Spring 2007

RATTLE

Poetry for the 21st Century

Book Features:

Laurie Blauner
All This Could Be Yours

Roy Jacobstein
A Form of Optimism

2007 Neil Postman Award for Metaphor

Paintings by Mark Vallen

Issue #27 Preview

e.2

Spring 2007, e.2

 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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About This E-Issue

In many ways it's been a frustrating winter—trying to arrange an audio CD for the summer issue knowing nothing about audio; dealing with constant hacker attacks to our ever-growing website; snowstorms and missed flights, SUVs crashing through coffee shops (don't ask). But spring is here and the figurative fruit trees are already starting to bloom. I type this while watching a baseball game; life doesn't get much better.

Laying out the new e-Issue, our second digital venture, I can't help but be amazed at how good a read it is. If this were a full issue of *RATTLE* and not a mere supplement, I'd still be happy with the product. Not that I mean to toot my own horn—the quality here has nothing to do with me; a few artists and writers I enjoy just offered to share some extra work. They really came through.

It's incredible to me that for 50 bucks of bandwidth and a couple hours on the weekend, it's possible to release something so worthy to the world. We didn't need a grant to put this together; all it took was a little software, a little time, and a high-speed internet connection. It's that easy. I suppose this is the future, what all the established media industries fear the most—self-published digital media, mixed media, print-on-demand kiosks in every Starbucks on every corner of every street in the world.

So print out a copy or scroll down your monitor and stick it to the man. Find a comfortable chair and enjoy the heart of Laurie Blauner, the intellect of Roy Jacobstein. Learn a lesson on writing from Gary Lehmann; introduce yourself to the founder of slam poetry.

New in this issue is the Neil Postman Award for Metaphor—yet another brilliant idea I can't take any credit for. One of our readers suggested it, generously putting the up money, and the Postman family approved. Every year we'll be selecting the best use of metaphor from our print issues, and at the same time honoring a man who deserves to be considered a literary figure. It's a simple nod, but something that feels wonderful to be able to do.

I can't leave without mentioning the upcoming issue, which in addition to 60 great page poems, features a tribute to slam poetry. Included with the issue is a full-length audio CD of the poems performed by their authors—quite literally 18 of the best performance poets alive today, all with amazingly diverse styles and backgrounds. If you can listen through without laughing or crying, you'd better check your pulse. A year ago I hadn't given slam much thought; now I can't believe I wasted so many years without it.

Despite the CD, the cover price remains just $10, releasing June

1st and available for preorder online right now (securely through our HackerSafe third party vendor).

One final note on the website: due to the aforementioned hacker attacks, I've built a new, simpler, html site. It doesn't have the pretty hover-overs and dropdown menus, but all the content remains. The pretty php site might return, but it might not—either way, switching ruins most of the links. If you visit us only to find a dead page, please just type in www.rattle.com and navigate from the home page.

We're not going anywhere.

Timothy Green
Editor
March 21, 2007

THE NEIL POSTMAN AWARD FOR METAPHOR

"A metaphor is not an ornament. It is an organ of perception."
—Neil Postman, from The End of Education

When one thinks of champions and purveyors of metaphor—those certain folks who habitually view experience and ideas as "like" something else, who are invested in better navigating, complicating, decoding, and enriching the human condition through comparison, juxtaposition, allusion, and all other available schemes and tropes—one normally thinks of poets: Shakespeare, Wallace Stevens, and the like.

Neil Postman rarely comes to mind. If he does, he's at the very end of one's mental list, dangling from a metaphor shaped like a string. And this, we think, is a lamentable thing.

Postman wasn't a poet, strictly speaking, but he had a poet's nature—a poet's soul. And like poets, he always spoke crucially to his readers without excluding or pandering to them, and he thought that ideas could help save us were we mindful, or help ruin us if we weren't. He espoused the same values as most poets and addressed the same questions with equal fervency and fluency: careful thought, the import of probing questions, the dangers of definition, the celebration and propagation of humanism, the love of language, etc. He understood Blake's dark, satanic mills and militated against them. He knew Thoreau's quiet desperation and hoped to help us avoid it. And he knew how to eat a peach and steal any number of plums from the refrigerator.

"The medium is the metaphor."
—Neil Postman, from Amusing Ourselves to Death

Although primarily known as an educationist and a media critic, Postman was, at his core, a "noticer"—and he particularly noticed what we do with metaphor and how metaphor shapes and creates our cognitive world. Much like George Lakoff and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Postman maintained that words (and words, in truth, are metaphors) are as much the driver of reality as they are the vehicle. Consequently, metaphor was not a subject to be relegated and limited to high school poetry units wherein a teacher drones on about the difference between "like" and "as" and considers the job finished. For Postman, the study of metaphor was unending and metaphors were as crucial as they were omnipresent; they served to give form to and dictate experience. Is America the great melt-

ing pot, or is it an experiment in unity through diversity? What metaphors are embedded in television commercials—are commercials, in fact, parables and/or metaphors for "Heaven?" Is language a tree or a river? If the medium is the metaphor, then what framing mechanisms are at play when one reads Dickens as opposed to watching *Friends*? Can one "save time" without a clock? Can a certain medium of communication, say, smoke signals, convey significant truths? Can a poem? All of the above questions are questions that Postman pondered (and, come to think of it, they're all good ideas for poems).

Throughout Postman's books (to name a few greats: *Amusing Ourselves to Death, Technopoly, Conscientious Objections, The End of Education, The Disappearance of Childhood*), the importance of metaphor comes up time and time again. Put simply, Postman (like his teacher and hero, Marshall McLuhan), maintained that the medium through which information is conveyed directly colors meaning and our sense of the world—hence Postman's lamenting the slow death of the "typographical mind" and the rise and present ubiquity of television. We are, essentially, what we see, hear, and read. Postman might go so far as to opine that we are the metaphors we use.

In honor and remembrance of Neil Postman, who died on October 5th, 2003, we have established the Neil Postman Award for Metaphor. The raison d'être for 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 the two issues of *RATTLE* printed during that year and all poems that appear in the magazine are applicable. There are no entry fees or submission guidelines involved. The author of the chosen poem will receive $100.

We hope that the winner will buy books with the money. And kill their television.

Cullen Bailey Burns

WE JUST WANT IT TO BE HEALTHY

Here is the little bomb. We call it baby,
all mouth and potential. We do not speak
of disappointments—no one to strap it on yet
and cross the border, the demilitarized zone
of our foyer. The neighbors coo at it, rub
the tops of its dimpled hands with their thumbs
and say, "give me a smile."
We think about schools and such, of course.
But at night when we lay our plans
it always kicks its feet from the bassinette
in the corner of the room, central to everything,
central to some final detonation.

Stacie Primeaux

RELIC

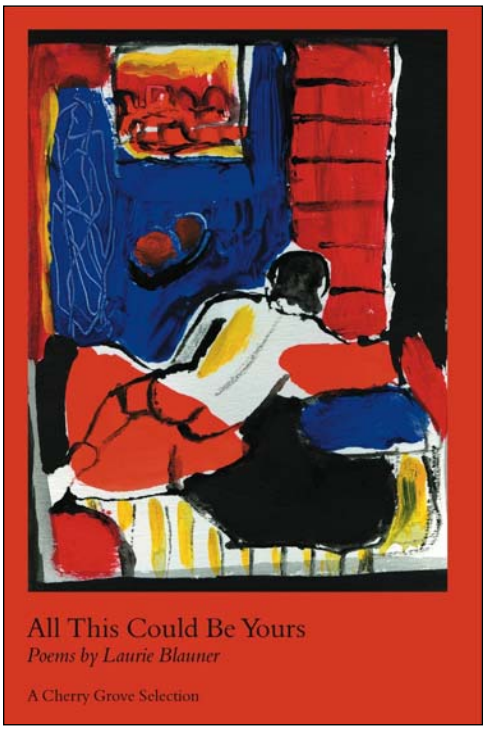
My son is not as enchanted with me
as he used to be. He's begun to shrug my limbs off
snuff out my kisses, though I tell him
he's only rubbing them in

I'm sauce-spattered as the kitchen
stove. I smell like stale wisdom and hard watermarks
My boot scuffs sound decades of stumble and somewhere
he must've noticed this, indecision
stuck between the teeth, self-doubt dirty dress hem

I've hoarded a certain memory from him
behind a stone he's too small
to push over; a night of treason and injustice
where I caught his father
skipping bedtime story pages in haste
His dog-eared face, the stars sobbed
with my scalded boy, and all apologies
were slung from the balcony

He whimpered like a rusty swing set
as I lay in the next room, all glory and grace
a bruised-bitten tongue hid
I feigned sound and stately and maybe
this was the moment, the peak
where his tiny voice pleaded under the threshold
"Oh Mama, don't marry Daddy. Marry me."

I was pioneered, my summit laid claim to
He takes the view for granted now
And I squirrel away my stories for winters
like these to dangle before him.
See, boy. I never skipped a page.



ALL THIS COULD BE YOURS BY LAURIE BLAUNER

A Cherry Grove Selection

"I am trying to say something else," Laurie Blauner begins one poem in her breathtaking collection *All This Could Be Yours*. "The abstract made flesh." Blauner's poems are startling in their attention to the demands of the flesh, its constant need to sense the world physically as well as spiritually. Teeming with the sounds and sights of the earth, Blauner's poems immerse the reader in her world—and our own.

All This Could Be Yours by Laurie Blauner · Original Paperback · Cherry Grove Collections
Cherry Grove Collections. P.O. Box 541106. Cincinnati, OH 45254-1106.
Publication Date: 2006 · ISBN: 1-933456-38-8 · 112 pages · $17.00

To order online visit www.cherry-grove.com/blauner.html

For more information call Cherry Grove Collections: (513) 474-3761
or email: connect@wordtechcommunications.com

All poems reprinted courtesy of Cherry Grove Collections.

Laurie Blauner's first book of poetry, *Other Lives*, was published in 1984. Her second was titled *Self-Portrait With an Unwilling Landscape* and was published in 1989. Both were published by Owl Creek Press, as was her third poetry book called *Children of Gravity*, which won a 1995 King County Publication award. Her fourth book of poems, *Facing the Facts*, was published in 2002 by Orchises Press. Laurie Blauner's poetry has appeared in *American Poetry Review, Poetry, Poetry Northwest, Georgia Review, The Nation, The New Republic,* and *Field* among others. She has received several Seattle Arts Commission and King County Art grants and an NEA grant in poetry.

Her first novel, *Somebody*, won a King County Arts Commission award and was published by Black Heron Press in 2003. She has received an Artist Trust grant in fiction and has published short stories in several magazines including the *Wisconsin Review* and *Talking River Review*. Her second novel called *Infinite Kindness* won a 4Culture Arts award and was also published by Black Heron Press in January, 2007. She lives in Seattle, Washington.

