certain laws have been broken, but only in obedience to other, more insistent laws. There may or may not be a reconciliation with the original poem, but it's in the reconciliation between the translator and the translator as poet that the new work comes to life.

There are, however, some cads that don't even struggle. Poets who set off

only to have a passing fling with the original, no questions asked. No promises given. It's not that they treat the original lightly, or disrespect the text. Or even that they value their own efforts more highly than the original poet's. But rather, maybe, that they want to bypass the agonies of a commitment that's going to be nothing but trouble anyway. Why get into all that soul-searching and grief?

So they start out by saying, "Let's not call this a translation. Let's be honest with each other—it's a 'version,' an 'after,' an 'imitation.'"

Robert Lowell might be characterized as one of those "honest Casanovas." In 1961 he published a collection of translations that evoked both stellar praise and deep derision. Robert Lowell's *Imitations* is self-described as a "small anthology of European poetry." The eighteen poets range from Homer and Sappho through Francois Villon and Rimbaud, into the twentieth century with Rilke, Montale, Pasternak, among others.

Although *Imitations* won Lowell the Bollingen Prize for the best translation of 1961, it also engendered numerous scathing reviews that were by no means in the minority. His biographer, Ian Hamilton, who was largely sympathetic to Lowell's own poetry, was also sympathetic to the negative reception which he summarizes:

> Lowell had presumptuously turned Rilke into Lowell, and the result was neither good Lowell nor recognizable Rilke. His howlers were itemized, his overburly modernizing was shown to be thuggish, disrespectful; respect for the original was spoken of as if it were something like respect for a parent or grown-up. At least part of Lowell's crime was to have treated these great poets as his equals—as his playmates almost...

But Lowell's preface cautioned that: "This book is partly self sufficient and separate from its sources, and should be first read as a sequence, one voice running through many personalities, contrasts and repetitions." That voice, of course, is Lowell's voice.

And he goes on to warn:

> My licenses have been many. My first two Sappho poems are really new poems based on hers. Villon has been somewhat stripped; Hebel is taken out of dialect; Hugo's "Gautier" is cut in half. Mallarme has been unclotted, not because I disapprove of his dense medium but because I saw no way of giving it much power in English…. About a third of "The Drunken Boat" has been left out. Two stanzas have been added to Rilke's "Roman Sarcaphogus," and one to his "Pigeons"… Some lines from Villon's "Little Testament" have been shifted to introduce his "Great Testament." And so forth! I have dropped lines, moved lines, moved stanzas, changed images and altered meter and intent.

Notice how subtly he slips in that last "altered…intent" as if in passing. Most of the rest might be "translation stretched." But altering *intent?*

VI: The Translator as Curator

Besides both being awarded Bollingen prizes there are some odd coincidental parallels between Lowell and Pound. Robert Lowell, as "Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress" (now styled "Poet Laureate") was on the committee that awarded Ezra Pound the 1948 Bollingen prize for *The Pisan Cantos*—poems published while Pound was incarcerated in a mental hospital. That Bollingen award, the first ever given, was even more contentious than Lowell's translation award. It effectively ended the original intent that the award was to be a semi-official national poetry prize when the Library of Congress withdrew its further sponsorship due to Pound's unrepentant Fascism, not to mention his legally certified insanity.

And Lowell, famously, had his own, lifelong, off and on, psychiatric issues. In early 1961 a bout of manic energy began with an ecstatic new affair with a student and ended with six weeks in a mental ward. Until finally that summer—back to peace and reconciliation with his wife and young daughter. Writing to his wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, and still sifting through the wreckage, he talks about an analyst's session. His doctor "has decided my dreams are more rewarding than my actuality... My disease in life is something like this."

Pound would have approved of Lowell's going to prison as a draft refuser during WWII, although Lowell shared no Fascist sympathies. Rather, this was a budding pacifist's protest against the continued bombing of civilians and the Allies' insistence on unconditional surrender after he believed the war had been won. And Lowell's struggle with manic depression seems to bear little resemblance to Pound's megalomania. Lowell never embraced the persona of a disease that swept him up in tides of irresistible elation, then tossed him unceremoniously onto bare, jagged rocks. Madness seemed to make him a humbler, more hesitant poet—not a Poundian voice in the wilderness. But the raw material of his confessional poetry was still personal pain. For me, *Imitations* has always seemed, among other things, a poetic vacation from the poem of the anxious self. And a particular kind of vacation—a museum tour with Robert Lowell as curator.

Paradoxically, in translating these paragons, Lowell's self-doubt seems to vanish, replaced by an aesthetic rapture that, for once, won't betray him by draining his energy. Translating—or rather, conversing with—his gallery of grandmasters, his poetic energy seems to arise no longer from his nerves, but from the ongoing breath and murmur of twenty centuries of European poetry. The reader of *Imitations* would do well to follow Lowell's advice and treat the book as a single sequence, a sort of long poem to be read from beginning to end. Ian Hamilton was correct in pointing out "flaws" and flat spots in various poems. But read together these fade into the whole like imprecise brush marks on an Impressionist painting.

Many of the translations pre-date the collection and were published separately in various magazines. It's in *compiling the collection* that Lowell does something akin to a PBS presentation by Simon

Schama or Sister Wendy. We see these poems through his admiring eyes. They talk to him and he talks back—in his mid-twentieth century curator's voice.

