Fall 2008

RATTLE

Poetry for the 21st Century

Book Features:

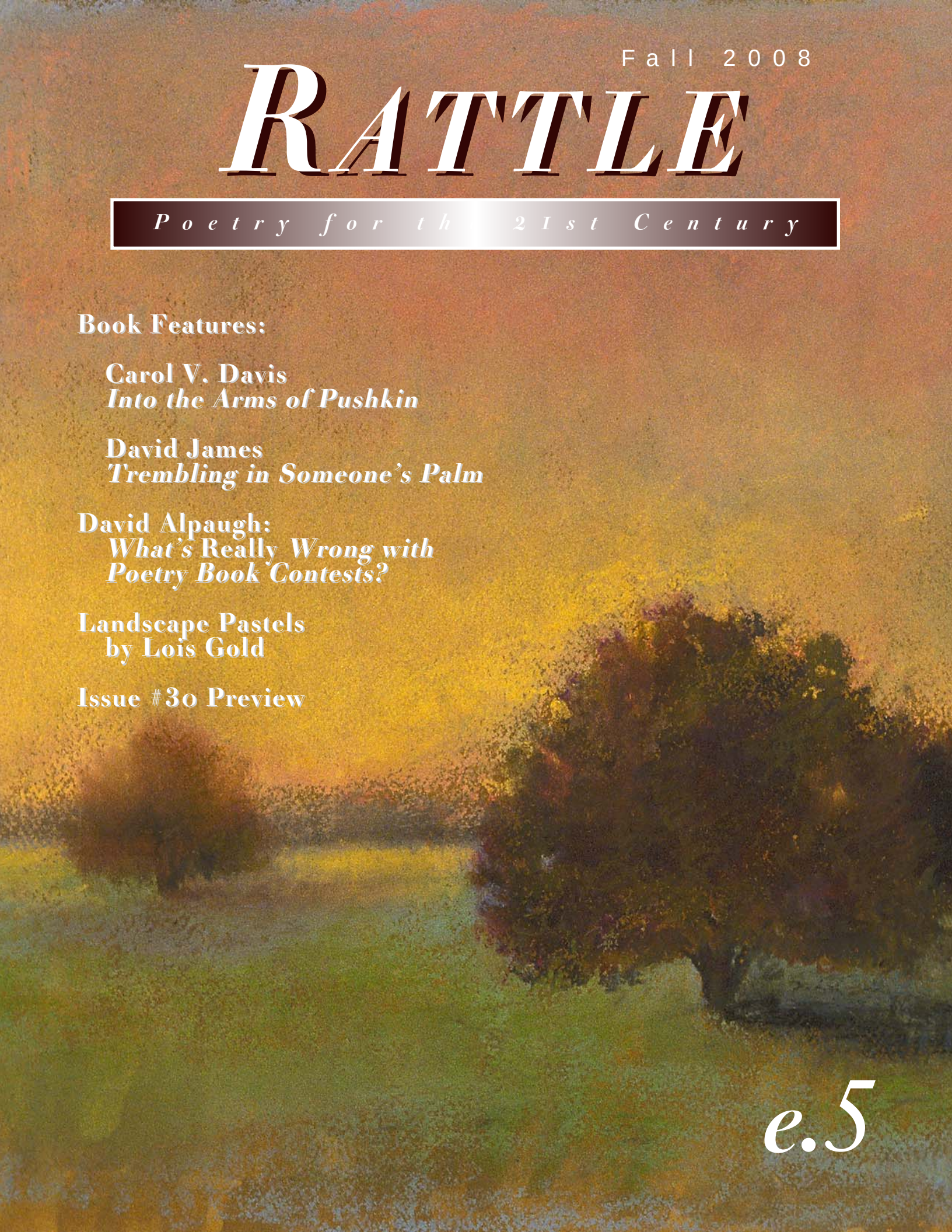
Carol V. Davis
Into the Arms of Pushkin

David James
Trembling in Someone's Palm

David Alpaugh:
What's Really *Wrong with Poetry Book Contests?*

Landscape Pastels
by Lois Gold

Issue #30 Preview



e.5

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Fall 2008, e.5

 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

EDITOR'S NOTE

Immediately you should notice that this fall's e-issue is shorter than it's been in the past. Don't let the length fool you—the content hasn't changed. We've simply decided to make it more streamlined, more succinctly newsletter-like. If you listen close you can hear the sounds of the trees rejoicing, and just below that murmur, the gentle plop of Dunder-Mifflin stock dropping a quarter-point. But more than just saving paper, the fully integrated, columned format better represents what this really is: a biannual newsletter. Some readers were getting confused, and it's easy to see why, with so much to savor.

This fall's e-issue takes you to Russia, with a selection of poetry from Carol V. Davis's *Into the Arms of Pushkin*, and then deep inside the mind of David James, whose boxy prose poems house as much imagination as the skull. In our featured essay, David Alpaugh stirs up controversy and subverts everything you thought you knew about poetry book contests—if you're thinking of entering one, this is a must-read. We round out the issue with Andrew Kozma's appreciative exploration of the chapbook, and a preview of our forthcoming winter issue, dedicated to Cowboy & Western poetry. Lois Gold provides ambiance throughout, with her end-of-summer landscape pastels. As always, we hope you enjoy.

Timothy Green
Editor
September 26th, 2008