Praise for Laurie Blauner

"...a fine poet with a masterly command of language and imagery..."
—James Welch, author of *Riding the Earthboy 40*

"This is Laurie Blauner's fifth poetry collection, and, in my judgment, her strongest. Blauner has a rich fantasy life, which the rigors of everyday living are seldom able to dislodge. *All This Could Be Yours* abounds in highly original metaphors that readers will discover for themselves."
—Madeline DeFrees, author of *Blue Dusk*

Laurie Blauner

FOR USE BY CONVENTIONAL LIGHT

I am trying to say something else. Not how
a tongue of light lies about the shape of flowers,
how water accepts moonlight without perturbance,
or sky is embedded with a somnolent light the birds
want and cannot reach. But how we are defined.

The abstract made flesh. The sharp light
of a knife that broke the boy. His blood's affinity
for your hands. The bones that made way for
you to touch his heart. All his archival muscles
led to this one moment. A sky full of insects

exhaling at school. You, my child,
are my flesh and blood. I whisper
to the windows, accentuating summer tomatoes
into redness at the ledge, to let me out. My love
ripening at the doorstep, then eaten. I open

the handbook of absurdity and cover my mouth.
You must be a theory, a bad one. I hate
the days that take you away. I argue
with myself. I apologize to every family
I meet. I wonder what would happen if birds

reached the top of the sky. If water threw
moonlight back to the moon. The visual lies
vanished. I think of life. I think of
sacrifices, big and small, and
how the ancient gods just took these offerings.

Blauner

THE SCIENCE OF FORGETTING

Dust in the corners is full of debris and flotsam.
The pinwheel of bones
in my father's face whirls.
My mother laces her fingers
with sunlight
or stitches of snow on the window.
I am the amateur daughter
squeezed from another state.
My thoughts are staccato
against the traffic.
The weathered flesh of hills rises
just beyond my vision.
My old father speaks to my mother
in the language of animals,
not recognizing her.
My mother
tests the floorboards
like a caged panther.
Brainwashing she says.
The portrait of a swimmer:
my father lost in swimming trunks,
a rubber cap strapped
below his chin,
his arms frantic
as he sails through air.
I want to forget them,
the face of snow
is cheap and white at the windows,
the stars implacable—
deep, silver scars in the belief of heaven,
the shipwreck of their lives.

Blauner

THE HIT MAN ABSENTMINDEDLY KILLS A FLY

Each body is patient. Each in their different way,
sometimes words cough out. In the syncopation of knives,
something is left. Dirt under my fingernails.
Insects resembling bullets worry the air

and this is the time for small talk, time to implicate
yourself into the next day. The buzz is for a job
well done, applause, money. Time swallows
big words in the short hours

of each afternoon. A friend's voice tosses itself over
like evidence of sunlight, proving its existence
in this half visible world, where a stranger's smile
could mean laughter, acquiescence, or death.

I let the air wash me, a congregation of
sounds beginning and ending. The day moves on
awkwardly wounded, looking for sanctuary,
knowing nothing, no matter how small, is forgiven.

Blauner

THE COUNTERFEITER'S BELIEF IN THE ORDER OF THINGS

The setting sun adjusts the horizon, air peels
the redundant landscape from the highway.

The world fits within. I think about the price
and velocity of still things: paper as thin as

a sick wife's wrists, the silence between the gossip
of printing machines, the brutal resuscitation of light

in illustrations. Marriage is a cruel joke.
We are not much more than weak breath, money

overfilling the furniture. Each day wind knots
the same green grass. I love the kiss of ink

on paper, the clocks in my eyes and heart.
The smell of a damp labyrinth, desire unfulfilled,

sky shedding its same stars. I know about men's dreams
and afternoon reshaping the litany of evening.

The unfolding of surprises, flowers invoking the body,
muscling light, children taking shape like origami,

the wrinkled skin of motion left
in a pile, the exhausted air.

Trees press their threads of bone against
my window, my wife's face. We spend

ourselves and depart like currency. A kingdom
of acceptances and order. No superstitions,

black cats or night. I think about
how a red apple absorbs everything but red.

Blauner

THE PHOTOGRAPHER, WHEN COLOR MISBEHAVES

You invent black and white, shadow and ghost, wrong and right.
Light worships your household. Rests in the furniture,
polishes the fruit you return to, hungry again.

Welcome home to photographs that slowly wear out,
stay in place like the warm circle of sun
caught at the window staring at your wife.

Plums don't stay purple for you, imagine them almost black
and circular. You think of a woman who looks in the mirror
and sees blue. A child who swallows yellow

and falls on the ground. A man asleep in green.
Is it you? You watch yourself like music in the awkward glass,
an imaginary song. You place your wife's hip bones in moonlight.

Her body is held in the boundaries of this world.
You love the same shape differently each time.
She resembles a peach in a white bowl. The domain

is adamant about colors, the invocation
of language. You see everything gray and
through a lens, never forgetting, distancing

your aggrieved nude, your disintegrating
still life. Somewhere a few stray stars become visible
and your mind's eye is arrested by the obedient light.

Blauner

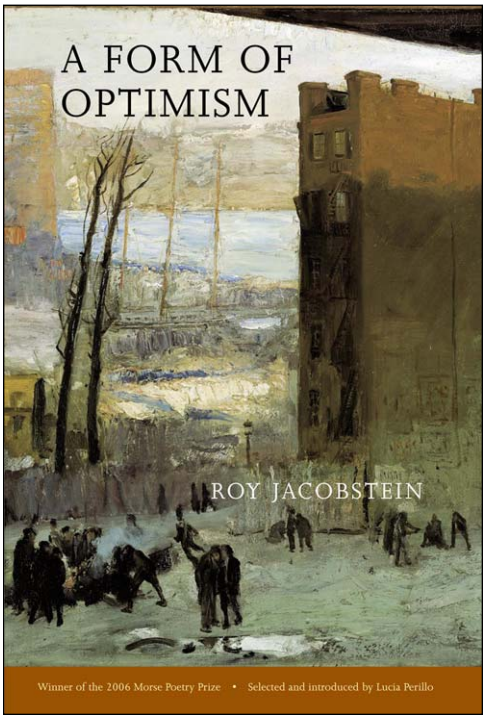
DREAM OF RED ROSES WITHOUT THE ROSES

All relationships are give and take.
Take red for example. The color is simply
an instruction to imagination. The body is
a surprise, the apparition of a hand.

Perhaps I have roses, loving the way
blossoms collide. Remembering how
all the years without rain I continued
to feel its possibility.

Tree branches are smoky in moonlight,
the bones of a fine hand. I dream
a mouth at the center. *Give it up*
the moon says. And I do,

lying in deep grass, taking whatever
the world has to offer. The stems
are boneless, unraveling in light,
listening to the garden. They borrow red,
making it redder.



A Form of Optimism by Roy Jacobstein

Samuel French Morse Poetry Prize

Selected and Introduced by Lucia Perillo

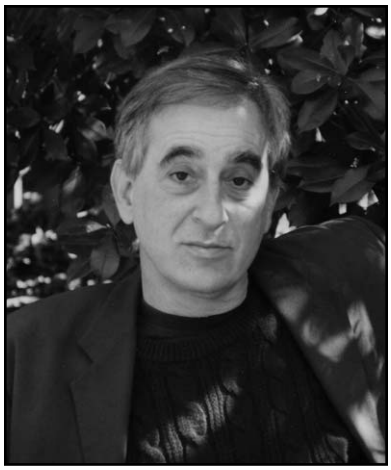
Filtered through the twin lenses of human history and personal memory, and suffused with ironic appreciation, A Form of Optimism engages in a prismatic meditation on beauty and evil, cornucopia and loss. The book becomes a lyrical mosaic, its compelling poems the broken pieces: sharp-edged and colorful, translucent, evocative. Drawing on the author's cross-cultural work in international health, the poems range widely and naturally across setting, personage, and tongue—from Istanbul to Detroit, Mother Teresa to Gorm the Old, Swahili to Sanskrit. Variously anxious, rueful, witty, tender, and worn, A Form of Optimism transcribes an arc of compassion and hope, embracing the sublime mysteries of the world and the word.

A Form of Optimism by Roy Jacobstein · Northwestern University Press
University Press of New England. One Court Street. Lebanon, NH 03766.
Publication Date: 2006 · ISBN: 1-5553-665-4 · 61 pages · $15.95 paper, $27.00 cloth.

To order online visit www.upne.com

For more information call toll free: (800) 421-1561

All poems reprinted courtesy of Northwestern University Press, after having appeared originally, some of them since revised, in the following journals: "A Form of Optimism" in *The Marlboro Review*, "Emigrees" in *Arts & Letters*, "HIV Needs Assessment" in *Prairie Schooner*, "Decimation" and "The Mystery and Melancholy of the Street" in *Indiana Review*, and "Ardor" in *The Threepenny Review*. "The Mystery and Melancholy of the Street" is also included in the textbook *LITERATURE: Reading Fiction, Poetry and Drama* (Mc-Graw-Hill, 2006).



Roy Jacobstein's first book of poetry, *Ripe*, won the Felix Pollak Prize and was a finalist for the Walt Whitman Award. His work appears in *The Gettysburg Review, The Iowa Review, The Missouri Review, Parnassus, Poetry Daily, Shenandoah, Threepenny Review, TriQuarterly,* and elsewhere. He has received several awards from *Prairie Schooner* and *Mid-American Review*'s James Wright Prize. His poetry is included in the textbook *LITERATURE: Reading Fiction, Poetry & Drama* (McGraw-Hill, 2006). He has an M.D. and M.P.H. from the University of Michigan and an M.F.A. from Warren Wilson College. A public health physician, he works in Africa and Asia on women's reproductive health programs and lives with his wife and daughter in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Praise for Roy Jacobstein

"As a poet and a doctor engaged in international public health, Roy Jacobstein observes the world from a singularly important vantage. He dwells not on the obvious if complicated politics of the virus but instead on the details that skitter away from the temptations of propaganda."

—From Lucia Perillo's introduction to *A Form of Optimism*

"If poets were athletes, Roy Jacobstein's specialty would be the triple jump, that graceful, hysterical combination of running and leaping that can take a competitor fifty feet or more. Look at a poem like 'The Mystery and Melancholy of the Street,' for example, in which he sails all the way from Pago Pago to Argentina to Billie Holiday to Benjamin Franklin in just a few lines. And when the intern treating his busted clavicle says "hoops," he thinks of the little girl in Giorgio di Chirico's famous painting, rolling her hoop into the ominous shade. And out again: not in the painting, but in Jacobstein's mind, so agile and richly imaginative that his every glance amounts, as the title of this collections says, to a form of optimism."

