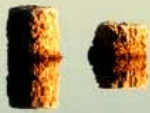


Fall 2007

# RATTLE

*P o e t r y f o r t h e 2 1 s t C e n t u r y*



## Book Features:

Jeannine Hall Gailey  
*Becoming the Villainess*

Lynne Thompson  
*Beg No Pardon*

Photography by Daniella Zalcman

## Issue #28 Preview:

Nursing and Poetry: "A Kind of Gift"

*e.3*

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Fall 2007, e.3

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## ABOUT THIS E-ISSUE

Well, it's finally happened. It only took three eIssues, but the content in this fall's version was so good that I had to bump some of it up into print. Originally I'd slated three personal essays by nurse poets for e.3, but I felt they were so interesting and illuminating for this winter's tribute, that I had to include them there. So we found room in our budget to expand the issue by 8 pages, bringing it to 208 total, packed so tight that there isn't room for an extra comma—and the nurse issue deserves every pica.

When I mention that our next issue features a tribute to nurses, more often than not I get a quizzical look, as if the topic were chosen at random. In truth, there are more, and more talented, nurse poets than any other vocational group we've explored. We're publishing work by 24 nurses, including 4 essays, a contribution that easily tops the lawyer poet and slam issues. Some of them write about their careers, but the scope of their subject matter is impressive, and all of it informed by the intimate work that they do daily. Nurses are present at our most vulnerable moments, and so are given special insights into what it means to be human. The nurse tribute is such a bounty that this fall's preview section is comprised entirely of nurses. And there's plenty more where this came from.

But enough about issue #28—this is the fall, and this is an eIssue. Here we feature selections from first books by two of *RATTLE*'s past contributors, Jeannine Hall Gailey and Lynne Thompson. Each book is an example of what a poet can do with the concepts of narrative and identity, as they each assume varying roles—Gailey those of female superheroes, and Thompson those of her Caribbean ancestors.

The essay and review also relate, if only by subverting their own labels. Art Beck's extensive review of *The Drunken Boat* is an essay on the art of translation. Norman Ball's essay on difficulty is a review of the opaque poems you keep posting to online discussion groups. It's been said that poetry's job is to enlighten and to entertain—who said that, me?—Ball and Beck manage both of those things in prose.

Finally, I want to use this space to remind you what the eIssues are, and how you might participate. What you're reading here is a newsletter, only better—it's a digital supplement to what we print twice a year. As such, we're always looking for work that we might include, that doesn't fit the format of our regular issues.

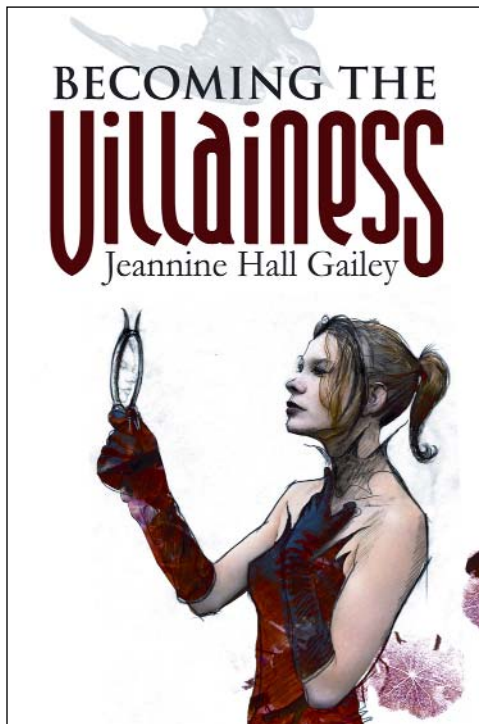
Essays in *RATTLE* have to fit to a given theme—for the eIssues, we want essays that *don't* fit a theme. Send us anything, of any length, on any subject relating to poetry. Most readers are poets themselves, so

we're especially interested in poems on craft. But really, we're open to anything—this is our free space to play with.

Poems in *RATTLE* appear individually, and are previously unpublished. For the eIssues, we want a series of poems, which may have been published in the past. A single poem in a literary magazine is like an appetizer; we want a cut of the main course. Most interesting are book features, where we publish five or six poems from a collection. If you have a book of poetry, send it to us, and label which handful of poems you'd like us to consider as a feature.

Essays and book features are what we're most actively looking for, but there's no limit to what we can include here—that's the beauty of an eIssue. So if you have any ideas or questions, send me an email and we'll think about it.

Timothy Green  
Editor  
September 29, 2007



*BECOMING THE  
VILLAINESS  
BY  
JEANNINE HALL GAILEY*

Steel Toe Books

Alternately funny, violent, wicked, and sad, this first collection of poems by Jeannine Hall Gailey presents mythic archetypes in a surprising new light against a backdrop of pop culture, Ovid, Grimm's fairytales, and the struggles of contemporary women.

*Becoming the Villainess* by Jeannine Hall Gailey · Original Paperback · Steel Toe Books  
Steel Toe Books, c/o Tom C. Hunley, Department of English,  
1906 College Heights Blvd. #11086, Bowling Green, KY 42101-1086  
Publication Date: 2006 · ISBN-13: 978-0974326436 · 96 pages · \$12.00

To order from the publisher, print out the order form at:  
[www.steeltoebooks.com](http://www.steeltoebooks.com)

Order online at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)

For more information email Tom Hunley:  
[tom.hunley@wku.edu](mailto:tom.hunley@wku.edu)

All poems reprinted courtesy of Steel Toe Books.



Photo by Tom Collicott

Jeannine Hall Gailey is a Seattle-area writer whose first book of poetry, *Becoming the Villainess*, was published by Steel Toe Books in 2006. Poems from the book were featured on NPR's *The Writer's Almanac* and *Verse Daily*, and two of them will appear in 2007's *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. She recently received a Washington State Artist Trust GAP Grant. She has an MFA from Pacific University and volunteers as an editor at *Crab Creek Review*. Her chapbook, "Female Comic Book Superheroes," is available from Pudding House Press and from her web site, [www.webbish6.com](http://www.webbish6.com). She is working on trying to discover her latent superpowers.

### PRAISE FOR JEANNINE HALL GAILEY

"Gailey writes with a voice full of wit and charm that keeps the reader somewhat off balance. She serves a dish of fairy tales and myths, part vixen and part Carol Burnett. Hers is an edginess that makes new those tales with which we are familiar. An excellent read that will leave you wanting more."

—Colleen J. McElroy

"These full-bodied persona poems give dimension to the powerful (and powerless) female heroes of myth and comic books with strong voices that struggle against stereotype and silence. Make room for this new take on the oldest story in the book."

—Dorianne Laux

"In this splendidly entertaining debut, Jeannine Hall Gailey offers us a world both familiar and magical—filled with fairytale and mythology characters that are our own bedfellows—we wake up with Philomel and argue with Ophelia while half-listening to a Snow Queen, amidst Spy Girls, Amazons and Mongolian Cows. The wild and seductive energy in this collection never lets one put the book down. (In fact, any one who opens the collection in the bookstore and reads such poems as *The Conversation* and *Job Requirements: A Supervillain's Advice* will want to buy the book!) For her delivery is heart-breaking and refreshing, so the poems seduce us with the sadness, glory and entertainment of our very own days. Propelled by Jeannine Hall Gailey's alert, sensuous, and musical gifts, the mythology becomes all our own."

—Ilya Kaminsky

*Jeannine Hall Gailey*

## WONDER WOMAN DREAMS OF THE AMAZON

I miss the tropes of Paradise—green vines  
roped around wrists, jasmine coronets,  
the improbable misty clothing of my tribe.

I dream of the land of my birth. They named  
me after their patron Goddess.  
I was to be a warrior for their kind.

I miss my mother, Hippolyta.  
In my dreams she wraps me tightly  
again in the American flag,

warning me, “Cling to your bracelets,  
your magic lasso. Don’t be a fool for men.”  
She’s always lecturing me, telling me

not to leave her. Sometimes she changes  
into a doe, and I see my father  
shooting her, her blood. Sometimes,

in these dreams, it is me who shoots her.  
My daily transformation  
from prim kitten-bowed suit to bustier

with red-white-and-blue stars  
is less complicated. The invisible jet  
makes for clean escapes.

The animals are my spies and allies;  
inexplicably, snow-feathered doves  
appear in my hands. I capture Nazis

and Martians with boomerang grace.  
When I turn and turn, the music plays louder,  
the glow around me burns white-hot,

I become everything I was born to be,  
the dreams of the mother,  
the threat of the father.



*Gailey*

## BECOMING THE VILLAINESS

A girl—lovelocked, alone—wanders into a forest  
where lions and wolves lie in wait.  
The girl feeds them caramels from the pockets of her paper dress.  
They follow like dogs.

Each day she weaves for twelve brothers, twelve golden shirts  
twelve pairs of slippers, twelve sets of golden mail.  
She sleeps under olive trees, praying for rescue.  
In her dreams doves fly in circles, crying out her name.

For a hundred years she is turned into a golden bird,  
hung in a cage in a witch's castle. Her brothers  
are all turned to stone. She cannot save them,  
no matter how many witches she burns.

She weeps tears that cannot be heard  
but turn to rubies when they hit the ground.  
She lifted her hand against the light  
and it became a feathered wing.