VII: Sappho Again

I think it's the interjection of that often anachronistic voice that sets the teeth of his critics on edge. The second poem in the sequence is a version of "Sappho 31." Lowell begins conventionally enough:

> I set that man above the gods and heroes—
> all day, he sits before you face to face,

But then:

> like a cardplayer. Your elbow brushes his
> elbow—
> if you should speak, he hears.

That "cardplayer" interjection is Lowell reading the poem some 25 centuries later. Your first reaction is to wonder: Did the ancient Greeks play cards? With what? And then realize "I'm entering this poem from my own time, as myself. It's alive and I'm alive. And yes, there is a high stakes game going on here." Lowell's next two lines simultaneously bear out Hamilton's criticism, then make you say "so what?" The first, pedestrian, cerebral, so abstractly not Sappho, but wholly redeemed by the second:

> The touched heart madly stirs,
> your laughter is water hurrying over
> pebbles…

VIII: Deliberate Departures

Critics of loose translation should remember that there's only one thing a translator can do to harm the original poet. It's not mistranslation, but vapid translation. I think most poets, living or dead, would rather be enjoyably read, even if misunderstood, than not read—or read with a yawn. And as for the original poem, no translation can change a word of it. It's still there, still available.

One of the longer poems in *Imitations,* Rilke's "Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes" is also one of the most "Lowellized." And one of the most enjoyable, as well.

Lowell's opening dramatically diverges from Rilke's. The scene describes the mythic attempt of Orpheus to rescue his lost young wife Eurydice from the world of the dead. An attempt that ends sadly when, similar to Lot's wife, Orpheus can't keep himself from looking back to see if the silent Eurydice is still following him out of the underworld. A fatal breach of faith in a story older than Sappho.

Here's the first stanza in the original German:

> *Das war der Seelen wunderliches*
> *Bergwerk,*
> *Wie stille Silbererze gingen sie*
> *als Adern durch sein Dunkel, Zwischen*
> *Wurzeln*
> *entsprang das Blut, das fortgeht zu den*
> *Menschen,*
> *und schwer wie Porphyr sah es aus im*
> *Dunkel,*
> *Sonnt war nichts Rotes.*

Here's Edward Snow's fairly literal translation.

> *That was the soul's strange mine.*
> *Like silent silver ore they wandered*
> *through its dark like veins. Between roots*
> *the blood welled up that makes its way to*
> *men,*
> *and it looked as hard as porphyry in the*
> *dark.*
> *Nothing else was red.*

And here's my own, somewhat looser version:

(See guidelines on page 37)

Imagine a mineshaft of souls
running as silently through the dark
as silver veins flow, and blood welling
among the roots, on its route to humanity,
clotting like porphyry in the shadows.
Other than this—nothing was red.

This poem, unlike so many other Rilke poems, is relatively straightforward in meaning, and it's also an early-modern foray into open rather than closely rhymed form. So "Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes" seems one of the least problematic Rilke poems to translate—except for the word *wunderlich* in the opening line. Its primary translation is "strange" as in Snow's translation. But alternately: "eerie," "odd," "wondrous," "bizarre," "fantastical," etc. A richly resonant adjective. Farther into the poem, you might be satisfied picking one or another, but the first line sets the mystic tone of the poem. Is there an English word that encompasses all of the above? In Stephen Mitchell's translation, the "wunderliches" mine becomes the "deep uncanny mine of souls." My own choice was to flip the adjective into a verb and let the scene describe itself. Lowell's choice is to wade in expansively with his own *wunderlich* imagination.

That's the strange regalia of souls.
Vibrant
as platinum filaments they went,
like arteries through their darkness. From the holes
of powder beetles, from the otter's bed,
from the oak king judging by the royal oak –
blood like our own lifeblood sprang.
Otherwise, nothing was red.

I more than like what Lowell's done. I take it as the spontaneous response of a poet reading a poem that captures him. Rilke's poem is well-known, widely translated. Nothing Lowell did could harm it. And I don't think Lowell's first stanza gloss clashes very much, if at all, with where Rilke is going with the piece.

IX: The Other Side of the Spinning Coin

But "spin" does come at a cost and that cost is very often the sacrifice of ambiguity and complexity. Like high-brix, high alcohol, "Robert Parkerized" wines, the ripe intensity of spin adds a fruit forward pleasure. But loses the often funky elusive flavors of still tentative, not-so-ripe grapes.

Later in the poem, Lowell makes some more subtle interjections. (The highlights are mine.) Rilke is describing Eurydice being led out of the underworld by Hermes, and following Orpheus who is forbidden to look back. Here's my more or less straightforward translation of the Rilke:

But, now, she went on the arm of the god,
her pace impeded by the long burial shroud,
uncertain, meek and with no impatience.
She was self contained, like someone with higher hopes,
and didn't think about the man who walked ahead
or the path, that climbed back into life.

Here's Lowell's more expansive take:

...She leant, however, on the god's arm;
her step was delicate from her wound—
uncertain, *drugged* and patient.
She was drowned in herself, as in a higher hope,
and she didn't give the man in front of her a thought,
nor the road climbing to life.