—David Kirby

"From a calligraphy shop in Istanbul to advertisements for caskets and toothpaste in Lilongwe, to a bottle cap of Faygo Red Pop, "carbonated taste of the Midwest," Roy Jacobstein's curious, unflinching eyes see more than most of us ever could. He reveals the blinding complexity of a world that encompasses both Hitler's watercolors and "the gold glinting from an armadillo's shell." Jacobstein's poems are as exquisitely crafted as a mosaic in Topkapi, and like Rilke's, they say to us in a voice we can trust, "You must change your life." Courageous and sensual, these poems "claw deep into hard ground.'"

—Robert Thomas

Roy Jacobstein

A FORM OF OPTIMISM

I doze in tranches and planes,
    angled acutely
        like some Cubist harlequin.

Easy once, that nightly pirouette
    into REM sleep,
        but what with the road rage,

dirty bombs, malevolent spores,
    it's clear that's Oblivion
        whose sulfurous wheezes

are singeing our neck-hairs,
    hence my new habit
        of sleeping with the lights on—

which doesn't mean sleep's
    a bad thing, in fact
        its lack makes everyone's bones

cry out, and right now my vertebrae
    are emitting a cascade
        of wails to do a banshee proud.

O numinous world!, where a thing
    so routine, so banal
        as tonight's pastel sky

still takes one's breath, even as out there
    they're searching for the next
        seven year-old stolen from her bed

while asleep, and cactuses in the desert
    (where the body waits)
        already are entering bloom.

Jacobstein

EMIGRÉES

—"Imagine the small empty purse
your mother carried across an ocean."

Only now, in the airport waiting area,
riffling through a discarded *Redbook*
as our century passes its worn baton
to the next, do I vision her exodus

from Pilvestok, detritus of the First
World War. She'd have been three,
maybe four, already the trachoma
clouding her corneas, veiling her

from her own sight, threatening
to snuff the Statue's welcome lamp.
Did she grasp her Papa's hand the way
he grasped at prayer? And in her other

hand—what? A doll with blue clear eyes?
German fairy tales? Or perhaps a lemon,
its rough skin staining her palm for life,
so each time she touched hand to face

the next eight decades she'd inhale
that bitter scent, hear her sisters retching
again into the shadows of steerage,
and claw deeper into the hard ground.

Jacobstein

HIV NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Everywhere the faces, hair, limbs
are coal, obsidian, flawless black
sapphire, thus the rare *mzungu**

like me stands out the way those
remaining white moths once did
on industrialized London's trees.

A month fluttering *The Warm Heart*
of Africa's long length on this *Needs*
Assessment. We've found the needs

many. But let us not talk of that,
as the people do not. Focus instead
on the vivid oleander & limpid sky

that domes the arid volcanic hills,
its lapis mirrored in the uniforms
of the file of schoolgirls who stride

the side of the road. And when the talk,
matter-of-fact, beyond resigned, bears
left at the roundabout, glances upon

a cousin's funeral attended yesterday,
the two added children your colleague
from Lilongwe is now raising alone,

funeral venues for this weekend, just
sit there as the *Project Vehicle* propels
you onward to the next *Site*, past

the lone ads for toothpaste
& for study opportunity abroad,
& the many for caskets ("lightweight,

can be carried by one"), & say nothing.

—*Swahili for *white person*, literally "to travel around"

Jacobstein

DECIMATION

Not wholesale
elimination, final
solution—it's just
reduction by 1/10th,
not unlike the way
this eight-foot high
column of bleached
skulls from Pol Pot
days tapers upwards
almost imperceptibly
from base to topmost
crown, so as to mimic
the *stupa*, sacred tower
built over a lock of hair
or thread of robe or other
relic of the Buddha or spot
where once he'd meditated
during his life's slow journey
to enlightenment, his becoming
ever more serene, impermanent,
white rose above a lattice of bones

Jacobstein

THE MYSTERY AND MELANCHOLY OF THE STREET

Piano in Melanesian Pidgin is *big black box with teeth,*
you hit him, he cry. Must take forever to reach the end
of the sentence in Pago Pago. And why is Pago Pago
pronounced *Pango Pango*, like it rhymes with *tango*?
Where did that *n* go? If it's true the tango was invented
in Argentina a century ago, why's their economy
such a mess today and when will the Mothers
of the Plaza de Mayo get justice? All over the world
women are named for what blooms—*Daisy, Iris,*
Dahlia, Lily, Rose—but no man is named for a flower,
which explains a lot about human history. Lady Day
always wore a white gardenia in her hair, even though
she wasn't allowed up the elevator with white folk.
The *Infanta of Castille* may be the answer to the conundrum
of London's tube stop, *Elephant and Castle*, whose origin
otherwise—like ours—is an enigma, a vortex of mystery
that must perplex even the most jaded urban commuter.
I know it does me, these mornings when a humid breeze
bodes another scorcher in the City of Brotherly Love.
Wasn't Poor Richard lucky not to get himself electrocuted
flying his kites into those lightning storms, so later
he could have all his amorous escapades in Paris? A bad
bounce last night caromed me into the Emergency Room
with a busted clavicle. *No sweat, you'll be shooting hoops*
again in no time the intern opined, pulling her figure-
of-eight brace taut against my chest. But who can hear
the word *hoops* without immediately seeing that little blond girl
rolling her hoop up the ochre umber burnt sienna street
in Giorgio di Chirico's famous painting that portends
the rise of fascism in Italy according to art historians
because the scene is a rigid geometry of arc and angle
and her face is unseen, and though she seems carefree
in the Tuscan sun, she's rolling her big innocent hoop
into the looming shade.

Jacobstein

ARDOR

No wonder *ardour* couldn't survive
the bullying linguistic fist of the Hero
of the Battle of San Juan Hill,
robust and lusty Theodore Roosevelt,
who also managed, upon becoming
the youngest and most virile President
of a young and expanding country,
to eliminate the *u* from the scents
of *arbour*, the necessities of *labour*
and *neighbour,* the cacophony of *clangour*,
the heat of *rancour*.
O Teddy, burly
bespectacled one, monumentally chiseled
into the granite of that mountainside above
the Badlands, see how the world has grown
harder to command than any Commander-
in-Chief could have imagined a century ago:
no Presidential declaration can alter the rules
of spelling, though it can still delete faces
that leave us with a last short *o* on their lips.

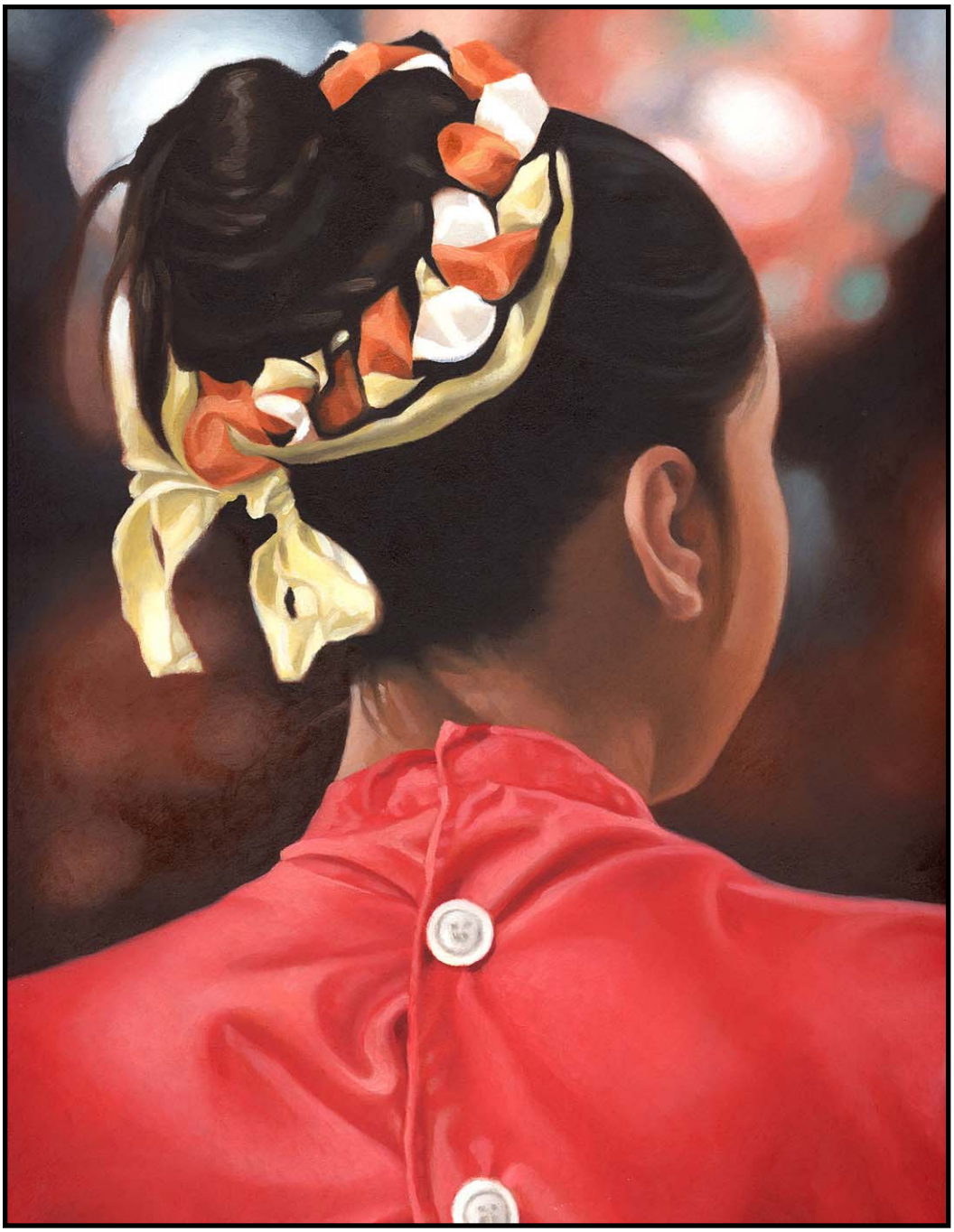
ARTWORK
BY MARK VALLEN

Mark Vallen is one of those rare individuals who fits within a great tradition—the artist who creates images based on social observation and empathy for common people. Proficient in painting, drawing, and printmaking, Vallen is a unique chronicler of the American experience and an accomplished social realist for the early 21st century. Vallen's firm commitment to figurative realism in painting and drawing helps him to document the world around us. His universal themes of human solidarity and compassion are the perfect counterbalance to these chaotic times.