She learns the songs of mockingbirds, parakeets, pheasants.  
She wanders into the forest more herself.  
She speaks of her twelve stone brothers.  
There is a dragon curled around eggs. There is a princess

who is also a white cat, and a tiny dog  
she carries in a walnut shell.  
She befriends a reindeer who speaks wisdom.  
They are all in her corner. It seems unlikely now

that she will ever return home, remember what  
it was like, her mother and father, the promises.  
She will adopt a new costume,  
set up shop in a witch's castle,

perhaps lure young princes and princesses  
to herself, to cure what ails her—  
her loneliness, her grandeur,  
the way her heart has become a stone.

*Gailey*

## THE CONVERSATION

I am an avenging goddess, she said, severely.  
What about that do you not understand?

I need you, he said. Even without your costumes.  
I lie in the dark and think of you. Every night more.

I eat men like you for breakfast. Her right hand gripped  
a sword. I've forgotten how to make my lips do anything but sneer.

I could make you French toast instead, he offered.  
He was blond and easy on the eyes.

There is no happy ending for us. You've seen the stories—  
in the end I'd be bent over your slain body,

miss the gunshot, the final blow. But think, he said, how sad,  
all that you're missing—the slow sunny afternoons in pajamas,

maybe a cat—or an African pygmy hedgehog—on the couch.  
Trips to the grocery store. Bad movies.

Anyway, she said, I'm late. She picked up a handbag full of arrows.  
Please try not to disclose my secret identity. I'll see you later.

He pretended not to care as her shadow lengthened in the doorway.  
She pretended not to notice the sudden heaviness of her sword.

*Gailey*

## THE SLAYER ASKS FOR TIME OFF

It's hard enough just trying to pick out  
the miniskirt that matches my platform jellies

but as you know, the cute-as-a-button cheerleader  
must also answer to the darkest demons

(if you've watched any animé, you know this drill  
already—how I'll prowl through corridors

looking fragile in the shadows, how the monster  
grabs my ponytail from behind and I'm

knocked, momentarily, off my tiny feet  
but will spring up, brandishing the medieval sword

hiding in my teddy-bear backpack.)  
And don't think it doesn't get boring, the back flips

and the bite marks and perfectly timed execution  
of one more stake through the heart. I'm tired of wiping blood

off my jeans, the adrenaline rush in graveyards.  
Just once I'd like to take the night off, maybe

be the damsel in distress, instead of always,  
always, wearing the armor and carrying the flag.

*Gailey*

## THE SNOW QUEEN

You tell yourself he only left you for her  
because of the wicked shard of glass in his eye,  
but the truth is, every man wants an ice princess.  
The truth is, you're too easy to get used to—

your sloppy warmth, the heat from your skin  
fresh from the garden—it's too much for him.  
He'd rather marvel at her tedious snowflakes,  
caress her frosted hair, bask in that cold gaze,

that veneer of symmetry. So you wander  
around town like an idiot, forgetting  
even your shoes. The boys there  
are all still in awe of her. "Did you see

that thing she was driving?" they keep asking.  
You set off to bring him back, not thinking  
you are the last person he wants to see.  
"He's trapped in that ice castle" you murmur,

"He needs to be rescued." Dogged, you follow  
the tiny shards of glass, and their sparkle.  
And when you finally find him, dark with cold  
from her brutal kisses, he doesn't even

recognize you. You stop blaming the shard  
in his eye; how can you rescue a man  
whose heart, transfixed by skeletal crystal,  
craves the bruising of frost?

*Gailey*

### THE SNOW QUEEN EXPLAINS

Hey, I didn't start out like this.  
I enjoyed corned beef sandwiches,  
good vodka. It started with sparkle—  
one broken splinter in my foot, another in my finger.

Then I lived so far South the only snow  
I'd seen was the shedding of magnolia,  
a petal coat of white on the ground so thick  
you had to kick through it.

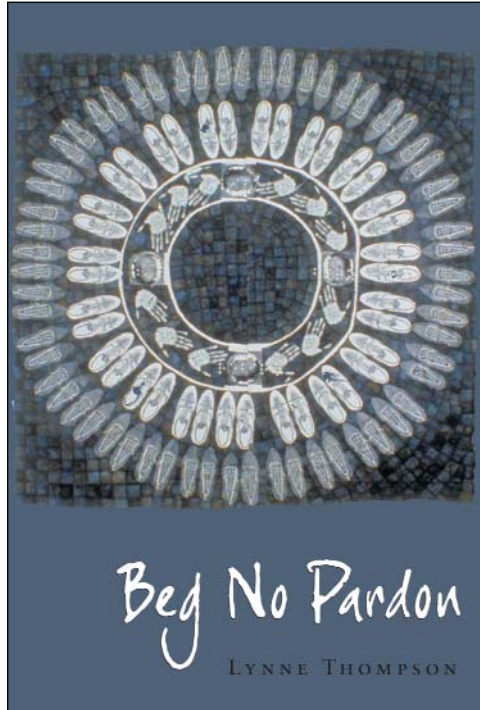
I didn't notice how sounds had dampened,  
how the summers with you became intolerable, sticky.  
I lay in ice water baths, peeled off blankets,  
nightgowns. You always complained  
my hands were too cold anyway.

I moved North, started keeping pets with fur.  
I enjoyed the way my new stilettos  
pierced the fine layer of ice outside my door.  
My Southern manners melted in the blank  
face of so much snow.

A glassy film grew over my skin, perfecting.  
My hair grew lighter without the touch  
of sun. I built a palace from the remnants  
of our life together—white car doors,  
blocks of ice, mirrors, polished surfaces.

I dressed in white satin, white fox.  
I carved swans in ice for company. After thirty,  
I started wanting one boy after another—  
Perhaps their girlfriends' tiny fists bang  
on my palace door. I cannot hear them.

I don't think of you at all,  
here, while my skin grows smoother  
each year, while my hands and feet  
become idols for the dead.



## *BEG NO PARDON* BY LYNNE THOMPSON

Perugia Press

Extroverted, declarative, jazzy, and vital, *Beg No Pardon* commands attention from the first word to the last. Brimming with personality and attitude in the very best sense—pride, dignity, and graceful indignation—poet Lynne Thompson speaks about the search for, love of, and joy in legacy. The poems depict a process in which she tries to find or create, through birth family and family of choice, through erotic encounters and relationships, through the music and language of her hybrid culture, and through the act of writing itself, a place to feel at home. *Beg No*

*Pardon* is about the formation of identity from a little-known and complicated beginning, both personally and culturally. At times alarming and sexy, at times sorrowful and bitter, *Beg No Pardon* describes the vivid world of Afro-Caribbean heritage in the 20th century.

*Beg No Pardon* by Lynne Thompson · Perugia Press

Susan Kan, *Editor and Director*, PO Box 60364, Florence, MA 01062

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[susan@perugiapress.com](mailto:susan@perugiapress.com)

Or call: (413) 587-2646

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**Lynne Thompson** was born and raised in Los Angeles, California, by parents born in the Windward Islands, West Indies. She received her B.A. from Scripps College and a J.D. from Southwestern University School of Law.

Prior to Perugia Press' selection of Lynne Thompson's *Beg No Pardon* as its 2007 First Book Award winner, her publications included the chapbooks *We Arrive By Accumulation* (SeaMoon Press, 2002) and *Through A Window* (Conflux Press, 2005). Her work has also been featured in the *Indiana Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Poetry International*, *Runes*, and *Rattle* among others, well as the anthologies *Blue Arc: An Anthology of California Poets and Mischief*, *Caprice* and

*Other Poetic Strategies*. A Pushcart Prize nominee, Thompson is an active member of Los Angeles poetry community, most recently participating in the West Hollywood Book Fair. Trained as an attorney and currently employed as the Director of Employee & Labor Relations at UCLA, she doesn't allow those diversions to interfere with her search for lyric.

### PRAISE FOR LYNNE THOMPSON

"The poems in Lynne Thompson's *Beg No Pardon* sing of her Caribbean ancestors, won't be told the can or can't do, have the perfume of sin bleeding from their fingertips. These poems drip from lips the color of peril. Here is a deep ode to blackness, an incantatory chant from a deep well full of mythic missives. Read this book."

—Tony Barnstone

"In Lynne Thompson's new collection, *Beg No Pardon*, the poems move from precise reflections on childhood to the rights of passage of young adult years, and then on to all the days of joy and despair, solitude, longing, and selfknowledge that follow in a life richly lived and acutely observed. Thompson is a poet who revels in language—that 'house of many pleasures.' Like the 'one good eye' of her 'Unworshipped Woman,' this collection delights, 'it flash—'"

—Natasha Trethewey

*Lynne Thompson*

## I ASK THE MALAGASY

Where are my ancestors buried?  
*In the feathers of a yellow bird.*

How do you remember me?  
*As seven wishes.*

Where will I find the shape-changers' magic?  
*In fields of hydrangea.*

Who teaches your tantara?  
*A fox behind closed doors.*

Where are your elephant birds?  
*In ruby and absinthe afternoons.*

And where is the sawfish beak?  
*In the dayshine of trees.*

How deep is your river Betsiboka?  
*Twelve earthquakes deep.*

What time did your soil turn red?  
*When calves bent their knees . . . .*



*Thompson*

## BACK SEAT

Long before I learned life repeats like an unchecked burp, I was a schoolgirl sitting in the last seat of a yellow bus facing backward like I'd been told more than one hundred times not to do. It was raining in that all-at-sea way it used to rain in southern California before there were so many cars but even then, there were too many. And the street was Adams or Pico or some other familiar street although here, the familiar is always being knocked down to make way for the unfamiliar.