Rilke (as I read him) continues:

She was self contained. And being dead
enriched her like a treasure.
Like a fruit full of dark sugar, she was filled
with a death so immense and new
she couldn't quite grasp her role in it.

She'd come into a new childhood
and must not be touched. Her sex
had closed like a young flower at evening…

Which Lowell adapts as:

She was in herself. Being dead
fulfilled her beyond fulfillment.
Like an apple full of sugar and darkness,
she was full of *her decisive death,*
so green she couldn't bite into it.
She was still in her marble maidenhood,
untouchable. Her sex had closed house,
like a young flower rebuking the night air...

Rilke's poem ends when Orpheus, having climbed nearly all the way out of the underworld, inexplicably turns around to see if Eurydice is following, and breaks the one condition laid down by the god of death when he granted her return to life. Hernes, the messenger god guiding Eurydice, immediately notices. Despite the conversational ease and modernity of the narrative, Rilke's last lines seem somehow unsatisfying and emotionally incomplete. Here's a fairly straightforward version:

And when suddenly, abruptly,
the god stopped her—and sadly exclaimed
the surprising words: He's turned around.
She didn't comprehend, just quietly asked: Who?

But some way off, dark in the clear exit,
someone—it could have been anyone—stood,
the one whose face could no longer be recognized.
He stood and watched how on a strip of meadow path
with a sorrowful expression, the god of messages
silently turned to follow the retreating shape,
her pace impeded by the long burial shroud,
uncertain, meek and without impatience.

Lowell's retelling, as in the other passages above, is more decisive than Rilke:

And when the god suddenly gripped her,
and said with pain in his voice. "He is looking back at us."
she didn't get through to the words,
and answered vaguely, "Who?"

Far there, dark against the clear entrance,
stood some one, or rather no one
you'd ever know. He stood and stared

at the *one, level inevitable road,*
as the reproachful god of messengers
looking round, pushed off again.
His caduceus was like a shotgun on his shoulder.

Does Lowell sense that this 1904 poem, for all its surface modernity and its surreal beginning, slips fatally back into a 19th century romantic morbidity with its almost Poe-like ending?

So that for Lowell, re-creating the poem at mid-twentieth century: 1) Death becomes "decisive." 2) Rather than being "self-contained" in death, Eurydice is "drowned in herself," no longer just "meek" but "drugged." 3) The strip of underground meadow path (which earlier in the poem takes on the wounded image of an unrolled bandage) becomes the "one, level, inevitable road." 4) And Hermes their guide, disgusted with Orpheus, metaphorically blows away his hopes with an interjected shotgun!

Is it that, essentially, Lowell, as a mid-century reader and "participant" in the poem, can no longer go where Rilke goes? In fact perceives Rilke's conclusion as sentimental, maybe "dated"? And so his curator modus operandi works to make the poem accessible to a contemporary sensibility. To strip it of what might date it the way you might remove rust from a wire to enable an electrical connection. Sometimes this works, but sometimes an essential element is lost.

X. What Does Lowell Lose and What Did Rilke Find?

Let's presume for the sake of argument that the early-modern "Orpheus, Eurydice and Hermes" didn't quite make it into the 20th century. However, Rilke certainly did. And if this poem, ultimately, doesn't fully exploit its potential, what does Rilke do when he returns to the theme?

...She was self contained. And being dead enriched her like a treasure....

She'd come into a new childhood...

Here it is again, in 1912, in the *First Duino Elegy*, in a passage referring to those—like Eurydice—"taken before their time."

It's certainly strange to no longer occupy space in this world.
To stop practicing customs you've barely learned.
Not to give roses and other particularly portentous
things the significance of a human future.
For someone once held in endlessly apprehensive
hands—to no longer exist, even your very own name
tossed aside like a broken toy. Strange to no longer want
your wants. Strange to see everything coherent fluttering
loose around the room this way. And death's
a laborious pastime, full of catching up, until, only gradually,
you begin to feel the slightest hint of eternity.

And I'd argue that a hallmark of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* lies in their managing to somehow avoid romanticism while they build on the mystique of an unfathomable but essential afterlife. A fugue that Lowell's mid-century aesthetic seems to compulsorily mute.

And in 1922, in the *Sonnets to Orpheus,* Rilke addresses a poem directly to Orpheus that revisits the narrative scene of the long 1904 poem. This time in a fully realized 20th century mindset. From "Sonnet to Orpheus #13, Book Two":

...Sei immer tot in Eurydike-, singender steige,
preisender steige zurück in den reinen Bezug.
Hier, unter Schwindenden, sei, im Reiche der Neige,
sei ein klingendes Glas, das sich im Klang schon zerschlug....

...Always be dead in Eurydice—climb out the way a singer climbs,
in a voice rich with loss and celebration of that pure connection.
And here, below with the ghosts, in the empire of bitter endings,
be the clinking glass that, even as it shatters, rings...

If these poems are read as a continuation of the "Orpheus, Eurydike, Hermes" theme, could Rilke's maturing aesthetic be viewed as actually *transcending* Lowell's mid-century sensibility? And if Rilke had concluded with something as emphatic as Lowell's version in 1904, would he have still felt compelled to return to the theme? Is the fertility of "Orpheus, Eurydike, Hermes" for Rilke inextricably tangled in its arguably unsatisfactory conclusion? If we take the *Duino Elegies* and the *Orpheus Sonnets* as an outgrowth of the theme Rilke began in 1904, does Lowell's adaptation and spin point anywhere near that soaring direction?