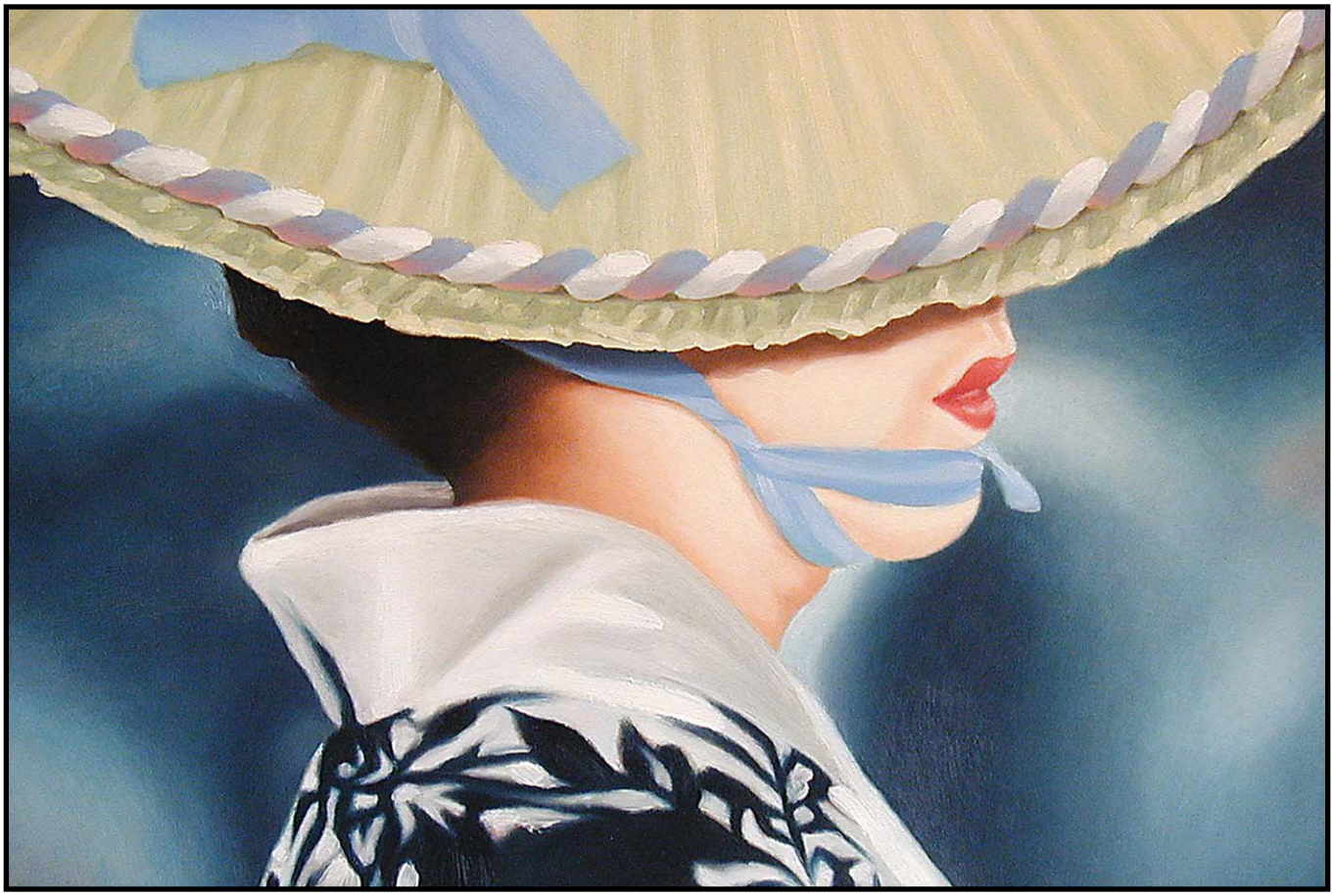
Born in Los Angeles in 1953, Vallen studied for a brief period in the early 1970s at Otis Parsons Art Institute of Los Angeles, but considers himself to be self-taught—deriving inspiration from the rich heritage of artists working as social critics and documentarians. His influences range from Goya and Daumier, to the German expressionists and the Mexican muralists.

Vallen has a decades long exhibition history and his first solo show was held in Los Angeles during July-August 2004 at the A Shenere Velt Gallery, an exhibit that was also a retrospective encompassing 30 years of work. Today Vallen focuses on easel painting, and is a main proponent of social and figurative realism in art. He also writes for and maintains a popular web log where he discusses art theory and news related to the arts. You can view more of his works at:

www.markvallen.com

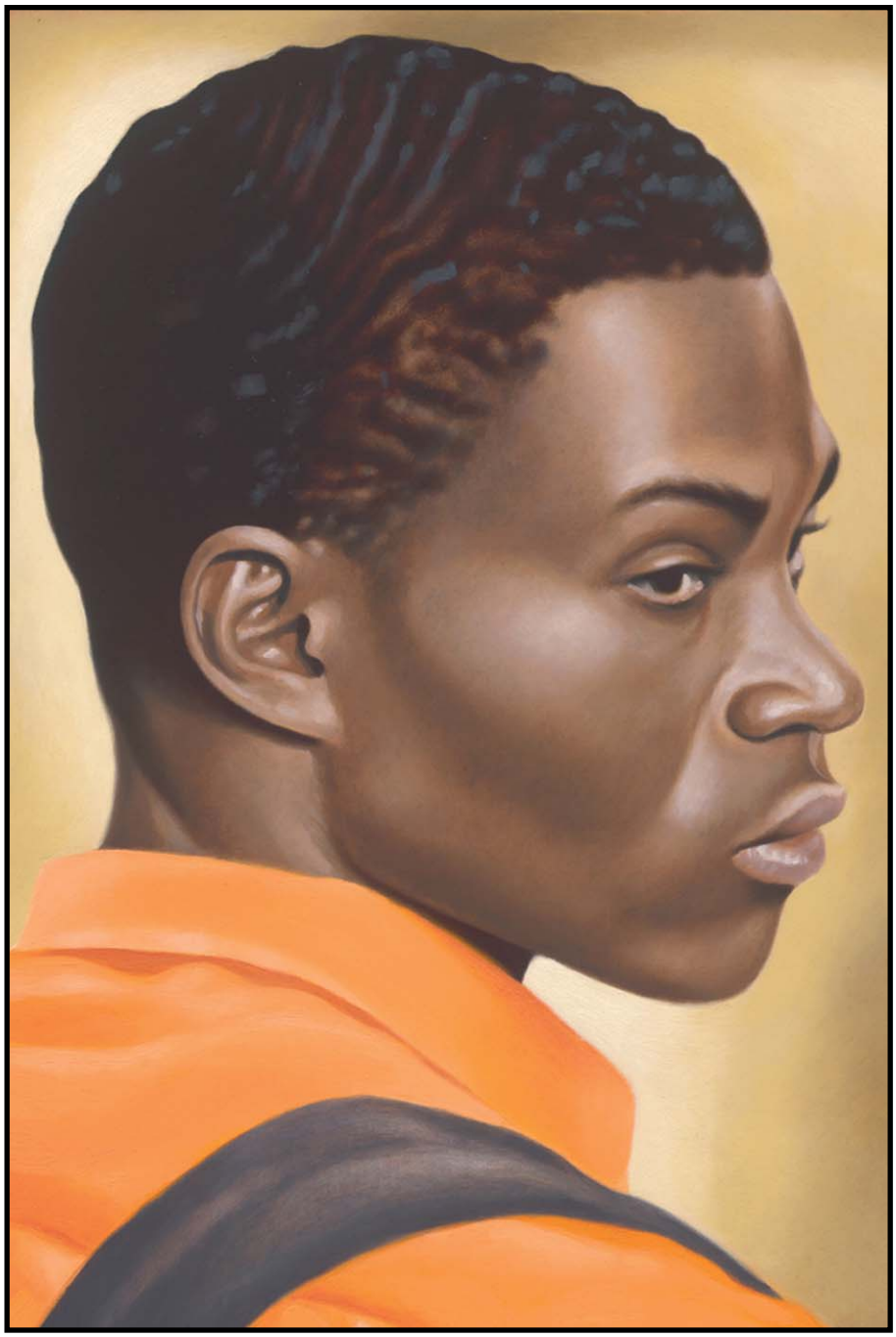


"The Red Dress"
Mark Vallen 2006
Oil on masonite panel 9" x 12"

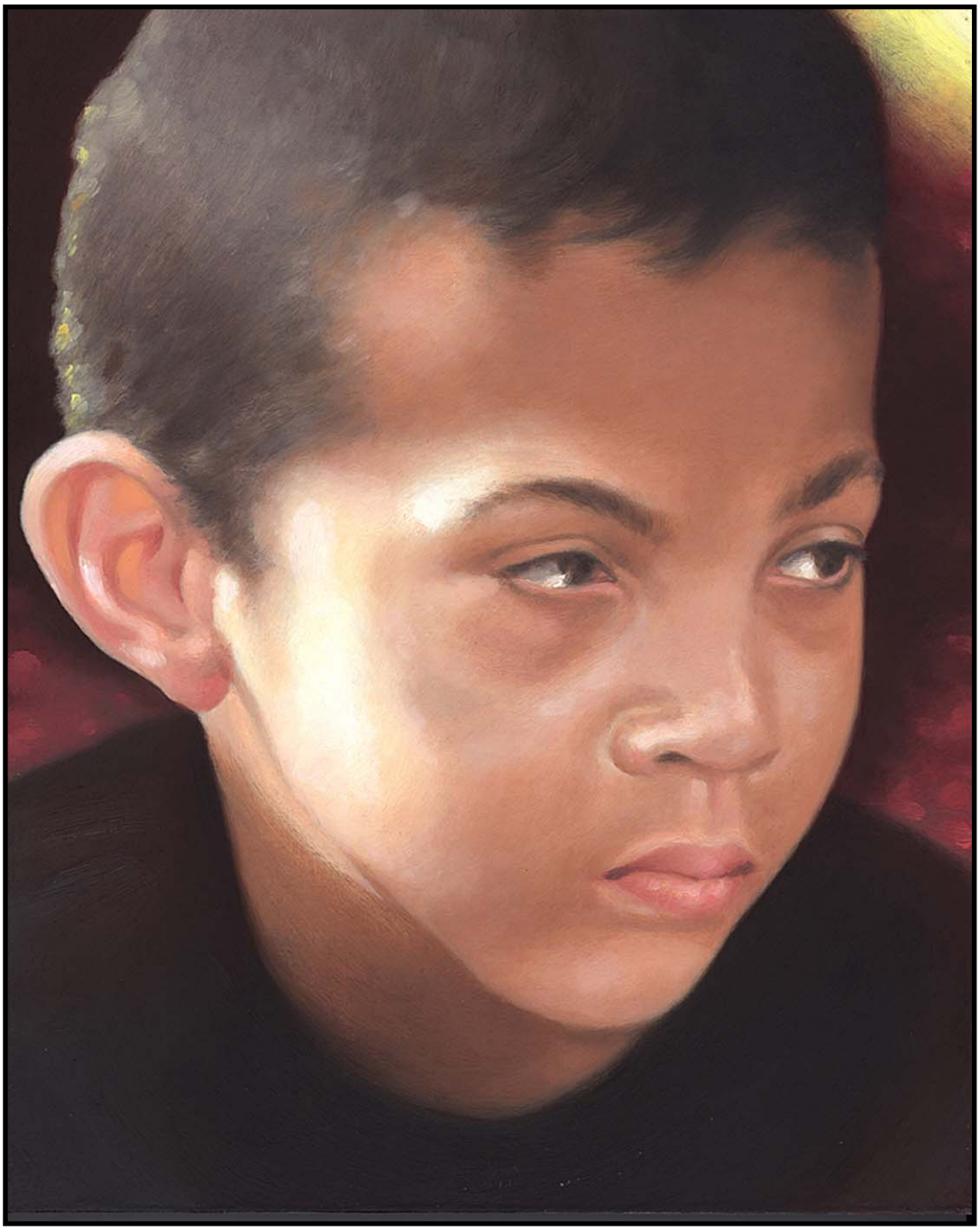


"Japanese Dancer"
Mark Vallen 2007
Oil on Masonic Panel 11" x 14"