One day, there was a blue & white car with sharky fins and Cheerio tires following very close to the bus and every time the bus stopped, those blue & white fins stopped too and just missed us by inches and I thought *that car sure wants to hit us* (as though a Chevy has a will of its own) until it did and I went flying—Peanut's lunch pail, satchel, and all my golden pencils spilled like pick-up sticks and my bottom lip split on the silver grab-on rail like a spoiled banana and it's been that way ever since: collisions, broken bodies and nothing, nothing to be done.

*Thompson*

### SHORT STACK WITH SWITCH MONKEY

I'm a free wheel. Got no one telling me the can or can't do.  
So when this jeans-too-tight-to-breathe strolled into Miz  
Willie's Grill, I liked the cut of his kerchief right off. Knew  
he knew things I wouldn't know in a lifetime: how to bail  
it in, strut in company jewelry, and play the glory hunter.  
That's why I wanted him. Him straddled out at counter's end,  
nursing a cup o' joe hotter than Yuma's breath, looking neither  
left nor right, just talking to Miz Willie who didn't look left  
nor right or give a damn about anything he said. But I did.

So I sidled up to the counter, took the stool two stools away  
and bought another cup while I listened to him blow smoke.  
Listened to his world of slow train, hotshot, piggy-back. Heard  
how he would catch out ahead of the bull, drug runners, and  
ramblers with romance in mind, trying to follow him out past  
San Berdu, all the way to Baxter Springs. Listened long enough  
to know he'd never tie on to a can or can't do or to me. Finished  
my cup o' mud and lit out—full on a cheap pie card, a rail fan  
looking for a local load, all smiles from a stack of short love.

Thompson

## HIGHWAY 61 BLUES

*you begin with a sound wrapped around a syllable...*  
—Quincy Troupe

Woncha take me Bobby J? Woncha take me  
up the trail outta New Orleans, past Natchez,  
past Vicksburg, all the way to Rollin' Fork?  
You and me gonna beat the boll weevil,

gonna beat the bent back heat all the way  
to Duncan, all the way to New Africa been  
on my mind. I'm lookin' for a blue devil,  
a blue devil to set me free from floodplains,

from Yazoo, from Tallahatchie, fly free me  
all the way to Greenville, Tutwiler, all the way  
to Clarksdale where my guitar just gotta moan  
Preachin' Blue all the way, all the way, all the way

and I'm hollerin' loud *I been 'buked and scorned  
Willie Brown; I been beat down Howlin' Wolf;  
hey Kid Bailey, got any scratch? Can you get me  
to Shelby where blues ain't dead?* So said some

pretty one-eyed gal who gave me two six stringers  
and a hard drum, said *pace yourself, pace yourself*  
and yeah, Mr. Jimmie Cotton soothe me sure with  
some sweet, sweet devil music to keep me movin'

outta sullen heat and deep blue and  
Jim Crow and sharecrop—no mo' dry throat,  
no mo' hot whip, no mammy sold to don't know  
where, no white man's cotton but no forty acres

and no goddamned mule, *yeah*, so take me, Bobby J,  
all the way to Memphis, out west to Houston,  
up east to Cincinnati, up north to Chi-town, away  
from the woncha please *Stop Breakin' Down Blues*.

*Thompson*

## THE UNWORSHIPPED WOMAN

Nothing

beat her

break her down or reek so  
the way she do

nothing got her unzipped mind  
her fly-paper memory

she a riverbed will be

for a dog's millennium

she gone lost

to her un-borns she pale smoke

*shadow in the distance*

she a train whistler's whistle

this unworshipped this woman

she come like salt lick she go down

like a drowning man hollering for one last last

her story hung like seaweed

she come in she go out

like unworshipped women supposed to

knees bloody  
knuckles got somebody's  
jawbone jammed on

hair coiled with September twatterlight  
corkscrewed so tight even owls won't hoot

until she pass by them longing, on long legs

lips the color of peril

bittersweet folded round a hollow in her twisted back

But her one good eye it flash—

Thompson

## I AM GRENADINE

having been born of elite black masses.

I am a slaver washed up on Spring.

I am Lower Bay and its blackbird.

I am the great-grand-niece of Chatoyer;  
chipped fretwork on his chattel-house.

I am sharpening stones from Queensbury;  
mist sheltering sugar plantations at Farm,  
a dwelling house joined to the cane,  
to the windmills, to the waterwheels,

a hodgepodge of Karäybe footnotes  
in Father Breton's diary; he say—  
*from the very beginning, they were  
filled with hatred, not just for slavery,  
but any form of injunction, authority  
or submission...*

This is why I run to the sea.  
Being well-supplied with rivers,  
I oscillate windward and leeward,  
dangle a bracelet of fishing cays,  
tattoo of Bordel petroglyphs  
on each palm, Yambou Pass carving  
the bones where my elbows curve.

In 1780, I was harried by hurricanes,  
under heavy fire from all enemies.

But I stride with considerable numbers—  
led the insurrection at the Massarica River.

Some say I am one-half Anglican Church,  
but I am thorny and cut down.

I am never six furlongs from Kingstown.  
There, I am after-ash of Soufrière, 1902—  
or so my daddy tells—  
all internal wars,  
pregnant with destruction,  
fled in different directions.

Today,

I am golden guava, Young Island, Grenadine,  
and my name will not be confused or improved.



## ARTWORK

BY DANIELLA ZALCMAN

Daniella Zalczman is an insufferable shutterbug who can always be found carrying at least one and sometimes as many as four cameras simultaneously, depending on her spirits. Sometimes, she thinks she sees the world more clearly

through a lens than she does through her own eyes, which are terribly near-sighted and not very useful anyway. Born and bred in DC, she lives in New York City where she is a junior at Columbia University, inexplicably majoring in architecture even though she is determined to become a journalist.

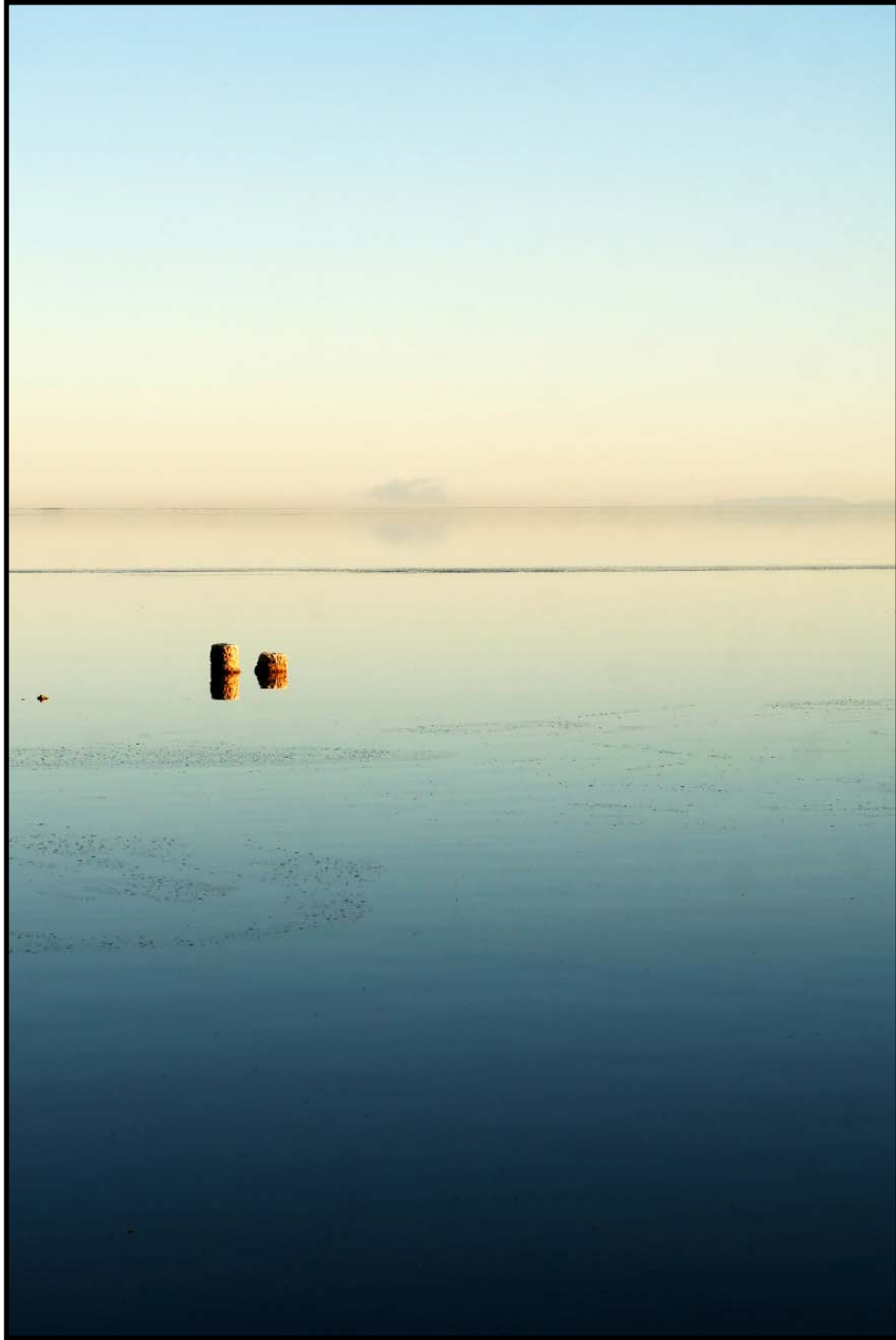
## THE SALTON SEA - MARCH, 2007

The Salton Sea as it exists today is the aftermath of a man-made environmental disaster that occurred between 1905 and 1907, when improper management of irrigation routes from the Colorado River caused the river to flow unchecked into the Salton Sink for some two years. As the basin filled, the town of Salton and parts of the Torres-Martinez Indian Reservation were submerged.