Probably not, but in the end does it matter? His "after poem" may not be "recognizable Rilke" but I disagree with Ian Hamilton—I think it is pretty "good Lowell." Just as "Catullus 51" in no way negates Sappho, Lowell's appropriation of Rilke honors the original in ways no mere reiteration could. Just as, in imagining a mythic *Cathay*, Pound doesn't bury, but resurrects, Li Bai. Or even as he evokes—and both questions and honors—his own personal Whitman: At a certain intersection of reverence and play, a poet's most valuable poems speak—not to posterity, but rather with poetic ancestors. And ghosts, by definition, are elusive and *wunderlich.*

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Art Beck is San Francisco poet and translator, and a frequent contributor to *Rattle* e-issues. Those essays are collected online at <www.rattle.com/poetry/extras/beck>. Beck's translation of the complete poems of Luxorius, a Roman poet whose 90 extant poems were literally lost for a thousand years, was published this year by Otis College Seismicity Editions.

What's Poetry

by
Bruce Whiteman

"Does one know what's poetry and what isn't?"
—Jean Cocteau, Orphée

April is National Poetry Month, thirty days out of the year when poetry gets a nod from libraries, publishers, and other cogs in the literary machine that usually give it short shrift. If you are on Knopf's distribution list, you will receive a poem per day during April, a pleasant arrangement that they might consider making permanent. The University of California Press and New Directions celebrate the event more frugally, by offering discounts on their poetry list. The Academy of American Poets, which inaugurated NPM in 1996, sponsors various poetry-related events that include tweeting opportunities for poets among other up-to-the-minute cutting-edge attempts to keep poetry at the forefront of the American psyche. All of this is hopeless, of course. The average American doesn't give a pinch of prairie dog scat for poetry. The American psyche is more interested in Civil War reenactments than in poetry. An American is a thousand times more likely to know who Jed Clampett was than Amy Clampitt.

Arguments about how to apportion the blame for this situation are endless and fruitless. One can point a finger at the education system, at the rise of electronic media, at the provincialism and anti-intellectualism of American society, at the pandemic MFA programs, or at the poets themselves. Modernism made poetry too difficult even for the average intelligent reader to understand, goes one explanation, and the audience never recovered its interest. Poets took advantage of the vocal and formal changes introduced by Whitman, Cummings, and Williams and passed off almost anything as poetry, further alienating readers, goes another. There is just *too much poetry* goes another still, and without a way to tell the good from the bad, the self-proclaimed from the genuinely talented, readers simply turned off the poetry channel altogether. All of these explanations have some force, but none or even all of them taken together can account for the fact that a civilized society has turned away from a literary form that is perhaps the oldest in the history of the world. Humans made pictures before they started to imagine the world in verbal form, but as soon as they did, poetry was the natural and normal recourse. Myth itself, the ancestor of all fiction, was recorded in poetic form in the ancient Near East and the classical world alike. Myths recounted in prose are so late a literary development as practically to be denominated modern.

What does it mean anymore to be a poet? Henry Miller, who as far as I know wrote very little poetry, thought that the poet's "status and condition" revealed "the true state of a people's vitality."[i] Whitman before him was convinced that a country was not even recognizable as such until it produced great poetry. "A barren void" exists without it, he wrote, no matter how advanced the nation's intellectual and political growth. Since his day, America has produced a lot of great poetry, of course, although its exact relationship to the country's enduring history is hard to measure. Yet poets like Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, Dennis Lee, Anne Waldman, many Québécois poets, and others certainly worked and still work from a platform that includes a recognition of the polity and poetry's place in defining it. In the twenty-first century, do poets attest to or reflect anything that relates to the nature of their citizenship? And if so, does the citizenry care or pay attention? The answer to the first question is certainly yes—think of the poetry written against the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, for example—but the answer to the second question is unfortunately no. Congress keeps affirming the appointment of various distinguished American poets to be Poet Laureate, and the poets, conservative to a man and woman largely, keep coming up with programs that try to bring poetry to the people in a meaningful way. None of these efforts seems radically effective or long-lasting, and certainly none has had any rooted effect on the nature of what it is to be an American citizen in our age. Perhaps the United States is too decadent a country for poetry to matter in a political sense anymore. That it matters in other ways to a large proportion of the country's citizens is also demonstrably not the case. Few people think poetry to be integral to their intellectual, emotional, or passional lives. The constitution of most bookstores' stocks proves that contention. Is it still true, then, as Guy Davenport wrote forty years ago in a review of Stanley Burnshaw's book *The Seamless Web*, that "poetry is the voice of a poet at its birth, the voice of a people in its ultimate fulfillment as a successful and useful work of art"?[ii]

Well, again, what does it mean to be a poet anymore? Sometimes even the poets don't know, or at any rate don't seem prone to letting on. The conservative East-coast poet Mark Strand, for one, suggests that "not writing is the best way to write." Standing on an aesthetic plinth in a polar opposite corner, Robert Kelly, a poet in the avant-garde tradition of Ezra Pound and Charles Olson, proposes that poetry is "lucid incomprehensibility." Neither of these ideas strikes one as helpful, and indeed they seem rather puerile contentions for distinguished poets to be uttering. Perhaps we are in what Mallarmé called "incubatory times," a time of deep change for poetry, a time when a thousand voices making contradictory and sometimes incomprehensible claims for poetry can be heard. Is any sort of consensus likely to emerge

from this cacophony? Does it matter? Has poetry any essential *quidditas* that remains even during a period when the art seems to have no central aesthetic being and little honor among readers?