"Solidarity"
Mark Vallen 2006
Oil on masonite 18" x 24"



"African American"
Mark Vallen 2004
Oil on wood panel 11" x 14"



"War Child"
Mark Vallen 2007
Oil on masonite panel 9" x 10"

Gary Lehmann

ON THE SELF AND OTHERS: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE CRAFT OF POETRY

When I first started writing poetry, I began writing about the most interesting subject in the world. Me. I had loves and hates, deep disgust and infinite wonder to share. It was all about me. Me, me and more me. I found that every new experience was intensely interesting, and I wanted to share it with the world. It felt a bit selfish, but I reasoned that since I'm such a darned interesting guy, people would naturally gravitate toward my words.

It didn't work out that way. When I tried sharing my poems, I discovered that few people understood them. Fewer yet expressed any liking for them. Even my mother said polite meaningless things after reading them, and no one expressed any desire to publish them. I found their indifference quite surprising, even alarming. How could the world react so coldly to the thoughts of a guy who was pretty much the nicest guy in the universe?

My experiences were common enough. Why didn't people understand when I talked about them? How could the world be so stupid? All people had to do was to put themselves in my shoes. Then they would understand how I felt.

The problem, which I only discovered years later, was that my poetry failed to tell the reader the context of my feelings in a way that highlighted their universal character. The problem was complicated because at that time I didn't perceive my life as progressing through a series of experiences others had had as well. To me, life was being born as I lived it. The waves were parting before my prow for the very first time.

It started to occur to me that if I wanted to have readers for my poems, I needed to include the reader in every verse. I had to start recognizing the universality of my experiences and connecting them with the experiences of my potential readers. What that meant in practice was that I had to start thinking about how my experiences have been paralleled by other people in their lives. When I found an equivalent, then I had a line of communication upon which I could string my personal narrative in a form that could be received on the other end.

Over time, I discovered that writing is at least half about the reader, maybe more than half. Finally, it came to me that the trick to writing good poetry, perhaps the trick to writing in general, is discovering how to approach public issues without losing the intensity of personal feel-

ings. This realization created a change in my thinking about how to write poetry. It's a subtle change, but suddenly I found I had an approach that attracted a readership. At this point, I began my career as a poet.

My experience is probably not all that unique. As youths we like to believe that life is being invented for the first time as we encounter it. As adults, we realize that other people have had all these encounters before. People, in fact, have much more in common than they have in opposition to one another.

The act of writing poetry can be as personal as the poet wants to make it, but the act of sharing poetry with others involves reaching out to our shared heritage of emotions and experiences. That green farmland is where poetry grows, not the rarified oxygen-starved high mountain air of the summits of individuality.

I remember a poem that was written by one of my fellow high school poets. It went something like, "Anguished indecision and tormenting fear / the agony of life / and / the realization of deep pain / that will not go away. / O life! O dear life / That mushroom cloud of exquisite agony!" The problem, of course, is that there is no topic here, no focus for the reader to engage the pain at any level that transcends the gap between sender and receiver. There is pain, but without a context for this pain which everyone can empathize. The reader only sees the outcome and not the human sources.

And the pain itself, though characterized, remains undifferentiated. The poem quickly degenerates into a parody of real emotion. It turns laughable because it is so non-descript. One of the secrets real poets know is that while writers virtually always write for themselves, out of ego, writers who wish to be read by others have to have a super-ego that comes along to lay out the connections that bring readers along.

Let's illustrate this with a poem by the California poet, Robert Hass. In a recent interview he admits, "Everyone...wants to say in their own terms what it means to be alive. Poetry is the most common way, because the material of poetry is the stream of language that is constantly going on in our heads. It's very low tech. Anyone can do it."

HEROIC SIMILE
BY ROBERT HASS

When the swordsman fell in Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*
in the gray rain,
in Cinemascope and the Tokugawa dynasty,
he fell straight as a pine, he fell

as Ajax fell in Homer
in chanted dactyls and the tree was so huge
the woodsman returned for two days
to that lucky place before he was done with the sawing
and on the third day he brought his uncle.

They stacked logs in the resinous air,
hacking the small limbs off,
tying those bundles separately.
The slabs near the root
were quartered and still they were awkwardly large;
the logs from midtree they halved:
ten bundles and four great piles of fragrant wood,
moons and quarter moons and half moons
ridged by the saw's tooth.

The woodsman and the old man his uncle
are standing in midforest
on a floor of pine silt and spring mud.
They have stopped working
because they are tired and because
I have imagined no pack animal
or primitive wagon. They are too canny
to call in neighbors and come home
with a few logs after three days' work.
They are waiting for me to do something
or for the overseer of the Great Lord
to come and arrest them.

How patient they are!
The old man smokes a pipe and spits.
The young man is thinking he would be rich
if he were already rich and had a mule.

Ten days of hauling
and on the seventh day they'll probably
be caught, go home empty-handed
or worse. I don't know
whether they're Japanese or Mycenaean
and there's nothing I can do.
The path from here to that village
is not translated. A hero, dying,

gives off stillness to the air.
A man and a woman walk from the movies
to the house in the silence of separate fidelities.
There are limits to imagination.

In his poem "Heroic Simile," Robert Hass is playing with our expectations of meaning in poetry. This is a complex poem. He seems to be saying that nothing tells its own story except as the poet likens it to something else. In this poem, he draws out the comparison between the death of the samurai soldier and the falling of a great tree. The moviegoer who analyzes the film is like the woodchopper and his uncle who patiently chop up the tree into useable pieces and wait for a cart to carry it away. But the poet has lost interest in the wood chopper metaphor and so the tree remains on the forest floor with no way to be transported back to the village. The moviegoers, a man and a woman each lost in private reveries, walk away from the theatre and leave the whole grand saga of sixteenth century Japan behind as they amble back into their own twentieth century existences.

Art of any kind has only a fleeting second to make its impression. We are all impatient consumers and we need the useful bits pretty close to hand if we are to gather them into something before the inclination to process them evaporates in the face of the demanding present. If a poem is to work in the public forum, it has to proclaim itself quickly and clearly. There's no time to waste.

Even the most intensely personal poet in twentieth century American literature knows this lesson. Back in the 1950s Robert Lowell of Harvard and Boston aristocracy, decided to abandon the public voice he had adopted as a young poet and write confessional verse, spilling all his secrets in public. The publication of his book *Life Studies* (1959) shocked his friends and neighbors who found their personal relations revealed in his intimate accounts of daily life. M.L. Rosenthal has said that the book reveals "the naked psyche of a suffering man in a hostile world." Lowell suffered from manic depression and anguished his way through three marriages. One of the stable relationships he had was with Elizabeth Bishop who was surprised to find that she could talk poetry at an almost scientific level with Lowell.

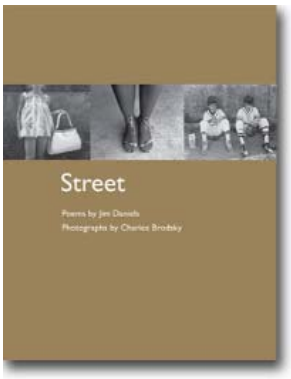
"It was the first time I had ever actually talked with someone about how one writes poetry...like exchanging recipes for making a cake," she said. Good poetry has to sound spontaneous and fresh, even if it comes from an anguished place in the soul, but it rarely emerges from the pen that way. Good poets, like Robert Hass, Elizabeth Bishop and

Robert Lowell understand that we poets weave an illusion of reality in words, which takes a good deal more than a pen by the bedside to make the words ring down through the ages.

Gary Lehmann teaches writing and poetry at the Rochester Institute of Technology. His essays, poetry and short stories are widely published—about 60 pieces a year. He is the director of the Athenaeum Poetry group which recently published its second chapbook, *Poetic Visions*. He is also author of a book of poetry entitled *Public Lives and Private Secrets* (Foothills Press, 2005), and co-author and editor of a book of poetry entitled *The Span I Will Cross*. His poem "Reporting from Fallujah" was nominated for the 2006 Pushcart Prize. His short play, "My Health Care Worker Stole My Jewelry" was selected for professional production in January 2006 at Geva Theatre, Rochester, NY. Visit his website at www.garylehmann.blogspot.com

Todd Davis

STREET
BY JIM DANIELS, PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLEE BRODSKY



Bottom Dog Press, PO Box 425, Huron, Ohio 44839; ISBN# 0-9330-8794-2, 2005, 96pp., paper, $12.95, hardcover, $20.00

http://members.aol.com/lsmithdog/bottomdog/

In his eight previous volumes of poetry, Jim Daniels has demonstrated not only an affinity for the working class but also a desire to capture and frame certain small moments that represent their joy and despair, their levity and anger, moments of varied, intricate lives that otherwise would simply vanish, shuffle around the corner in a pair of worn shoes, slipping away with seemingly no consequence. Of course, the consequence of all our lives is what's at stake in Daniels' poems because what we notice and honor in art versus what we choose to ignore and discard says a great deal about our particular cultural moment in time. Thanks to Daniels' range and ability to find the crack through which a reader might discover not just sympathy but empathy for those we share our neighborhoods and towns with we are given yet another book from a poet whose craft and care continues to grow.

If it were not for a poem like "Buckle," in which a working man reels with the absurdity of the system's petty gratitude for his years of labor—"Gold pen: twenty-five years. / I clip it on. A joke, really...A little piece of the boss / to stick myself with"—or another like "American Young, American Darling," in which the speaker assures us that "Whatever news he carries / in his back pocket / is nothing you want to hear"—we would not have a record of such poignant and essential matters, and the most elemental parts of America's cultural infrastructure would be in danger of being misplaced, misused, or simply abandoned, so much rubbish or detritus to be hauled safely out of sight.