The Salton Sea developed into a tourist attraction, because of its water recreation, and the waterfowl attracted to the area. Up until the 1960s large luxury communities were established around the Sea's perimeter, until the lake's lack of any outlet induced fish die-offs, high levels of bacteria, and rapidly increasing salinity. The shore is coated in a layer of fish skeletons and recently deceased tilapia. For decades, various restoration plans to the Salton Sea have been discussed, but little has been done to date.

<http://dan.iella.net>





*“Posts”*  
Daniella Zalcmán



*“Trio 2”*  
Daniella Zalcman 2007



*“Coast”*  
Daniella Zalcman 2007



*“Submerged House”*  
Daniella Zalcman 2007





*“Bombay Beach”*  
Daniella Zalcman 2007

Norman Ball

## BEING DIFFICULT

With all due respect to those preceding me on this poetry discussion thread, I see great efforts have been expended to assist your poem along what the consensus clearly feels should be a more linear track. There's nothing like audience-provided cliff notes! I'm reminded of the old lady—approached at a busy intersection by a Boy Scout—who beats him senseless with her handbag. Everyone assumes the old dear will welcome a helping hand. In fact she relishes the thrill of reaching the other side unassisted.

The message to poets is, beware the kindness of strangers. Those who would rescue a poem from 'incomprehensibility' may actually be advancing death-by-explication. Poetic logic is its own animal existing outside the bounds of relatable (i.e. conversational) understanding. I'm guilty of offering dubious assistance in some of your prior efforts. But I find myself developing a comfort level with your opacity. To your credit many readers end their excoriations by allowing, sheepishly, that there is 'something there' (by itself, a tacit acknowledgement of poetic success), even as they suspect you of being willfully obscure or insensitive to their great sacrifice as readers. For me, at least part of the fascination of your poetry lies in its willful inaccessibility. I'm convinced you've constructed more here than a good game of hide-and-seek.

But first, a word for the much-maligned Internet poetry workshop as it offers the possibility for these marvelous rolling commentaries complete with ugly mob scenes that can develop in a flash. Short of the occasional letter to the editor, how can the *Paris Review* compete with this human cluster?

While it's not in vogue, I level some blame at the audience. Even the most engaging preacher must contend with lazy congregants. For too many, difficulty is a tiresome abomination, a code to be cracked; really, they want their poetry fed to them in bite-sized morsels. Of course they'll weather the broken flow of the stanza; the better to think themselves Poetry Appreciators (I capitalize this because I feel it is a genus, much like the Lesser Shrew.) There is a certain social value in being a Poetry Appreciator. I believe this is the philistinism Frost was rebuffing when, asked to explain one of his poems, he replied, "Would you have me say it in more or less-adequate words?" This obsequious reader has designs on poetry alright, but for all the wrong reasons (or is it simply just one of the many reasons?). He wants a cogent sound-bite to spice his cocktail chatter with, a haiku-kernel with which to impress his fellow mid-brows.

I can hear him muttering, “To hell with art. Chicks dig poetry.” Far be it from me, saddled by my own nefarious agendas, to cast the first stone here.

I’d like to address attention spans—but only briefly. There is too much of the dashed-off vignette in poetry today. Difficulty can’t keep up with the penchant for brevity. I must single out the Internet again as, for all its salutary effects on artistic collaboration and community, it beckons with an immediacy that can be the undoing of careful composition. People want to take full advantage of a forum’s one-poem-a-day quota (a virtual gag order as unnatural to the erstwhile poet as China’s one-child policy is to that country’s fertile peasant class). The technology itself tempts at rushing a poem out there *before its time*. There is a propitious aspect to poetic composition. In the days of pen and ink, poets would put a poem in a drawer for a few years before returning to it at its *appointed* time. I’m reminded of the famous Gallo wine slogan “We will sell no wine before its time,” a thirty-second jingle that paradoxically extolled the virtues of unrushed maturation. The natural forbearance of good craft is tempted mightily in the Internet age.

Hurriedness is not a charge I lodge against you as I sense careful composition in your tiny enigmas. The question I would be asking myself if I were you is: “does my poem warrant its difficulty or am I a hopeless obscurantist?” Speaking as a reader, I find myself answering sometimes yes and sometimes no, depending on your poem. No different from any other poet, you approach the dais with a satchel stuffed with successes and failures. Who doesn’t?

Though I may struggle to comprehend it, I have no difficulty with difficult poetry on artistic grounds. In fact, we need more of it if for no other reason than to put our shrinking attention spans through their paces. For one thing, there’s our civic duty to consider. We are approaching an age when rapt attention to anything for a period exceeding sixty seconds will be a crime of the state, perhaps a proviso of Patriot Act III. George Bush’s prisons will soon be stuffed with people guilty of extended reflection. Bush, storekeeper for the New World Order, repeats the operative term with Pavlovian insistency: *we must not cut and run*. True, he is arguing for patience, but through the language of impulsivity—*cut and run*—what a fascinating dichotomy in the dark tradition of Orwellian doublespeak.

So we are being systematically curtailed. In this Age of Truncation, poetry should strive for the lonely promontory; stake out the oblique leisurely stroll, the unhurried voice of truth to power before being led away in hand-cuffs. Let the Gestapo goons beat their heads against the wall struggling to put into words the precise nature of the

poet's offense. His crimes should be impossible to explicate on a writ or a summons. To all real poets out there, I say: Your inscrutability is a birthright. Follow your destiny. Take the long way home.

T.S. Eliot, no great lover of the approachable masses, was all over difficult poetry. There is evidence he took great pleasure at the allusion-chasers who scoured *The Waste Land* searching for the Nile's true source. But if the cartographer can plot the coordinates, then it's probably Duluth, not poetry. *The Waste Land* gives nothing up over bagels and coffee. People rarely fall in love over this behemoth. More often they are rendered speechless. Yet it *feels* like a poem, filling us with the overwhelming sense we are experiencing *something*. There is no paragraphed synopsis to render this experience. This is as it should be.

Doomed though it is, debate is irresistible. In *T. S. Eliot—An Author for All Seasons: Word of No Speech: Eliot and his Words*, Lidia Vianu elicits Eliot's dim view of understanding as a mainstay of poetic appreciation. "Word of no speech" is a line from Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday*, part II:

"The 'seasoned' reader," Eliot begins, "does not bother about understanding when he first reads a poem." This new image of a reader who enjoys before he has realized what he is reading is in keeping with what was new in the way of writing at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The novelty lies in the poet's consistently leaving out of the poem something that the reader is used to finding there. A "kind of meaning," Eliot says, is willfully put aside, and its absence bewilders the reader. Eliot gets rid of that clarity which makes the paraphrase of the poem possible.

In short, a frothing at the mouth with apt rejoinders—i.e. the false-mastery of understanding—belongs to that narrow sphere of English majors, dilettantes and cocktail party show-offs. For the unabashed fancier of art, however, *full poetic appreciation* is entirely possible in the absence of *full understanding*. A successful poem—no less a cryptic one—should not be mere launching pad for dollops of explanatory cock-waddle. Like the falling tree in an empty forest, a poem is capable of its own noise, thank you very much. One can go further and suggest that a full understanding—so-called clarity—is the province of prose and not poetry at all. After all, why write a poem in the first place if the desired artistic effect lends itself better to prose? Why not write an essay instead? In his willful exclusion of certain narrative elements critical to a linear understanding, Eliot reserved for himself oodles of fun: *There is no decoder ring. But keep looking because I'm busting a gut watching you guys scramble for it.*



If I've helped you flesh out the trajectory of your own poetic inquiries, while stringing up a few pikers along the way, then this exposition has not been in vain. If you're a true cynic, you'll see I may have committed the same fallacy I sought to expose i.e. *talking your poem to death*. In the meantime, I'll continue enjoying your poetry to the extremities of my feeble understanding.

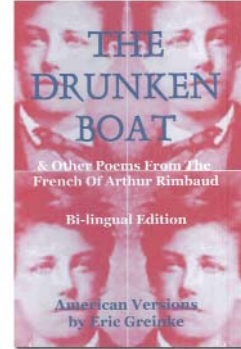


**Norman Ball** is a Virginia-based writer and musician. His essays, articles and poetry have appeared in a variety of venues including *Bright Lights Film Journal*, *Main Street Rag*, *Liberty*, *The Berkeley Poetry Review* and *Epicenter*. His song "Good Books" was recently selected for participation in the Neil Young Justice Through Music Project and he was honored to perform his song "Space Between the Notes" on behalf of ASCAP at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in late 2006. A copy of his music video for "Spill My Wine" can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ri0s2mAFYRs>

Review by Art Beck

THE DRUNKEN BOAT & OTHER POEMS  
FROM THE FRENCH OF ARTHUR  
RIMBAUD: AMERICAN VERSIONS  
BY ERIC GREINKE

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Arthur Rimbaud had, arguably, the most productive adolescence in modern literary history. Born in 1854 and raised by a difficult and single mother on the edges of poverty, he nonetheless began publishing accomplished poems in his early teens. The title poem of this selection—*Le Bateau Ivre*—was written at the age of 16. And marks the beginning of a brief career that impacted not just French poetics – but world poetics generations later. It’s hard, for example, to imagine *Howl* without the touchstone of Rimbaud. And it’s become a commonplace observation that each new crop of poets finds itself searching for the “new Rimbaud”. In the American imagination, Rimbaud has become the brilliant bad boy personified. James Dean on poetry steroids. A patron saint of the Beats and rock musicians.