Real poets go on writing no matter what the culture of receptivity is around them. Literary history easily furnishes many examples of poets who did not become joiners or barber-surgeons or airplane pilots when their books found no readers or largely hostile ones. If today only a very few poets do not have other jobs, it is because they were brought up that way. Their sense of calling remains immutable, even if what they think their poems are good for and where they come from know no end of variety. Perhaps "calling," with its overtone of divine representation, is not the right word for what is, finally, an inborn compulsion centered on the music of language. There is a commonality among those who have thought about poetry, going all the way back to the ancients, that one is born and not made a poet. The made-up poets, and there have been thousands, the ones who assume poetry rather than follow its drive, fall pretty quickly by the wayside. They are the boring self-expressers who have little to tell us about the beautiful obliquities of language or the world, and who use poetry mainly as psychoprophylaxis or to profess things. Some 2,500 years ago, Aristotle wanted poets to be considered separately from those who merely used poetry for specific ends (science, medicine, or philosophy). Hart Crane wrote in a letter that the real poet needed "an extraordinary capacity for surrender," and Robert Creeley, in his wonderful essay on Whitman's late work in *On Earth*, his last book, refers to poetry's "correspondences and determined intimacies of feeling—all the physical reception that being human constitutes."

In two lines from Creeley's poem for his friend and fellow poet John Wieners, an essential truth about poetry is confided:

> When you are a poet as he was, you have
> no confusions, you write
> The words you are given to, you are
> possessed or protected by a vision.

Perhaps the order of the elements is strange here, but Creeley has it exactly right: the poet has a vision (by which he means nothing especially or necessarily spiritual, but rather a cogent and penetrative view of the world and his experience in it), he or she has no confusions about *that*, whatever confusions he may suffer on other planes, and the poems are given to him, all at a go or word by word, from some startlingly unspecific and mysterious source, call it what you will. It is that receptivity that constitutes poetic brilliance. The poem is what the poet transmits. Of course he also puts things there more consciously: thematic improvisations, musical scaffolding, rhythmic finesse. He may re-order the elements, dispose of excess words or discordant sounds, orchestrate line endings or sentence continuity. He is not *just* a conduit, not *just* a platform where surrealism plays out its unconducted musical fantasies, not *just* a subject for psychoanalytic free association. His control of the poem under hand ebbs and flows, as the language comes to him and he goes with its direction, unpredictably making decisions and having decisions made for him by the words as they creep or flow into ordered life from the thousand sources and the infinite characteristics that language has.

In "By Blue Ontario's Shore," Walt Whitman called the poet "the arbiter of the diverse." He or she listens, thinks, remembers, feels. On the page the words that arise from his feelings, senses, intellection, and desire will form a kind of music that will be ill or well constructed depending on a host of factors beyond the poet's control for the most part. Prosody can be studied, but it is largely about what has happened in the past, not what is under hand or going to happen in the future. The subject of the poem brings it own prosody with it. The poem makes decisions much more than the poet does.

Whitman said that the poet "judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling round a helpless thing." He or she illuminates a subject by giving it a chance to speak through the poetic gift. Poets will have their own recognitions afterwards and may be surprised by them. Readers too will see and hear aspects of the poem that the poet was unconscious of. Whitman again, from "A Song for Occupations": "All music is what awakes from you when you are reminded by the instruments." In "The Work of Creation," included in his *Last Poems*, D.H. Lawrence wrote:

> Even an artist knows that his work was
> never in his mind,
> he could never have *thought* it before it
> happened.
> A strange ache possessed him, and he
> entered the struggle,
> and out of the struggle with his material,
> in the spell of the urge
> his work took place, it came to pass, it
> stood up and saluted his mind.

What makes a poet a poet is that he has that ache; the ear is where the events of the world focus and become the poem. The Bay Area poet Jack Spicer put it in as distilled a fashion as possible: "Prose invents—poetry discloses." Poetry is the voice of the world, then, prose the voice of an author.

This view proposes to erect a very lofty bar, and it is not surprising if most poets fail to leap high enough to cross it. With no obvious or universal rules any longer about what constitutes poetic language, it has become relatively simple to self-categorize everything from the maundering and the impenetrable and the prosy to the loony and the analphabetic as poetry. "Does one know what's poetry and what isn't?" was the obvious question in Cocteau's film *Orphée* when it was shown that the car radio was the medium for transmitting poetic texts, a metaphor that appealed deeply to Jack Spicer (who thought that poets were just mediums for messages from outer space) but which has a more general suggestiveness. How *does* one know what's poetry when all the old basics of rhyme, meter, strophe, elevated language, etc. are either a thing of the past or at any rate not de

rigueur in a text that defines itself as a poem?