Perhaps Daniels' penchant for such portraits is no different from any other artist whose work describes or portrays a particular subject and betrays an idiosyncratic passion. Like his poetic forbears—Walt Whitman, Carl Sandburg, William Carlos Williams, and Philip Levine, to name but a few—Daniels' work distinguishes itself from many of his con-

temporaries because of its sustained commitment to the lives of the people we most often overlook or ignore in our culture, and Daniels' own history and relationship with this subject brings a degree of authenticity that has always been the strength of American poetry. (Daniels worked the auto line in Detroit before lighting out for academia, and his relatives still work in many of the plants surrounding that city.)

It's most fitting that Bottom Dog Press—whose founder Larry Smith long ago made plain that his purpose was to publish a literature about and for the working class—has brought out this volume of poems that showcases the flawless collaboration of two artists whose very clear aim is not only to highlight the physical lives of the working class but also the range of their emotional lives, suggesting the ways in which we are all connected.

Street literally speaks in the voices of its subjects. The photographs in the collection were made in various Pittsburgh neighborhoods during the 1980s, and the poems were written over the course of 2004. Brodsky, who like Daniels is a professor at Carnegie Mellon University, has created a series of pictures whose angle of focus—sometimes upon the bellies and midriffs of people in the street, sometimes upon their bare or shoed feet, sometimes with her subject in a doorway or window or in front of an apartment building or neighborhood store—serves as the catalyst for Daniels' inspired and wide-ranging characters, for the voices they speak in—rough, colloquial, city-speak.

Street is organized into three sections: "The Art of Letting It All Hang Out," "The Invisibility of Doors," and "Stillness and Sway." Like Brodsky, Daniels has made decisions concerning light, juxtaposition, and "verbal" cropping in each of these sections, and like Brodsky, he has succeeded in letting his characters talk about what they know best. Brodsky's photos capture women in house dresses, in shorts several sizes too small, in halter tops, in shoes decorated with bows, band-aids on shins and ankle bracelets demurely clipped over pantyhose. She also gives us boys sitting in the shade, baseball uniforms still white before a game, men washing hubcaps, men in work-shoes and business suits, men with defeated faces curled in disgust or defiance. When Daniels adds voice to these subjects, telling us the stories that reveal their attitudes, their motivations, then the true beauty of this collaboration shines, layer upon layer unfolding, pushing the reader back and forth between the poem and the picture. In "Bad News," for example, a man tells us that "Sight is a funny thing. / It's like a bad haircut. / I hate bad haircuts," and we are compelled to turn back to the photo only to discover that Brodsky has not shown us the man's hair, that the focal point is instead his hands and the glasses he holds in those hands, the down turn of his head, the resignation of his

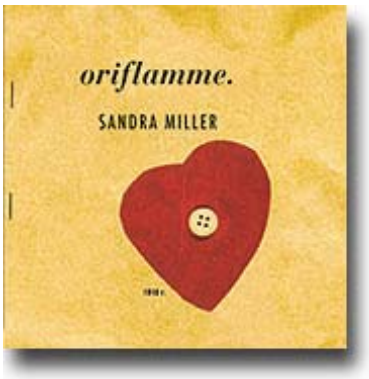
pursed lips. It is the lips, then, that push us back to the poem, to a better understanding of why Daniels has this man say, "You hate me. / I'm trained / to recognize hate. To be hated."

This dance between Brodsky and Daniels' art finds its culmination in the books last section where feet carry so much of the burden, as they do in life beyond the page. As Daniels explains in "Haloes," "Everybody looks for them / around your head / when the feet deserve them / more." These two artists reveal plenty about who we are and where we think we're headed. They've spent plenty of time on their feet, walked the necessary miles to better understand what might be captured in a poem or photograph. Perhaps, as Daniels says in "Glow," we should refuse "to pray and ask for more." After all, this collection's abundant and artful life is more than enough.

Todd Davis teaches creative writing, environmental studies, and American literature at Penn State University-Altoona. His poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and have appeared in such journals and magazines as *The North American Review, River Styx, Arts & Letters, Quarterly West, The Christian Science Monitor, Green Mountains Review, Poetry East, Many Mountains Moving, Natural Bridge, Epoch, The Louisville Review, The Nebraska Review, The Midwest Quarterly*, and *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion*. In September 2002, his first book of poems, *Ripe*, was published by Bottom Dog Press. Some of the poems from *Ripe* are anthologized in *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry* (University of Iowa Press, 2003) and in *Visiting Frost: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Robert Frost* (University of Iowa Press, 2005). His second book of poems, *Some Heaven*, is forthcoming from Michigan State University Press in 2007. Davis is also the author or co-author of several scholarly books, including Kurt Vonnegut's *Crusade* (SUNY Press, 2006) and *Postmodern Humanism in Contemporary Literature and Culture: Reconciling the Void* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). (tfd3@psu.edu)

Stephen Allen

ORIFLAMME, BY SANDRA MILLER



Ahsahta Press, Department of English, Boise State University, 1910 University Drive, Boise, ID 83725; ISBN 0-916272-83-4; 92 pp., $16.00 (pb.)

http://ahsahtapress.boisestate.edu

Avant-garde literature, by its very nature, is difficult, frustrating, and anger-inducing, and that is when it succeeds. Habits of interpretation developed on traditional literature provide very little help when faced with something aggressively different. A sympathetic reader, trying to understand an experimental work, will often grab hold of even the slightest clue in the hopes of finding a passkey that will open up the entire work. *oriflamme* is an avant-garde work, and the cover art is an easily overlooked clue to the nature of Miller's poetic project.

Between the copyright notice and the Library of Congress cataloging information is a brief notice: "Cover art: Olga Rozanova, collaged book cover, Transrational Boog (Zaumnaya Gniga), first transrational book in collaboration with Alexi Kruchenykh and Aliagrov (Roman Jakobson)..." The transrationalists were a group of pre-revolutionary (and briefly post-revolutionary) Russian writers and artists. As writers, they attempted to destabilize the accepted meanings of words: neologisms, puns, ungrammatical constructions, and odd word combinations were among their favorite tools. Perhaps their greatest influence in American literature has been on Language poetry, which perhaps explains why *oriflamme* could conceivably be grouped under that heading, but there are important differences between Miller's work and, say, Lyn Hejinian's or Charles Bernstein's. Miller's words do more that sit on the page as objects waiting for meaning: they function as complicated, albeit confusing, referents as well as things in and of themselves.

One of the most striking aspects of *oriflamme* is the visual presentation of the poems. While the Language poets do work with white spaces, they rarely do so to such an extent as Miller. *oriflamme* can be treated as a work of visual art in its own right: the placements of lines and the arrangement of stanzas, and the corresponding white spaces that are more of a presence in the book than an absence, make a statement in their own right. It is possible to take aesthetic pleasure in the book with-

out reading a single word. This goes some way towards explaining why one poem in the book, "sordid intimacy of eiderdown : traversed by waves." is printed twice, once in the same typeface as the rest of the poems and immediately afterward in a smaller typeface that allows the entire poem to appear on one page. The appearance of the poem is clearly important here, important enough to reduce the typeface to near illegibility so as to fit it on one page and render it completely visible in a single viewing. It is interesting to note here that Miller, according to the author's note on the back of *oriflamme*, "currently practices calligraphy and hand-making books," two activities that treat the text and book as artistic objects as well as conduits of information.

Still, while the layout may be attractive and worth separate consideration, *oriflamme* is made up of words, and the words demand attention. Miller's poems are not transparent: they require a lot of work on the reader's behalf to tease out any sort of logical meaning. Consider the third stanza of "[in hernani]": "the paperbells / son a ring / before they are everywhere." So what are "paperbells"? Bells made of paper? Bells associated with newspapers, perhaps belonging to a paperboy, given the "son" in the next line? Or is that "son" a contraction of "sound" or the French son (which also means "sound"). It is possible to go through the entire book engaging in interpretive leaps like these, although it does get exhausting after a while. While Miller's demands on the reader to provide some of the meaning of the text would seem to align her, again, with the Language poets, her multilingual wordplay and deliberate manipulations of grammatical constructs make *oriflamme* a much more lively work than most Language volumes.

There are also moments of great beauty in *oriflamme*, from the sparse "A black dog under a pink moon. The black dog under a black moon. // Man in the black harbor" ("Competing light sources.") to the mysterious

> the parkflower is bowing
> in a room that houses only harmonies there are 2 doors
> 1 for you &
> 1 for you
> "Everywhere it is face"
> ("& Still we are heavy to bend.")

to the incantatory

> in the arizona highbed
> platinum is a color you wear

by the well that feeds the desert
by the well that feels the water

the amplitude of high coyote

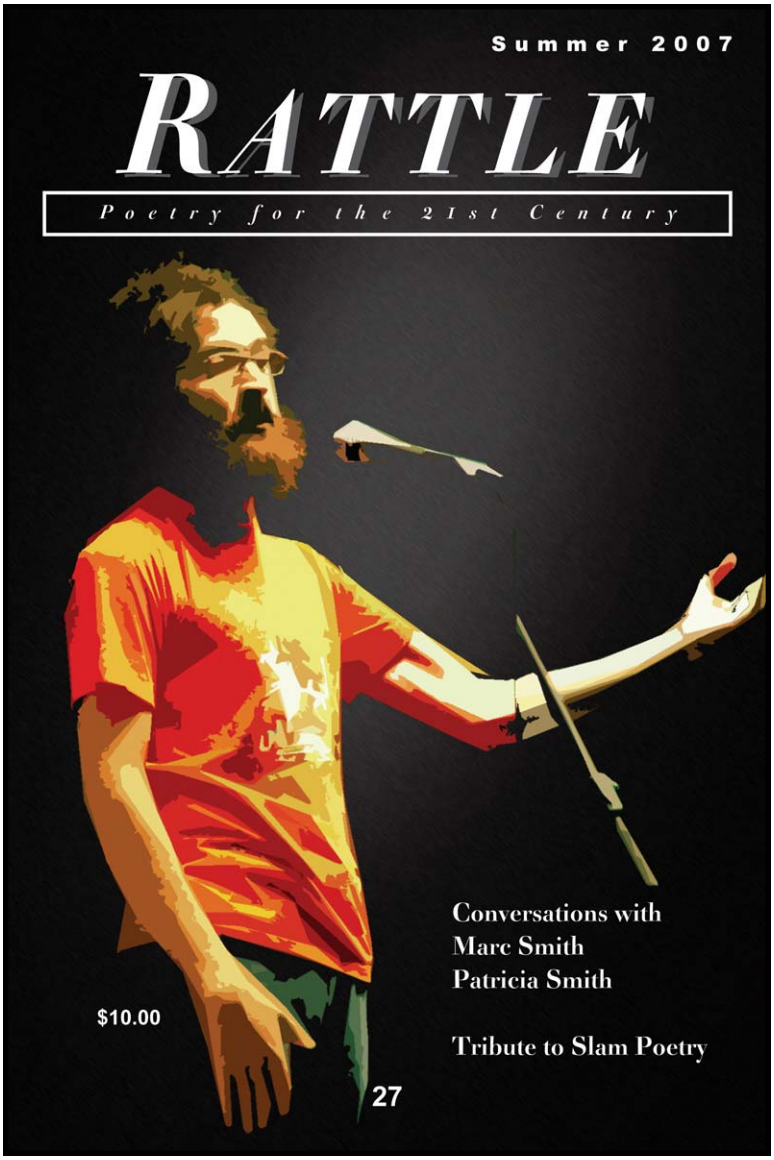
were you a thief of sand or water
were you feeding mercury with your

aster hair
("return from them with red eyes.")