Somewhere in his very early twenties, Rimbaud stopped writing. As suddenly as any suicide. Which only adds to the mystique. After a year or two of wandering, he went to work for a colonial merchant firm in North Africa. Part adventurer, part fortune hunter, he peddled arms as well as trading in coffee and tusks.

He might have continued for years, living as far away as he could from the scenes of his turbulent youth. Denying—as he was said to have—that he’d ever written poetry when the subject of poems by a certain Rimbaud circulating in Paris came up. “Preposterous.” But, a knee that slowly began to swell with a persistent tumor finally forced him back to France for medical attention.

In 1891, his right leg was amputated in Marseille. In July of that year, he returned home to his family. Would he also have eventually returned to literature? Invalided, with nowhere else to turn? And, if so, to what kind of aesthetic in the fast arriving twentieth century?

We'll never know. Stifled and sick, he resolved to go back to the colonies, but made it only as far as the hospital in Marseille. The swelling in his knee had been diagnosed as a carcinoma, which had evidently spread. He died in November, 1891, barely 37 years old. As brief as it was, the roughly ten year period of his poetic production seems significantly longer when viewed in the context of his, also, brief life.

#### TRANSLATIONS

If you browse the internet, you can find a number of individual Rimbaud postings and a few small press volumes, but, surprisingly, for all his popularity, there seem to be only a handful of major press collections. I'm no doubt overlooking some, but primary translators include Louise Varese and Wallace Fowlie in the 1950s, Paul Schmidt and Oliver Bernard in the 1960s and Wyatt Mason, whose complete Rimbaud appeared in 2002. In any case, this group provides a wide backdrop for Greinke's versions. Also noteworthy are the twelve adaptations of Rimbaud pieces included in Robert Lowell's 1958 volume *Imitations*.

I'm attracted to Greinke's approach for a several reasons. First, because he's a poet who's unapologetically trying to translate poetry into poetry. A tough proposition requiring shameless intuition and not only the courage—but the inner need to risk “poetic flight.” The need to work without a net.

The paradox of scholarly, linguistic translation is that by the time you do your research and test your facts, the poem's as often as not gotten tired of you and refuses to come out and play. There are notable exceptions, but I'm also of the opinion that the disciplines that make for an accomplished linguist may also work against what John Berryman characterized as “the freedom of the poet.”

The problem, of course, with poetic “intuitive” translation is that when you shoot from the hip, you have to accept that from time to time, you'll shoot yourself in the foot.

Another reason I'm attracted to Greinke's approach is that for him, Rimbaud is a labor of love, not a “project.” In his introduction, he talks about a feeling of *déjà vu* when first encountering Rimbaud. And describes what seems an almost compulsive sense of appropriated ownership. An annoyance at the existing translations. *A need to do his own*. To a non-translator, these feelings may sound a little over the top. But to any one who translates poetry—they're instantly recognizable. Greinke's only saying what most poetry translators think, but usually think twice about saying.

Greinke also recognizes that “a literal translation is *never* possible...” And that “in many ways, a translation is a new poem, modeled on the original.”

I personally would take this concept even further. I’ve often felt that a translator needs to look beyond the words and beneath the text for the roots of the original poem. But maybe the best metaphor for this was one given by Robert Pinsky at recent reading of his version of *The Divine Comedy*.

When the question of accuracy came up, Pinsky opined that somewhere—in whatever place these things exist—is the Platonic ideal of *The Divine Comedy*. Dante tapped it first, and no one will ever do it better. But Dante’s American and Chinese, and German, and etc. translators need to find that place that Dante tapped and try to tap it themselves.

## “COMMON GROUND”

In the introduction to his 2002 Rimbaud volume, Wyatt Mason draws a distinction between what he considers Fowlie’s almost prosaically trot like versions and Schmidt’s highly personalized, poetic—but spun—translations. In his versions, Mason wants “to find common, rather than middle, ground between the two poles.”

It may be informative to see where Greinke fits, here. One of his better pieces, I think is *Ma Boheme*, a light and early poem but full of the “adolescent exuberance” that Greinke finds lacking in existing translations. Rimbaud’s first stanza reads:

*Je m’en allays, les poings dans me poches crevees;  
Mon paletot aussi devenait ideal;  
J’allais sous le ciel, Muse! et j’etais ton feal;  
Oh! la la! que d’amours splendides j’ai revees!*

Schmidt’s version seems, on surface, straightforward, until after comparing it you realize how much of Schmidt has been added (But as Mason points out, this may come down to a matter of taste).

I ran away, hands stuck in pockets that seemed  
All holes; my jacket was a holey ghost as well.  
I followed you, Muse! Beneath your spell,  
Oh la la, what glorious loves I dreamed.

With Mason, we lose what seems an interjected “holey ghost,” but we

also seem to lose some of the voice.

And so off I went, fists thrust in the torn pockets  
Of a coat held together by no more than its name.  
O muse, how I served you beneath the blue;  
And oh what dreams of dazzling love I dreamed.

Does Greinke find the “common ground” that Mason is looking for?

So, I’m walking along, hands in torn-out pockets  
& my coat is looking really perfect  
Under the Romantic sky, & I’m a slave  
To my dreams of splendid love!

On first reading, I miss the “Oh! la la!” of the original, but yes, maybe oh la la does Frenchify the poem too much. And “I’m a slave” replaces it well. What really differentiates Greinke’s version though is that unlike the other two (both of which are undeniably good)—is that it reads like a poem written in English. And I think this was accomplished by tapping the roots as well as the words of the original. By “internalizing” the original and letting the new poem shape itself in the new language. Rather than forcing the French into English.

It’s also interesting to look at another instance of a poet appropriating the original: Robert Lowell’s version from “Imitations”:

I walked on the great road, my two fists lost  
in my slashed pockets, and my overcoat  
the ghost of a coat. Under the sky I walked,  
I was your student, Muses. What affairs

we had together...

Whether you prefer Greinke or Lowell, in large part comes down to taste. But both versions seem exemplary of what happens when a poem is internalized by a translator and then re-created in the target language. As opposed to just translating the text.

That being said, you also have to question whether—by migrating “muse” into “romantic sky”—Greinke loses what may be the one serious point of the passage? The young Rimbaud’s dedication to “the Muse”, i.e., Isn’t it poetry he’s a slave to, not love? But I think Greinke may compensate enough for this later in the poem: “... as if I was in some fairy tale, I shouted poems / as I went & I had a room at the Milky Way

/ & of course the stars were rustling like leaves.”

Greinke’s best passages exhibit that kind of fluidity and unstrained melody. From “The Clever Maid”:

In the brown dinette, perfumed  
with the aroma of varnish & of fruits, at my ease  
I scarfed a plate of various foreign  
Delicacies, & I sprawled in my big chair.

Or the maid “At The Green Inn”:

That one—never one to avoid embraces!—  
Giggling, served me buttered bread  
With warm ham on a multicolored plate.

## POOP

Greinke’s preface states that he wants to bring across the “musical and painterly qualities” of the original. Along with the “adolescent exuberance...and the *feeling*.” The inference is that much of this rests in the music and metrics. As he puts it: “Restoring the surface qualities has...been one of my goals. The meaning emerges when the tone and persona are restored.” But if Greinke’s strength is musicality, I think there are places the pursuit of sound may work against him.

For me, *Le Couer Vole*—“The Stolen Heart”—seems an almost impossible poem to capture in translation because its outer surface of jaunty, slangy rhyme protects something shattered within. Enid Starkie devotes a chapter to it in her biography of Rimbaud. And Wallace Fowle discusses the poem and its presumed basis at length in his 1946 treatise *The Myth of Childhood*.

As the legend goes (and perhaps it’s been revised in more recent biographies?), Rimbaud, while visiting Paris during the Commune uprisings, was sodomized, either willingly or not, in a military barracks. He was 16 and Starkie considers it his first real sexual experience. He transmuted the experience into a poem with emotions that Starkie characterizes as both violated and fascinated. First entitling it *Couer Supplice* (Tortured or Martyred Heart), later changing the title to *Couer de Pitrie* (Buffoon’s Heart). Before settling on “Stolen Heart.”

The French first stanza is:

*Mon triste couer bave a la poupe,*

*Mon coeur couvert de caporal;  
Ils y lancent des jets de soupe  
Mon triste coeur bave a la poupe:  
Sous les quolibets de la troupe  
Qui pousse un rire general,  
Mon triste coeur bave a la poupe,  
Mon Coeur couvert de caporal.*

Fowlie's translation begins as follows:

My sad heart slobbers at the poop  
my heart covered with tobacco-spit.  
They spew steams of soup at it.  
My sad heart drools at the poop.

Or in the 1962 Oliver Bernard version (on the WEB) entitled "The Cheated Heart":

My poor heart dribbles at the stern  
Under the gibes of the whole crew  
Which burst out in a single laugh,  
My poor heart dribbles at the stern  
My heart covered with caporal.

Looking at the French rhyme scheme, if you didn't know the content and background of the poem, you'd be inclined to presume this was something a lot lighter, a clever vulgar sound poem along the lines, say, of Jandl's *Otto's Mopps*. But reading Starkie and Fowlie—and if the story is at all credible—you start to view the protective shell of rhyme and slang as a tough ostrich egg with a small fatal crack from which the yolk is beginning to leak.