The answer in the end has to do with music and rhythm. All language, including prose or everyday speech, has these qualities to varying degrees, but poetry is or should be built around them. Rhythm is inherent in words, but the poet disposes the words on the page in response to how the ear hears rhythm between and among words, not just inside them. That is why William Carlos Williams's infamous "fashionable grocery list" ("2 partridges / 2 mallard ducks / a Dungeness crab" etc.) could be a poem as well as a grocery list. Music by contrast is the entirety of the sonic world of a poem. The ear of a good poet instinctively retains the sound of everything that has been said in a poem from the beginning to the end, whether in a short lyric or a long narrative, and establishes multiple relationships among those sounds. The Canadian poet John Newlove put it well in a wonderful poem called "White Philharmonic Novels": "This turbulent ear hears turbulent music,/ the poem made up of its parts." Largely lacking end-rhyme and meter, an excerpt from the fourth section of Basil Bunting's poem *Briggflatts* embodies a sense of music that can stand for many other examples:

> Where rats go go I,
> accustomed to penury,
> filth, disgust, and fury;
> evasive to persist,
> reject the bait
> yet gnaw the best.
> My bony feet
> sully shelf and dresser,
> keeping a beat in the dark,
> rap on lath
> till dogs bark
> and sleep, shed,
> slides from the bed.
> O valiant when hunters
> with stick and terrier bar escape
> or wavy ferret leaps,
> encroach and cede again,
> rat, roommate, unreconciled.

This is an instance of poetry's quintessential beauty and truth. The vignette is part of Bunting's autobiographical narrative, a story that could well be nothing more than bar talk or next-seat-in-the-airplane confessional chatter. ("You wouldn't believe how poor I was back then.") It is the rhythmic intercessions and the polyhymnic music of the words that make it poetry. The assonance and internal rhyme are effective and readily sensed, but equally important are the attention to vowel sounds ("rap on lath") and other rhymes—the way in which, for example, at the conclusion of the passage Bunting's ear still remembers the beginning, not just in the repetition of "rat," but also in the reappearance of the long vowel "?" ("I" and "unreconciled"). This is poetic music at a high level. It's what we most want from poetry. It's what makes poetry poetry, at least of a certain kind.

"So much talk of the language—when there are no ears," said Williams in Book III of *Paterson* over sixty years ago. Perhaps readers have abandoned poetry because its essential emphasis on music rather than meaning (although meaning is not irrelevant, needless to say) makes it seem less accessible. Perhaps it appears daunting in the way that chamber music can seem daunting if you are not musically trained. Prose fiction, like a symphony, offers a more ramified converse with a reader; the reader does not necessarily have to hear the language to follow the narrative. A reader who does not hear the poem has missed its essence. The verse from Creeley's poem "For John Wieners," quoted above, concludes with these lines:

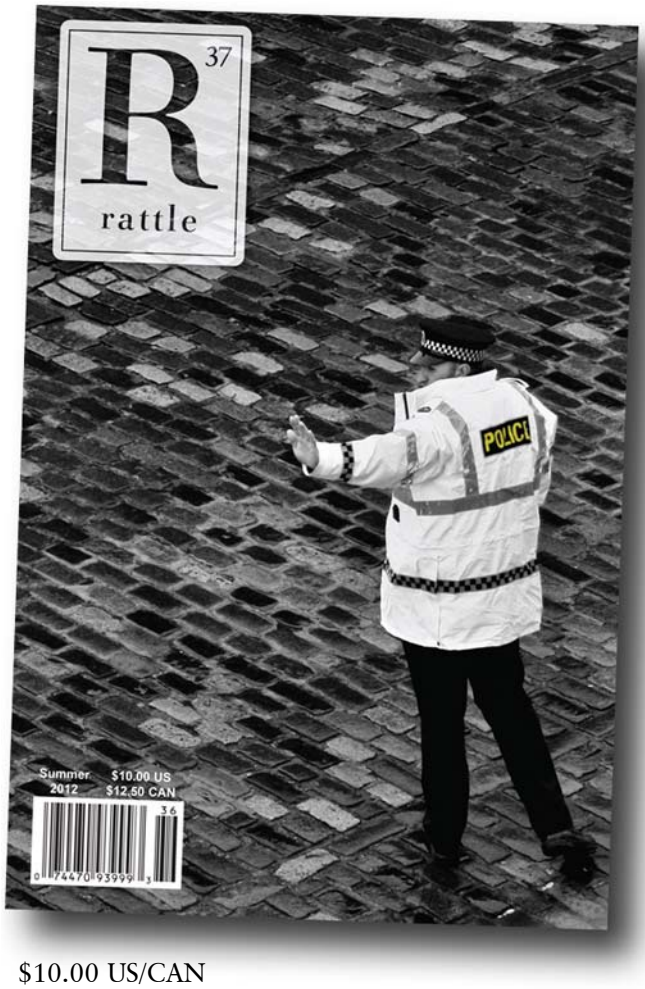
> We are not going anywhere, we are some where, here where John is,
> Where he's brought us much as he might himself this evening, to listen.

That's it: the poem invites us to listen. If we refuse or brush it off, the loss is ours. Williams thought it an incalculable loss ("It is difficult/ to get the news from poems/ yet men die miserably every day/ for lack/ of what is found there"), and he was right.