These lines give the impression that Miller would almost certainly be very successful writing mainstream, lyrical verse if she chose to do so.

But she does not choose to do so. She chooses to write difficult poetry with limited appeal to those who read poetry for imagery, form, or voice. On the other hand, *oriflamme* is a delight for readers who love the play of words and the visual aesthetics of poetry, and it does point in one direction that experimental poetry can take in the years to come. The Language poets have started to enter academia; the New York School is essentially the mainstream now; confessional verse is old hat. Transrationalism may well be a way to go to expand poetry's limits.

Stephen Allen holds an MA in creative writing from the University of Illinois at Chicago. He currently lives in Michigan, where he works as a freelance writer, translator, and underpaid hourly help at various fine retail establishments. (sallen@parrett.net)



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CONVERSATIONS
Marc Kelly Smith
Patricia Smith

ESSAY BY
Susan B.A. Somers-Willett

Caleb Barber

I WENT IN WITH MY HANDS UP

> *"Sweet Jesus as morning the queenly women of our youth!*
> *The monumental creatures of our summer lust!"*
> —*Thomas McGrath, "Letter to an Imaginary Friend"*

It was a little like that pregnant black heifer
stuck in the aluminum feeder-box sized specifically for calves
—jackknifed, full of muesli and seed, her head turned out
toward the snowy morning.

Me and that 80-year-old Irishman had to lift it,
the several hundred pounds of green metal, knowing,
with our elbows hefted above our divergent hairlines
and our ankles foundered in thick pasture mud, we would be totally exposed.

And she'd be coming out in a hurry, big and taut around the middle.
Us just hoping she wouldn't lose her calf in the fuss.

It was a little like that. Stopping by that girl's house
the other night. Except without the help. And this doesn't come out right.
I would never be so pigheaded as to compare a woman to a cow.
Just to compare the *parameters* using the inconsequential vessel of simile.

I didn't even know what horns that heifer bore.
What spawn might be brewing within her black belly.
But it had to be done. She had to be turned loose. I kept my legs.
And one doesn't count as a stampede.

Luisa A. Igloria

CIRCLE OF CRANES

> *I will stand like the flame in the flame…*
> *I will stand very still in your absence…*
> —*David St. John*

They have stepped out of one
rectangular sheet, the six
that now touch wing-
tip to wingtip and, wordless,
hum the white notes of the song
hollowed out of paper—anthem
of a kind of reverse creation:
folded from substance,
a well of apparently
nothing

But even so the empty
space shimmers: a disc
echoing still with the swift
crosswise slash of scissors
the careful pruning of neck
from neck and wing
from wing

Newly sprung, each
genuflects stiffly to the empty
circle, remembering how
the grasp of the world
came coursing through
the limbs; and what
it felt like to lift entire,
like dying, from
the blade

Krista Klanderman

HELLO, I MUST BE GOING

When we finally took her cigarettes away
Nana tried to smoke chicken bones, lighting
each gnarled end with matches we forgot to
check her pocket for. "You're a sweetie" was
her mantra, repeated like her old blue parakeet
she forgot to feed, and it died slowly, like the
smile from her face as she sat in
the blue velour chair, staring out the front window
like she was watching a Garbo movie.
When we came to bring her groceries,
those bags like birthday presents,
she would hike up her sweat pants
like an umpire contemplating a play and
wander to the kitchen, her fingers playing with the
edge of her t-shirt, and peer through
blue eyes, as clean as a slate, as we pulled
cans of fruit cocktail and snack cakes magic-like from
brown paper sacks. She had the looks of Marilyn,
never left the house in any shoes but heels, even
ironed Boompa's boxers until her mind moved on and
forgot to leave a note. When we came over today
she looked through me like I was a pane of glass. My
face like one she saw once in a magazine ad,
or in the crowd at St. John's Sunday mass.
She asked me who I was, her voice like the hello you
speak into the phone, distant and hollow like she
was across a lake. The glimmer of recognition in
her face like a dying ember stoked for the last time
before burning out altogether. She put her hands
up to her ashen face, devoid of the makeup she
caked on like Tammy Faye, and felt for her once pretty
eyes, that broke a hundred hearts, as they betrayed
her with tears, splashing down her face, surprising her
like rain on someone else's cheeks.

Anis Mojgani

CRADLE

Set the warriors to sea in a ship stacked with shields, layers of swords, mountains of gold. Lay them out with their wife. With their child. Lay them out with their livestock, with the whole farm. The rain is not coming here. Not today. For today the gods welcome one of their own back home. So set the hero out on the soft waves that will carry him to the other side of the pink ether where he will float on fire until the ash consumes him like the mighty warrior he once was and like the legend he will become. The flames will dance over his possessions, his goblets and arrows, his blankets, his paintings, his passions. The flames will dance across his flesh like the soft fingers of the soft lover he left, and as he sleeps this last sleep, the fires will eat him away, the heat will write his skin across the night sky to join the constellations that will guide the sailors at the storm, the herders lost in the clouds, they will all come home by facing the direction his eyes are facing. The heavens are filled with smoke. This is history this is legend this is what we once were. Where the stories come from, what we are. When you fall in battle, they will take your body with the life you made in this world and set it off to sail behind you in the next, so that you will stay a king, remain forever the golden being you breathed as on this side of the mountain. When you pass, may your life follow you like a shadow into the light. When I go, bury me with nothing but my own skin. I spent far too many days trying to outrun this thing called mine, so if I set myself into your arms would you hold me like the earth, quietly? I am yours. Give me a field, give me a big sky. A mountain. Give me your mouth. I'm just looking for a quiet place that I could die inside of.

Patricia Smtih

BUILDING NICOLE'S MAMA

for the 6th grade class of Lillie C. Evans School, Liberty City, Miami

I am astonished at their mouthful names—
Lakinishia, Chevellanie, Delayo, Fumilayo—
their ragged rebellions and lip-glossed pouts,
and all those pants drooped as drapery.
I rejoice when they kiss my face, whisper wet
and urgent in my ear, make me their obsession
because I have brought them poetry.

They shout me raw, bruise my wrists with pulling,
and brashly claim me as mama as they
cradle my head in their little laps,
waiting for new words to grow in my mouth.

You.
You.
You.
Angry, jubilant, weeping poets—we are all
saviors, reluctant hosannas in the limelight,
but you knew that, didn't you? So let us
bless this sixth grade class—40 nappy heads,
40 cracking voices, and all of them
raise their hands when I ask. They have all seen
the Reaper, grim in his heavy robe,
pushing the button for the dead project elevator,
begging for a break at the corner pawn shop,
cackling wildly in the back pew of the Baptist church.

I ask the death question and forty fists
punch the air, *me!, me!* And O'Neal,
matchstick crack child, watched his mother's
body become a claw, and 9-year-old Tiko Jefferson,
barely big enough to lift the gun, fired a bullet
into his own throat after Mama bended his back
with a lead pipe. Tamika cried into a sofa pillow
when Daddy blasted Mama into the north wall
of their cluttered one-room apartment,
Donya's cousin gone in a drive-by. Dark window,
click, click, gone, says Donya, her tiny finger
a barrel, the thumb a hammer. I am shocked
by their losses—and yet when I read a poem

about my own hard-eyed teenager, Jeffrey asks
He is dead yet?

It cannot be comprehended,
my 18-year-old still pushing and pulling
his own breath. And those 40 faces pity me,
knowing that I will soon be as they are,
numb to our bloodied histories,
favoring the Reaper with a thumbs-up and a wink,
hearing the question and shouting *me, me,*
Miss Smith, I know somebody dead!

Can poetry hurt us? they ask me before
snuggling inside my words to sleep.
I love you, Nicole says, Nicole wearing my face,
pimples peppering her nose, and she is as black
as angels are. Nicole's braids clipped, their ends
kissed with match flame to seal them,
and *can you teach me to write a poem about my mother?*
I mean, you write about your daddy and he dead,
can you teach me to remember my mama?

A teacher tells me this is the first time Nicole
has admitted that her mother is gone,
murdered by slim silver needles and a stranger
rifling through her blood, the virus pushing
her skeleton through for Nicole to see.
And now this child with rusty knees
and mismatched shoes sees poetry as her scream
and asks me for the words to build her mother again.
Replacing the voice.
Stitching on the lost flesh.

So poets,
as we pick up our pens,
as we flirt and sin and rejoice behind microphones—
remember Nicole.
She knows that we are here now,
and she is an empty vessel waiting to be filled.

And she is waiting.
And she
is
waiting.
And she waits.

CONVERSATION BETWEEN MARC KELLY SMITH and ALAN FOX AT THE GREEN MILL IN CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, NOVEMBER 26, 2006

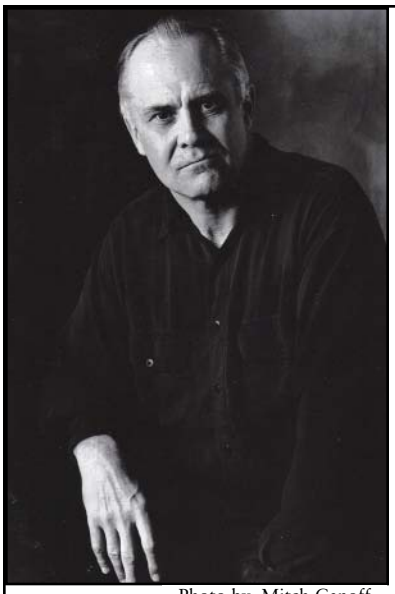

Photo by: Mitch Canoff

Marc Kelly Smith is creator/founder of the Poetry Slam movement. As stated in the PBS television series, The United States of Poetry, a "strand of new poetry began at Chicago's Green Mill Tavern in 1987 when Marc Smith found a home for the Poetry Slam." Since then, performance poetry has spread throughout the world exported to over 500 cities large and small. Chalking up more than 2,000 performances in night-clubs, concert halls, libraries, universities, and on the tops of hot dog stands, Smith continues to host and perform every Sunday night at the Green Mill to standing room only houses. He has staged a multi-tude of poetry related productions includ-ing The Neutral Turf Poetry Festival at Chicago's Navy Pier, Slam Dunk Poetry Day at Chicago's Field Museum, Summer Solstice Poetry Shows at the Museum of Contemporary Art, The Poetry Hot Dog Cart for Chicago's 2005 Stirring Things Up Festival, and several National Poetry Slams. He currently directs the Speak'Easy Ensemble, an innovative performance poetry troupe on stage bi-monthly at Martyrs Music Club in Chicago. In March of 2003 Sourcebooks released Spoken Word Revolution a book/CD anthology narrated by Marc and edited by his protégé Mark Eleveld, and in August 2004 Marc's Bible of Slam, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Slam Poetry,* was released by Alpha/Penguin to national and interna-tional audiences. His collection of poems *Crowdpleaser* and his CD "It's About Time" are available through his website www.slampapi.com.