When Rimbaud sent the poem off to his young teacher and mentor Izambard, he stressed "This does *not* mean nothing." And "I implore you not to score it too much with your pencil or with your mind."

Izambard, however didn't realize what the poem was. He later said he thought it "a hoax in the worst of taste." But wanting to appear broadminded, he answered Rimbaud with what he thought was a clever parody of the poem. Starkie dates the beginning of the end of their friendship from this letter.

It would be hard to criticize anyone for being less than successful in capturing *Le Coeur Vole*. But I think Greinke's beginning tries too hard.

My sad heart gushes in poop,  
 My heart drenched in tobacco spit;  
 They vomit currents of soup  
 My sad heart drowns in shit.

The sounds work, but the image they bring across is that of a conscious sentimentalist making tough fun of himself. Not a 16-year-old boy, losing his anal virginity and “dribbling at the stern.” Substituting “poop” (as in shit) for the French *poupe*—a nautical term for stern from which we derive “poop deck” is arguably okay, because I think in this case *poupe* signifies astern as in behind. But “gushing” and later “drowning in shit”—while musical and jaunty, as well as nautical—just seem to kill the essential image. While “dribbles” or the even more complex “drools” retains the damaged heart of the poem.

### ...DE FLEUVES IMPASSIBLES

Another instance where image may be unduly sacrificed for sound is at the very beginning of the title poem, *The Drunken Boat*. The original begins:

*Comme je descendais des Fleuves impassibles  
 Je ne me sentis plus guide par le haleurs:  
 Des Peaux- Rouges criards les avaient pris pour cibles,  
 Les ayant cloués nus aux poteaux de couleurs.*

The voice speaking, is that of the boat itself. Wyatt Mason’s translation is:

While swept downstream on indifferent Rivers,  
 I felt the boatmen’s tow-ropes slacken:  
 Yawping Redskins took them as targets  
 Nailing them naked to totem poles.

My own French is atrocious, but piecing out the stanza from a dictionary and with some help from French speaking friends, my stab at a trot is something along the lines of:

As I descended the impassive Rivers, I sensed  
 myself no longer guided by the (hauling) bargemen.



Howling redskins had taken them as prey (or targets)  
and nailed them naked to painted poles.

Louise Varese translates the stanza as:

As I came down the impassible Rivers,  
I felt no more the bargemen's guiding hands,  
Targets for yelling red-skins they were nailed  
Naked to painted poles.

Note that Varese changes "impassive Rivers" to "impassible Rivers." *Impassibles* (impassive) seems a "false friend" that's almost impossible to resist in the context of a river. And Schmidt, possibly wanting to have it both ways says "I drifted on a river I could not control." Greinke moves this further along:

As I flew down the raving river,  
Free at last of the boatman's hands  
That nailed themselves to my mast,  
That forced me into Indian waters

Certainly a melodious entry to a poem rich in sound. But what Greinke has done is to switch the images. He's objectified the impassive river system into a "raving river." And turned the raiding band of scalpers into an abstract—"Indian waters." He's also interjected a—for me—surreal image of a boatman nailing his own hands to the mast. Does a translator have the right—in creating a new poem in English—to bend the original this much? Yes, of course. I have no doubt that if Rimbaud were translating, he'd have no compunctions. But to me, there are several questionable consequences.

One of these is to remove an image that marks this as the poem of a, albeit brilliant, 16-year-old. And I don't know what's worse – losing the "impassive Rivers" which to me impart a sense of expulsion and alienation. Or losing the Redskins with all their adolescent energy. And the sense of ordinary workaday river commerce suddenly invaded by the wild.

One thing that strikes me is that, not only is *Fleuves* plural in the original—it's also capitalized—which seems to imply the name of a system of waterways flowing to the ocean in whatever imaginary country we're in. Do we really want to give that animist presence up?

Another unintended (or maybe intended?) consequence of leaving out the murderous Redskins is that of sanitizing the stanza the way

stage productions of Huck Finn refer to Jim as “River Jim.” Are the Indians essential to the poem?—maybe not. But I think the “expelling” impassive Rivers foreshadow the poem’s penultimate stanza, where the now exhausted boat yearns to return to a childhood scene. A childhood the 16-year-old Rimbaud already felt expelled from? In Greinke’s sensitive rendering:

If ever I shall return, it will be to the pond,  
Where once, cold and black toward perfumed evening,  
A child on his knees set sail  
A leaf as frail as a May butterfly.

*The Drunken Boat* is a long poem and a translation doesn’t sink or swim on one stanza. But, if Rimbaud is the lifelong companion he seems to be for Greinke, I’d hope that in some future revision, he might revisit that first stanza.

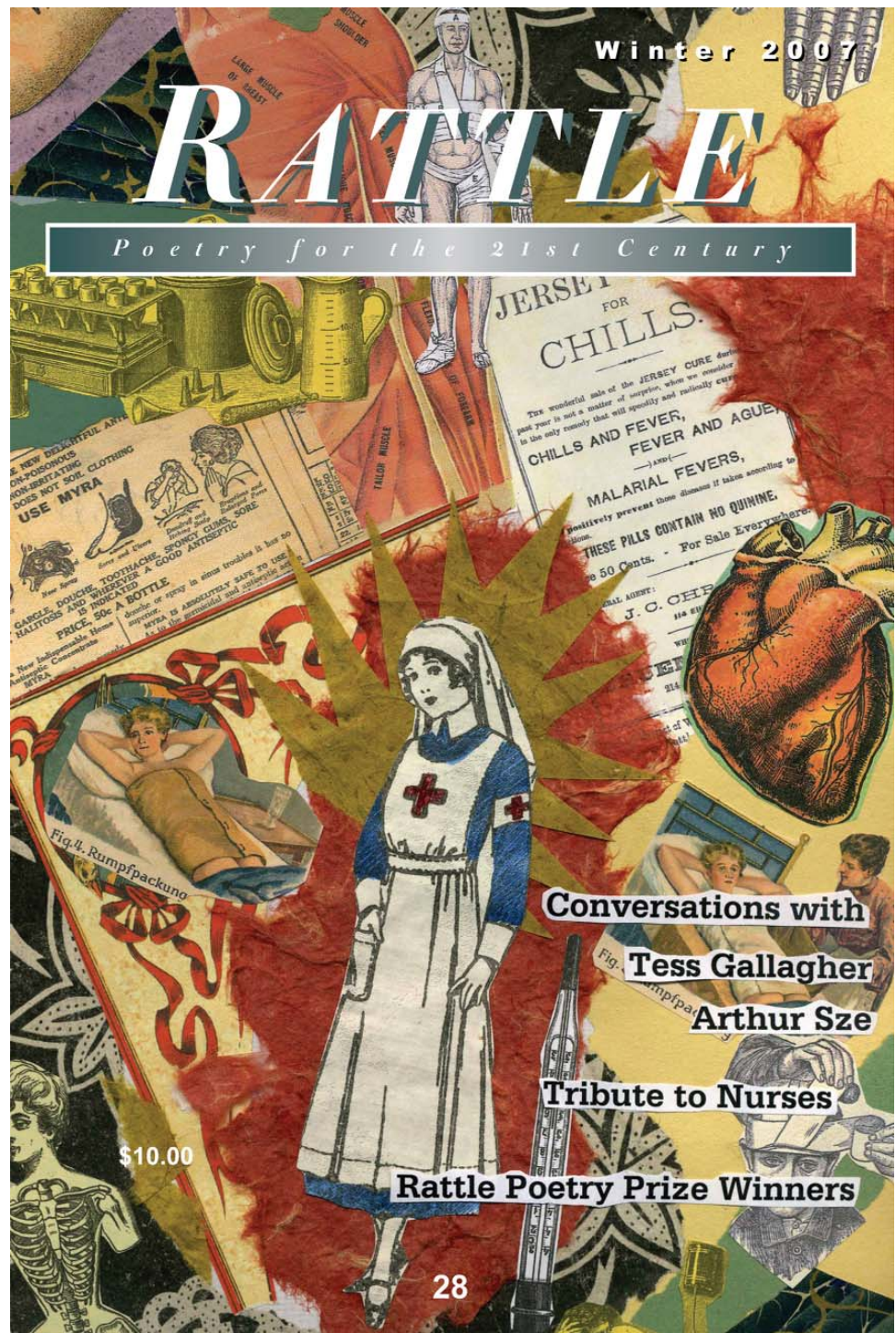
But then again, there’s Robert Lowell’s “imitation” which turns the impassible rivers into the “virgin Amazon.”

I felt my guides no longer carried me—  
as we sailed down the virgin Amazon,  
the redskins nailed them to their painted stakes  
naked, as targets for their archery.

Another example illustrating how different poetic translators will look for the “poem” in different aspects of the original. There’s no “correct,” and definitely no final version. What resonates for one translator, may be static to another’s ear.

**Art Beck** is a San Francisco poet and translator who’s published two translation volumes. *Simply to See: Poems of Lurorius* (Poltroon Press, Berkeley, 1990) and a selected *Rilke* (Elysian Press, New York, 1983). He’s currently trying to atone for some of his earlier Rilke versions by retranslating the *Sonnets to Orpheus*.