Notes:

[i] *The Time of the Assassins: A Study of Rimbaud* (1956), p. viii.
[ii] *The Geography of the Imagination* (1997), p. 214.

Bruce Whiteman is a full-time poet and writer, Canadian, but living in Iowa, where he writes poetry, translates from French and Latin, and does classical music commentary. His last two books were a translation of the *Pervigilium Veneris* (Russell Maret, 2009) and a large collection of prose poems called *The Invisible World Is in Decline, Books I-VI* (ECW Press, 2006).



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Tribute to Law Enforcement Poets

Releasing this June, *Rattle* #37 features a selection of poems by fourteen law enforcement officers. One might not expect any similarity between policing and poetry, but with reams of paperwork, plenty of drama, and a need for attention to fine detail, poets and cops do have much in common. And as retired police officer James Fleming explains in his introduction, "a sparse, carefully-written police report can evoke tears."

Of course, the Law Enforcement tribute is only part of the issue. *Rattle* #37's particularly rich open section features the work of a full 68 poets. And to cap off one of our most diverse issues yet, Alan Fox interviews the controversial political activist and poet Amiri Baraka, and former-Mennonite memoirist and poet Rhoda Janzen.

Tribute to Law Enforcement Poets
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Richard Vargas • David Wagoner • Kathleen Wakefield
A.D. Winans • Scott Withiam • Jeff Worley

from Rattle #37, Summer 2012
Poetry

Erik Campbell

Great Caesar's Ghost

I was on my third drink in my mother's basement
because it was Christmas and my father is dead

and took with him the plural possessive
of the basement and the house above it.

He was so tired before the end
that he spoke only in Freudian slips.

He painted houses and sighed a lot before
he died, and my older brother who is clever said

if you divided up his sighs you would have words
but all the words would be a synonym for "sigh."

And when he died I remembered something
funny he said at a restaurant one night:

"I bet you Caesar would hate his salad."
I remembered this and whenever I read

a menu, I think of Caesar, pissed
that the Greek salad is superior

even though they were punks. It happens
like this. A man becomes a salad joke,

becomes drop cloths in the basement draped
over an old bed frame. The drop cloths

become abstract paintings I can squint through
and finally sigh to, because a man can't fail

a Rorschach test, even if he's dead
drunk because it's Christmas and cold.

Edmund Jorgensen

Wouldn't You Like to Be a Pepper, Too?

Thanks for asking! Fitting
In is pleasant, and I'm not
Ashamed to say it, but
I'm not your typical
Conformist either. Sometimes
On a Wednesday night
I'll go out to a restaurant—
Something ethnic, preferably—
Mexican, maybe Greek—
And just sit there, sipping water,
Nibbling free chips or pita,
Not ordering anything, just
Watching people watching me.
I like the feeling that
America is with me. Is
Interested in how I spend
My days and dollars.
Cares what I wear.
I don't even mind
The full page ads in magazines.
In fact I cut them out
And tape them to my mirror,
Where I can feel them
Willing me to use
A different hair gel. I like
Going to the cinema,
Tiptoeing out a couple minutes
Before the movie ends and
Waiting in the lobby for the crowd
To exit, the human flood to surge
And ebb and surge around
Me till I close my eyes and feel
For one perfect moment as
Lost and found as
The snowman buried
In an avalanche.

from Rattle #37, Summer 2012
Poetry

Jeff Worley

How to Become a Professional Folk Singer

at the newly opened Ambush Club, Wichita, 1971

There I was: lemon-tinted Lennon glasses,
paisley shirt like ironed vomit, corroded
toenails dangling from Kmart sandals…

And when Otis Redding was cut off mid-chorus
from the juke, the three dozen dressed-to-the-max
black couples gazed up at me, each mouth a rictus,

as I tuned my Yamaha in a circle of light.
Close enough for folk music, I declared
and began to strum my three-chord version

of "Dock of the Bay," a clever segue and nod to Otis,
I thought. My fingers meated through the song.
I sat on that dock watching the waves come and go

through three choruses, then plunked the final major C
with all the majesty of a hammered thumbnail.
And I saw I had stunned the crowd to silence.

Did these fine people think I was a novelty act?
If I'd expected applause, I got a voice in the back saying,
Whoa, Momma—turn on the fire hose.

And poor Dennis, the new owner and dead-ringer
Ozzie Nelson who'd heard me strum "Stewball"
and "Puff" at the Riverside Park Folk Jamboree,

who thought I was good and knew he needed music,
was frozen behind the bar, lava lamps auguring his future:
purple bubbles rising and breaking apart

like the opening-night crowd. The juke erupted
with Otis, back on his dock. The stage lights dimmed.
Drinks on the house! I heard a voice say, Dennis' voice,

and he pressed a twenty into my right palm. *Just go,*
he said. *OK?* I slung the guitar over my shoulder.
He opened the back door to the parking lot,

and I took my rightful place among the stars.

Janice D. Soderling

Real Men Don't Take No Shit From Nobody

White man
Black man
Yellow man
Grief.

Doctor
Farmer
Soldier
Chief.

Hittin'
Spittin'
Cussin'
Hard.