LANDSCAPE PASTELS

by
Lois Gold

ARTIST STATEMENT

"My goal as an artist is to invite the viewer into the world as I see it. I am attracted to natural forms whether it is a shell, a flower, a fruit, or a landscape and I try to imbue each form that I paint with my own language. My images are often painted from sketches, photographs, and/or from memory. When I paint I may have an image in my mind of the final result, and then life surprises me so that the process becomes intuitive and spontaneous. It reflects my mood or sometimes the music to which I am listening. Thus, the end result is often very different from what I had planned much like life's endless unpredictability.

What I leave out of my paintings is as important as what I put in. I do not paint factories, grafitti, commercial buildings or any evidence of destruction, decay or overpopulation. My paintings are idealized visions of the world as it used to be. I am reminding my audience of the beauty and fragility of our world and how we must preserve it.

I am a colorist and have been greatly influenced by the great colorists of art history—especially Bonnard, Matisse, and Rothko. I have studied the paintings of Hopper, Homer, and Sargent and the way in which they explored the use of watercolor. Hopper's lonely landscapes resonate with me and inspire me.

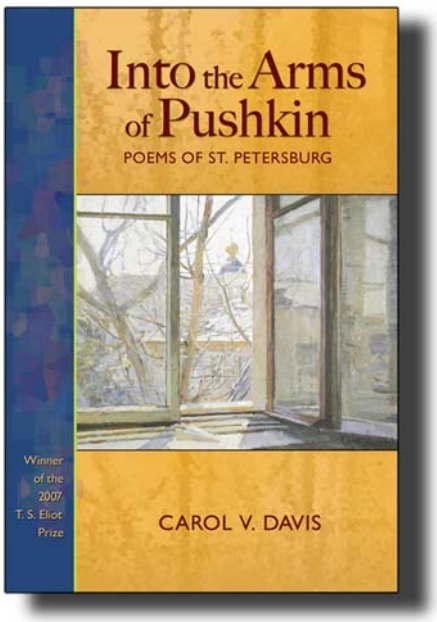
I work in several mediums—gouache, chalk pastel, oil pastel, watercolor and mixed media. My pastels are painted on toned papers, and my watercolors are painted on the whitest of white archival paper in many layers. Sometimes I mix the water colors with gum Arabic to add luminosity. Painting on paper or board is my preference.

My paintings have often been called moodscapes—portrayals of the outer world, inspired by my inner one."