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T. S. Davis, RN

## A KIND OF GIFT

*...I resign'd myself  
To sit by the wounded and sooth them, or silently watch the dead...*

*I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet-wound,  
Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so  
offensive,  
While the attendant stands behind aside me holding the tray and pail.*

*I am faithful, I do not give out,  
The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,  
These and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet deep in my breast  
a fire, a burning flame.)*

*—from the poem “The Wound-Dresser” from Drum Taps  
by Walt Whitman, 1865*

Imagine Walt Whitman moving among the Union soldiers' beds lined up like fallen dominoes, holding a dying boy's hand, mopping a feverish brow with a cool cloth, bowing his head while a gangrenous soldier prays for his life, touching water to parched lips. What's the connection between being a nurse and a poet? I don't know for sure. And I am a nurse. And a poet. I know the connection is elemental, almost primal, but it's difficult to talk about, to analyze, without seeming almost voyeuristic.

I was a poet first and became a nurse later because I needed a day job to support my real profession. I wanted a vocation that would allow me to work awhile and quit, to move from place to place and always be able to find a job, to work whatever shift I wanted, and to get a decent wage for it. But there are other occupations that afford that, so what attracted me to nursing? Or more to the point, what has kept me a nurse? I had friends who were nurses, and surely that made a difference in my initial decision. But as every nurse knows, when you talk about your job, most people react by saying, I could never do that. Why is it that so many poets can?

I'd like to be able to argue that poets are a special breed, sensitive, compassionate, and empathetic, and certainly that may be true. There's no doubt that those are traits needed to make a good nurse as well. But that's not the whole story. Another trait of poets is the desire to strip away the trappings of civilization and the accoutrements of culture, to get down to the fundament of existence, to engage love, procreation, spirituality, death, to marvel at the universe revealed in a leaf of grass, and to somehow bear witness

to it all with mere words. Nurses experience all this and more.

The average person who encounters what nurses see on a daily basis looks away, uncomfortable, anxious, maybe even sickened. And for good reason. I have put my gloved arm deep into a craterous opening in a man's back to pack his wound day after day. I have watched a doctor slice a pregnant woman's belly open to save the life of the child he pulled out of her. I've cared for a man who murdered his wife and her lover and then shot himself in the head but botched the job and lived. I've had to comfort the family of a young paraplegic who took his own life on my watch and my shift and cursed him for doing this to me. I've cared for a paralyzed man my age who could not speak and was believed to be brain damaged for twenty years and warehoused in a nursing home until a speech therapist taught him Morse code in one afternoon and rescued him from oblivion. I've pushed my breath into a dead man's lungs trying desperately and futilely to revive him and carried the hallucinatory memory of the fetid stench of his breath in my mouth and nose for a week afterwards. I've watched miraculous recoveries, and slow painful deaths, families that deserted their loved ones, and families that stood vigil until the last breath expired. I have seen courage and despair in equal measures and soberly wondered if I would be capable of mustering the one or surviving the other.

These kinds of things, both good and bad, test nurses daily. All nurses understand what really matters about the lives we're given to live because we see what matters and what only matters every day. In the wake of a brush with death, people often reorder their lives and priorities. But nurses see these transformational events routinely. These are the defining experiences of life and the subject matter of much poetry. So nurse poets are like rubberneckers passing a wreck on the freeway, voyeurs with a job to do. We know that what we experience is a kind of gift that teaches us what we need to say, what we need to shape into a poem.

After I was a nurse for several years, my poetry began to change. The subject matter became more intense, the imagery more visceral. Body fluids and body parts crept into my poems along with pathos and a new appreciation of time passing. My impatience led to didacticism which forced me to rethink everything I believed. Every poem seemed to be about living and dying. The luxury of free verse could no longer contain this elementally explosive content. I began using form to get some control over the emotions associated with decay and renewal, to try to bring some order to it all, to wrestle a frame around chaos and call it art.

Eventually, like most nurses, I burned out on caring for the ills of others. I got numb. I left the profession for five years until I could come

back again with a sense of wonder and compassion. When I did return, I went into psych nursing, eschewing the travails of the body for those of the mind. I worked with addicts, schizophrenics, personality disorders, and veterans chronically homeless from PTSD, medicating themselves with alcohol and drugs. The wounds of the mind are as real as the wounds of the flesh but invisible to the eye. Separating cause from effect in the mentally ill is like trying to unravel a metaphor by Dylan Thomas—it comes apart into separate meaningless seemingly unrelated pieces. It only seems to have meaning when the pieces come back together, or as Williams Carlos Williams—Dr. Williams, Poet/MD—famously said, “No ideas but in things.” It is what it is, and that’s the starting point in mental health nursing too.

My poetry took another turn under the influence of my psych patients. I started looking harder at myself, at my own neuroses, at my own place in the world. I’m middle aged and the time for thinking I could change, I could do or be anything is past. I am what I am. Whatever conflicting set of elements and experiences gelled into me is the metaphor of myself that means only what it is. “No ideas but in things.”

My poems, mainly sonnets now, constructs that focus like a microscope on one paradox at a time, these poems likely represent the final incarnation of my life work. Sensing this, I feel myself beginning to sum up all that I know, all that I’ve learned of life. Get it down, now, before it’s too late. Deep in my breast, I have my own fire, a burning flame. And from my own life, I continue to draw the lessons from what I’ve seen of suffering, mercy, redemption, despair. A nurse who is a poet cannot take his or her eyes off these.

There is a small measure of guilt in being a nurse and a poet. Over the years, I have received more from my patients in humanity and poetry than I was ever able to give them. Poets who are nurses, all nurses in fact, understand this: there’s more of an intangible nature coming in than going out. Maybe that’s why we do it. To feed the flame.

In his poem “Complaint” from his book *Sour Grapes* published in 1913, Dr. Williams describes a midnight visit to the home of a woman laboring to give birth. He stands witness to her great struggle, waiting for the moment he will be needed to catch new life coming into the world, but in the meantime: “I pick the hair from her eyes / and watch her misery / with compassion.”

We do what we can to alleviate the pain, but when we can do nothing else, we sit and watch and wait for the poem, like a miracle, to be delivered. Like Williams, like Keats nursing his dying brother, like Whitman in the Army hospitals, for whatever combination of compassion and art, we try to be faithful, we do not give out.



**T.S. Davis** has published in numerous literary magazines and authored two books of poems, *Sun + Moon Rendezvous* and *Criminal Thawts*. He produced the Seattle Poetry Slam and competed twice as a finalist at the National Poetry Slam. Mr. Davis was also a writer and performer in Seattle for the award winning live comedy show *Carlotta's Late Nite Wing Ding*. For two decades he worked as an RN specializing in spinal cord injury, psychiatric nursing, and addiction. Currently he lives in Asheville, NC, where he writes Shakespearian sonnets and works as a state inspector of nursing homes.

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Editor's Note: This essay is one of three personal narratives by nurses in issue #28, describing how they came to be both nurses and poets, and how the two fields interconnect. The other essays are "Nursing and Poetry" by Cortney Davis, and "A Split Personality" by Anne Webster, both of whom have poems featured in this e-issue.



*T.S. Davis, RN*

## THE GRAVEDIGGER THINKS OF

The gravedigger sits on the backhoe smoking a cigarette.  
It's quiet beneath the trees that partially hide him  
from the scrum of mourners beset by grief, regret,  
their weeping faces wan and pinched and grim.  
The gravedigger waits until the last one leaves,  
then yells to signal his men to lower the box,  
and turns the key that wakes his rumbling beast  
that lumbers now to move the dirt and rocks.  
The gravedigger fills the hole until the mound  
remarks upon the grass like blood on skin.  
And when he cuts the engine there is no sound  
except the whispered shush of trees in wind.  
The gravedigger thinks of all he needs to do  
before he sleeps tonight, like me, like you.



Cortney Davis, RN, MA, ANP

## DIAGNOSIS HIV

I don't know why I always say  
what I think she wants me to say  
when she asks if this infection—  
these sores, these lesions, this bad prognosis—  
is the result of love she made  
with the man now her husband  
or could it have been another man  
and does this infection prove  
that she is bad, something she's  
suspected all along,  
or maybe it was just bad luck  
or could it be, she asks me, punishment  
for the way she beat her children  
telling them *shut up, shut up*,  
and wouldn't it be better, she asks  
if she herself was never born,  
her own mother on the streets  
like a forecast of her life?—  
but then she says, *Still,*  
*I want to live; I've learned my lesson,*  
*and isn't my whole life about to change?*  
and every time she asks  
I always say  
*Yes, yes, I'm absolutely sure it will.*

*Marsha Smith Janson, RN*

## SKY STAYS THE SAME

Coincidentally the summer when the gazelles  
at the ecotarium kept jumping the fences  
most of my married friends were having affairs.  
We think we can but we cannot contain the heart.  
We continue to give it our best shot  
like the nurse saying roll up your sleeve.  
The inoculation is planted but there is no cure  
for the who you are and what you want.

Now even my mother seems to have forgotten  
the early years when she held me by a window  
as it snowed and three deer came out of the woods  
to stand blinking and pawing: the way I do  
before the mural painted on the building downtown,  
Sojourner Truth marching with clouds,  
the clouds anonymous in their lab coats.

It's always the same sky, it's just the weather  
and the seasons that keep changing.  
In spring I dust the pollen from my hands,  
then, blink, the maples along the river begin to smolder  
in their red coronas. Dry days.  
I've got an unquenchable thirst and can't sleep  
because there's such a whirring of wings.

Such thievery in the orchard, so many  
boxes of fruit hoisted over the back gate  
long after the workers have climbed down  
from their ladders, the smoke from their tobacco  
lingering long after they've gone home for the day.