FOX: You carry inclusiveness to a degree which most people don't. On your website you have articles which are antagonistic, saying someone else really invented slam.

SMITH: I wrote these articles. [Fox laughs] But it's surprising how some people, like in Germany, really believe that somebody bit somebody's ear off…I think one of the stories on the site talks about somebody getting so mad they bit the ear off.

FOX: The Bob Oafham incident, that's just made up?

SMITH: Yeah. [Fox laughs] It is my way of handling so much criticism that was leveled at me, so many lies. I read a book about Jane Goodall, what she went through while she did so much good work, through the same kind of thing, through the jealousies and the petty power. There's so much petty power in the art world, it's unbelievable. The people who are in charge of these institutions are very ambitious and don't care about the art, they care about themselves, moving up the ladder. And I did too when I started, and sometimes I can still be that way, but there's a big part of me that's learned—and hopefully I can keep remembering—learned that I've been given a gift. And I use that gift and to tell kids when I work with kids, "You know, you've got this gift, if you've got it, use it. What do you want to do, drive in a limousine, be one of the fucking actors like the rest of those—you know, they don't live happy lives, most of them. I've been there, I've seen these people. It's misery."

FOX: Do you do a lot of teaching?

SMITH: I teach in schools but I do it sporadically. I'm not a very good teacher. The longest I've lasted was fifteen days and let me tell you, it was a disaster. I am not a teacher. Teachers are very noble in my mind. Good teachers are wonderful. But I can come in for one or two days and I can be that guy that inspires people, and I do it, I go out more than a little. This past year was kind of average. One year I was out, oh I'd say I had maybe 20-30 gigs of doing it one year. I get repeats. But I enjoy it. My best....here's a good story; I'm just telling you stories because this is what you want—

FOX: Absolutely.

SMITH: I used to do a show every year in the middle of the Texas Annual Slam, the Blue Bonnet Slam. There was a wonderful couple who just wanted to do something good. They had been to a slam in Hot Springs and then they came to the show here and checked it out and they said, "We want to start a show in Conroe, Texas." The Schneiders. So they started an annual show. I didn't do it the first year, but every year after that I did it. The first year I did it was in this roadhouse, they got real cowboys. And we start the show and the cowboys start, "Ya ain't starting 'til Melly does her thing" and I don't know who this Melly is. "Well, okay let Melly do her thing." So the barmaid takes off and shows her tits and shakes her tits and that's how it starts! It's like, "Aye ya yi!"

[Fox laughs] But it was wonderful. Every year it got better. There would be local people, there would be the cowboy poets, there'd be these intellectuals from New York and these university authors and everything. So it was great. We had the Budweiser table and throughout the whole show ever year, they would stack their Budweiser cans into pyramids, [Fox laughs] and it was great. You know, they'd have fun but they'd be silent to listen to the stuff, and they would be honest, sometimes they'd like it, it was mixed. The state trooper was there guarding the door, I almost got him to do a poem one time.

FOX: Hmmmm.

SMITH: I started doing schools there; it's a system in Texas, they send all the kids that are problem kids to one school. So they have a whole high school full of kids that don't care. So I walk in, "I'm going to teach these guys performance poetry," and walk in. Let me tell you, there were a couple of kids I thought were going to kill me— they looked like killers. One guy comes in and he's obviously pissed, and I have the principal there, they got a video camera there, and I think, "How am I going to survive?" But these kids were so intelligent, they were so passionate. We were all crying at the end of it. It was so wonderful. It just came alive. It was just such a wonderful experience. The next year, I went back, nothing had happened, those kids go back to where they came from and that brief moment is gone. But what can you do if it doesn't keep going?

FOX: That's the problem. Every issue we focus on a group of writers—attorneys, or poetry editors, schoolchildren. To me, our best issue was prisoners, people writing from prison. They talk from the heart.

SMITH: They can be so honest.

FOX: Absolutely.

SMITH: That's what good writing is.

FOX: It seems to me that one of the bigger problems we have in society is that we put on a façade, which is partially not true. "How are you?" "Fine." And we rob ourselves and others of our truth.

SMITH: Right. Old guys like us, we probably think that the world's changed—I don't know, I do feel like something went awry. I go back and read Mike Royko [Chicago Tribune Columnist] you know, Royko. That

writing was so right on, and it didn't pull any punches. It said, "This is this." And the style that came out of Chicago, the performance styles that are from Chicago it's genuine. When people ask me, "Well what makes Chicago style different?" I say, "It's genuine." Because, like the show, your bullshit gets you just so far and then somebody's going to call you on it in Chicago. It's always been that way. These days, that from our president on down people lie, and they get away with it. They lie to you in business, they lie to you on the television, they lie to kids and kids grow up thinking it's okay.

Contributor Notes

Caleb Barber: "I maintain a BA from Western Washington University in Creative Writing. I am also currently an MFA candidate from the Whidbey Writer's Workshop. In Bellingham, Washington, I work for a metal shop and do all my poetry editing in my head while making deliveries down the I-5 corridor." (CalebKirk@aol.com)

Luisa A. Igloria spent part of last summer in a residency at Ragdale Foundation (Lake Forest, IL) where she read-and wrote poems-about writers, artists and scholars living in Europe in the 1800s. One of the things she loves best about poetry is how it often drops her into intriguing rabbit-holes and portals to other worlds; Stargate couldn't even come close. Luisa is Associate Professor in the MFA Creative Writing Program at Old Dominion University, and the author of *Trill & Mordent* (WordTech Editions, 2005). (www.luisagloria.com)

Krista Klanderman: "I write because, like artists, I like to create pictures. Since there are more words than colors and I tend to get more paint on me than the canvas, I write poetry. I like how simple connected lines and arcs form letters that make words that can be put together in ways to lift, bend, or enlighten someone's life. I am a listener, an observer and a thinker. Most of my poetry attempts to capture moments most people forget to notice." (mtnbkr@new.rr.com)

Anis Mojgani: "I have skinny arms and get cold easily. I have bad posture. I really like MF Doom. His rhymes are totally awesome to the max. I grew up in New Orleans. I have a BFA in comic books. Two months ago I watched my father try not to cry as he read about Baha'i martyrs dying in his home country of Iran. I wrote a poem about it. I like to write poems these days about people other than me. I like to write poems that illuminate the truths people hold in common. I like the myth of the poem, the ancient theater of its mythology. Right now I am writing a poetry book about a whale." (anis@couchstuff.com)

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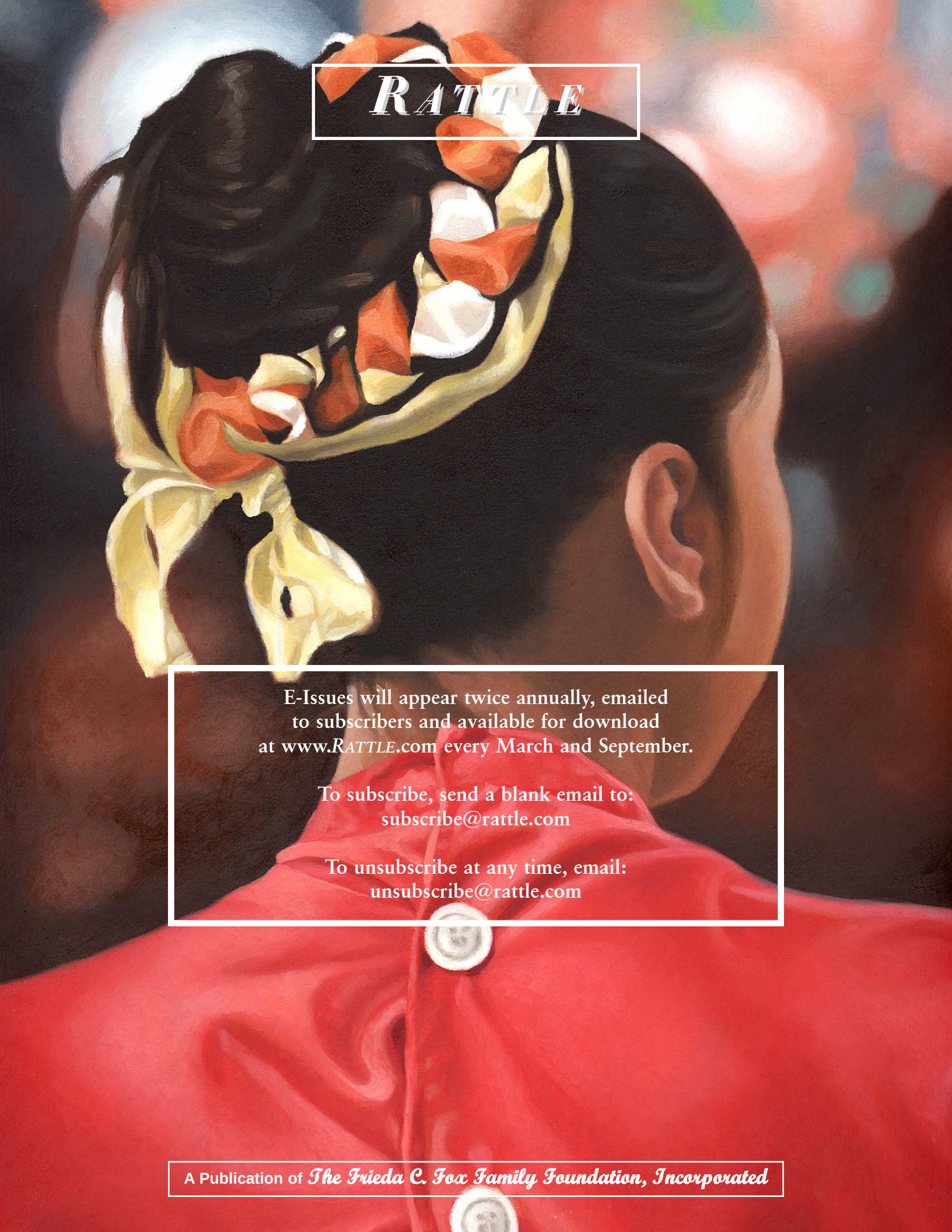

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