Bury
Their wives
In the cold
Graveyard.

from Rattle #37, Summer 2012
Tribute to Law Enforcement Poets

Suzanne Kessler

Mercy

darkens the girl
in the green bag.
Mercy the child,
beautiful and deep.
Feed her dirt
with a copper spoon,
paint three finger holes—
a purple dolphin
in her small room.
Touch her curving leg.
Mercy the child,
the noose,
the chair, the table,
the empty space
she was.
Better dead
or blind
or deeply placed
than merciful.
Drive mercy
into bird throats,
tree hands,
the eyes of grasses.
Walk away.
Leave mercy
to the shovels
and fools.

Dean Olson

Yellow Sailboat

Channel Obstruction

She is a pretty girl, swinging
gracefully in the gentle tide
and light puffs of winter,
sun catching her bright
yellow and throwing it all
around the harbor.

The shipboard computer tells
her secrets: age, pedigree,
where she lives, the name
of her owner; but not why
he dropped here to swing
with the impulsive wind of winter.

She is close to the channel.
We can leave her alone in an
easterly or southwesterly,
which is most of it this time
of year, but if the wind veers
west, she will be in trouble.

I imagine her owner as
a ne'er-do-well with a scruffy
beard; his unwashed hair and body
sleeping it off on the beach
with another woman. It's not
the first time he left her alone

like this, showing her age but still
very pretty, drifting at the edge
of a busy channel. You are too good
for him! We will keep near you;
take you to a new home
when the wind veers, as it will.

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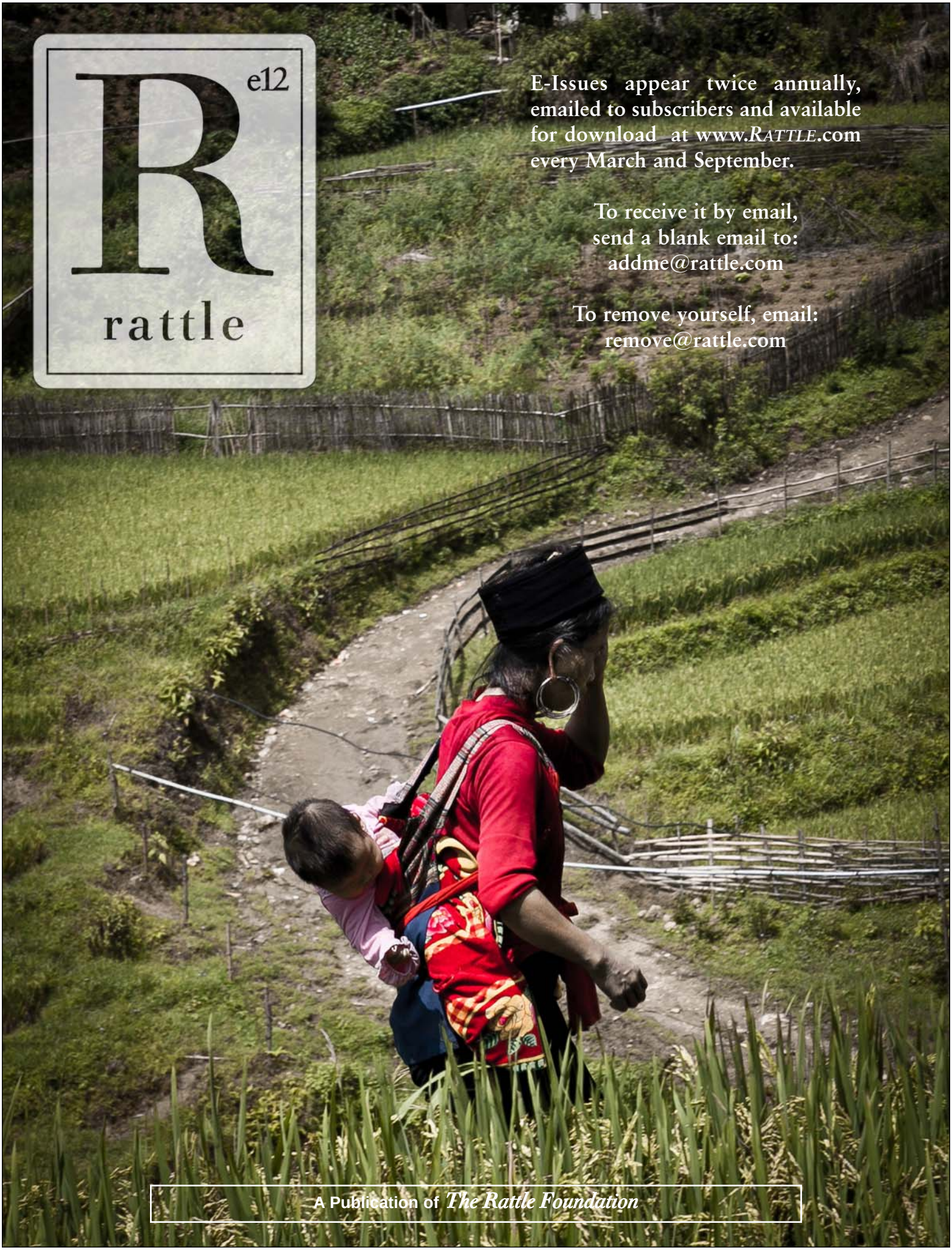

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