*Gerri Rosenzweig, RN*

## THE STREET OF THE CELLIST

*for Dan*

When at last  
you find the street of the cellist,  
may the dread  
that accompanied you  
fall by the way,  
may the yellow hive  
of her window direct you  
to the garden  
where the russet tint  
of alders keep  
for all time her three  
stone sundials in their shade.  
Don't worry  
if the thumbprint  
of oil placed  
on your forehead trembles  
at the pallor of her hair,  
in the layered  
softness of snow falling  
on your shoulders,  
in the hum of zero  
sounding your arrival,  
listen for notes  
drawn slow from the tattered  
libretto of your life.

*Anne Webster, RN*

## DRY DROWNING

He comes walking into the ER, holding  
hands with a wife and a little boy.  
A big guy, he's wheezing like  
a pump organ in a country church.  
"I'm thirty-five today. It's my asthma."  
I put him on a stretcher, start inhalers,  
page the ER doc, get an IV going,  
shoot some epinephrine, but the dumb  
galoot stops breathing. Laryngospasm.  
I grab a lung man who's walking by.  
He intubates, and I squeeze that ambu bag  
like a pastry chef icing a wedding cake,  
but the man's lungs aren't getting air,  
his blood pressure rockets. Now his heart  
flutters, stops. We pump his chest,  
shock him—again and again—nothing  
but a straight line. Ten minutes after  
he arrives we pronounce him. His wife  
and kid wait in the lobby, expecting  
him to amble out with a birthday grin  
ready for songs and cake. What they get  
is me and some strange doctor, our faces  
wearing the news. On the drive home  
at midnight, I count each breath I take,  
waiting to see if there will be a next one.

CONVERSATION BETWEEN TESS GALLAGHER  
and ALAN FOX, IN LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA,  
FEBRUARY 25<sup>TH</sup>, 2007



Tess Gallagher a poet, essayist, novelist, and playwright, was born in 1943 in Port Angeles, Washington. Her first collection of poems, *Instructions to the Double*, won the 1976 Elliston Book Award for “best book of poetry published by a small press”. In 1984, she published the collection *Willingly*, which consists of poems written to and about her third husband, author Raymond Carver, who died in 1988. Other collections include *Dear Ghosts* (Graywolf Press, 2006), *My Black Horse: New and Selected Poems* (1995), *Owl-Spirit Dwelling* (1994) and *Moon Crossing Bridge* (1992). Published in September 2008 from Blackstaff Press in Belfast is *Barnacle Soup: Stories from the West of Ireland*, a collaboration with the Irish storyteller Josie Gray.

DuFour will distribute this in America. Other books: *Distant Rain*—a conversation with the highly respected Buddhist nun, Jacucho Setouchi, of Kyoto, is both an art book and a cross cultural moment—*Soul Barnacles: Ten More Years with Ray*, *A Concert of Tenses: Essays on Poetry*, and two collections of short fiction, *At the Owl Woman Saloon* and *The Lover of Horses and Other Stories*. She has taught at St. Lawrence University, Kirkland College, the University of Montana in Missoula, the University of Arizona in Tucson, Syracuse University, and Willamette University. She lives and writes in Port Angeles, Washington.

[Excerpted from a 14 page interview.]

FOX: When you say that the size of the notebook affects the poem, what effect do you think your environment has on your writing?

GALLAGHER: Oh, a big impact, for me. I would never have written the poem “*Sah Sin*” probably if I had only lived in Ireland because they don’t have any hummingbirds. I have eagles in my poems. If I had grown up in Seattle, I might have seen an eagle if I went to the coast, but I had eagles land in my tallest tree the other day, and they’re maybe going to make a nest up there. It was a pair of eagles. It was so exciting. So I told my

friend Alfredo Arreguin, who did the cover of my book. I said, “Alfredo! Look at this!” I had taken a picture of it, just to make him jealous. [laughs] But he has a hummingbird in his front yard, he and his wife, who’s also a painter, Susan Lytle. Everywhere you live there’s something gorgeous.

FOX: Are there certain places, like your cottage, that you like writing, or can you write anywhere, hotel room, or does it make a difference?

GALLAGHER: If I go near water, I’m really sure to write. I mean, my Sky House overlooks the straight of Juan de Fuca, and many of the poems, in fact, most of the poems, in this book, *Dear Ghosts*, were written there. That place has been my respite. When I had to have help with Mother because I couldn’t get enough sleep at night, I would go there and let other people help me. I had to learn that—to let other people help me. That is a really inspiring place, and I designed and built it myself with one main workman in 1982. My mother and father helped with the foundation and helped me find a place on the hillside, kind of clinging to this hillside, just outside of Port Angeles.

FOX: You can see Victoria from there.

GALLAGHER: Yes, every night I say, “Goodnight Victoria,” and then I can see my town and I say, “Goodnight, Port Angeles.” So, yes being near water is a big thing. When I go to the ocean, as I did recently—I took Josie out to this place, the same place I took Mother, La Push—the waves crashing against the shore, that energy has to go somewhere. And I have this feeling that it just comes right into me, and that I can make use of it somehow.

FOX: That’s very interesting.

GALLAGHER: I love writing near the ocean. At the same place, I wrote a poem called “Sixteenth Anniversary” because I try to go someplace really special on the anniversary of Ray’s death, which is August 2nd. So I wrote that. He would have been dead eighteen years it is this August.

FOX: He died in 1988, I believe.

GALLAGHER: Is that eighteen years?

FOX: It would be nineteen years this year.

GALLAGHER: Nineteen years, yeah, nineteen years. So—

FOX: Does it seem a long time to you, or very short?

GALLAGHER: A lot of things have happened. I wish he had seen them all. I had to be kind of two people, thinking what he would think each time, and really being happy for two people, or wishing that I had his good help sometimes. Josie is only here intermittently and...I'm glad Ray didn't have to go through the breast cancer thing with me, it would have been very hard for him. And Josie's wife had leukemia for fourteen years, so he's kind of the right soldier for the job. I don't know how we got to have each other, but it was very good, because he's very steady. He feels things with me but he doesn't go too far into worry, just, "You're going to make it, girl," and so that's really helpful. And he lives in such a beautiful place, in Ballindoon in the West of Ireland. I was there for the lambing in the spring, and the sun was shining on this green hillside there. The property is on the lake where he has the animals, and I said to him, "I think this is the most beautiful hour of my life," just to see these young lambs next to their mothers. I began to weave as a result of my relationship with him because they had all this wool every spring—well, actually they do the shearing in, I think it's late June, so I've been getting some of that wool and making weavings out of what they call raw roving. I saved some lambs; I decided I'd like to not see them all go to the butchers, kind of a sad moment when all those spring lambs go off. Josie had told me about that on the email—sending the four month old lambs to market, and I asked him how much it would cost just to save one of those lambs, and he said, "80 Euros, that might do it." So I sent him 80 Euros, and now I have four lambs [Fox laughs] that became sheep, and one of them had a baby. Yeah, I'm into the sheep. However I got there, I mean, one thing leads to another.

FOX: You mentioned I think that your mother did some weaving, that you have—

GALLAGHER: My mother was a—she crotched and she knitted and she made some wall-hangings and they were so beautiful. Some artists had come to the house and they would look at Alfredo's work and enjoy it and also Josie's work, but they came to Mother's hangings, and they just thought those were just so marvelous. And she wouldn't let anybody else have them but me. Other members of the family would come in and want them, but she said, "No, those are Tess's." She was a great reader, Mother, and we read a lot of books together. I remember reading *Hope Against Hope* by Nadezhda Mandelstam. We read that out loud together. It was nice to read books out loud together. Like being two adult children and not being embarrassed about it.



## Contributor Notes

**Cortney Davis, RN, MA, ANP:** “Somewhere there’s a nurse just home from her night shift. She’s dog tired. Her feet hurt. Maybe someone died on her watch. She kicks off her shoes, reads a poem, and it makes her weep. The poem makes her want to go back to work and keep trying, or maybe it makes her decide it’s time to quit. I write for her. I believe poems can change our lives.” ([www.cortneydavis.com](http://www.cortneydavis.com))

**T.S. Davis, RN:** “When I was fifteen and living in a cage of equal parts conditioning and inexperience, Dylan Thomas and Kenneth Patchen roared up in a metaphorical ’65 baby blue Mustang blasting away with words like hollow tip bullets at the concrete and steel of my small town prison and broke me out of jail. I joined their gang and I’ve been on the run ever since.” ([eldorado27@earthlink.net](mailto:eldorado27@earthlink.net))

**Marsha Smith Janson, RN:** “The mind twists its silver wire / A tiny mechanical bird is made / to sing.’ Dean Young. I read these lines recently and although I don’t remember what exactly Mr. Young was referring to in his poem, I thought that they articulated fairly well the writing of poetry. Perhaps I could add that sometimes the wire is not silver but an alloy, sometimes it’s not even wire, but old string. Additionally, sometimes the bird refuses to sing. As for my life as a nurse: I work in the community as a case-manager for people living with mental illness.”

**Geri Rosenzweig, RN:** “I had a short term memory problem back in the days when such defects were only guessed at. Much to the amazement of friends and teachers, I could memorize poems without difficulty and recite them back in class. I believe it was the pleasure my brain took in the cadence, the music, the lilt of language when I was a child that makes me write poems, plus the freedom I feel when writing. For me, poetry is the only way I make sense of this life.” ([redwing3@optonline.net](mailto:redwing3@optonline.net))

**Anne Webster, RN:** “As a young nurse, my hospital experiences led me to begin writing word sketches of memorable patients on three by five cards. Soon after, my sister had a few poems published, and she invited me to a meeting of aspiring poets. It was like a door opening to a new world; I found in poems a way to express all those feelings and experiences, and have been doing it ever since.”

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