BIO

Exhibited at Lizan-Tops Gallery, East Hampton, New York-1994-2004, Martha Keats Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1999-2004, Ruzetti and Gow, New York City, 1998-2007, the Nutmeg Gallery, Kent, Conn., 2004, 2006, Summa Gallery, New York City, 1990-1995, the Flinn Gallery, Greenwich Conn., 2005, among many others. Cover art for Dan's Papers, 1999-2004, Published in "Southwest Art," 2002, Book Art Press, 2002, The Pastel Journal, 2003, Who's Who in American Art, 1995, 1996, 1998, The Pastel Painter's Solution Book, 1996, Pastel School, 1996, Painting Shapes and Edges, 1997, The Best of Flower Painting, 1998, Pure Color, The Best of Pastel, North Light Books, 2006, The Pastel Artists' Bible, Chartwell Books Inc., 2006, Bentley Publishing, Poster Art, 2005, Pastel Artist International, 1999, The Pastel Painter's Solution Books, David Cuthbert, North Light Books, 1996, The Artists Magazine, 1993, featured artist and cover art. Award winner of the 20th and 21st Century Achievement Award, International Biographical Centre, Cambridge, England, 1999, 2005. Part of the corporate collections in the New York Presbyterian Hospital, The Four Seasons Hotel, Brooklyn Union Gas, Boston University, Bristol Myers Squibb, and many more. Juried member of the National Association of Women Artists, juried associate member of the Pastel Society of America since 1995. Boston University, B.A., Columbia University, M.A.

www.LoisGoldArt.com



INTO THE ARMS OF PUSHKIN

Poems of St. Petersburg

by
Carol V. Davis

Winner of the 2007 T.S. Eliot Award

Truman State University Press
100 East Normal Street
Kirksville, MO 63501-4221
ISBN: 978-1-931112-70-3
96 pp., $15.95, Paper
tsup.truman.edu

Russia centers this world, in person and at a distance both. The casual detail and patient telling add up everywhere, giving us meaning where difference had been. Showing us what this particular life in Russia feels like makes it our world, even when the speaker struggles to draw meaning from confusion or frustration. In one poem, the speaker tells of laying out the language of the next day on the back of the chair, quite as if it were clothing. We grasp this moment with depth, startled to make the connection between language and clothing. These are great moments in their small detail, abstractions given recognizable form. Finding meaning—a continual act of translation and its failure in so many things—propels the poems in this book.

—Alberto Rios,
2007 T.S. Eliot Prize judge

Struggling to speak a new language, while immersing herself in Russian culture, becomes Carol V. Davis' trope for a spiritual quest in this book-length narrative of sensuous, tangible, shape-shifting poems. I feel constantly enticed into her richly textured world.

—Diane Wakoski

Rich, resonant, Russian—these alliterative adjectives barely begin to describe the charisma of Carol Davis's evocative engagement with Pushkin, St. Petersburg, and a mythic yet quotidian country whose archaic capital, Novgorod, is a city "so ancient/its language oozes out of the dark soil." Plucked (like the beets on which she broods in several poems) from the earth of Russia and the groceries of St. Petersburg, from the "arms of Pushkin" and the streets he once wandered, Davis's wonderful poems transcend the "struggle of translation" between one culture and another. To read them is to love them and to sigh with sympathy!

—Sandra M. Gilbert

Carol V. Davis is the granddaughter of Jewish immigrants from Russia. Her fascination with Russia, aided by a Fulbright grant, drew her to St. Petersburg in the mid-1990s. Over the next decade, she divided her time between the U.S. and Russia, where, as an American-born Jew, she was an outsider in Russian society. This collection of poems expresses the struggle with language barriers and cultural differences—struggles heightened as Davis helped her children adjust to their new daily life. Inspired by Russia's rich history, its economic changes, and landscape, these poems express a unique perspective of Russia.

CAROL V. DAVIS is author of two chapbooks, *The Violin Teacher* and *Letters from Prague*, and a bilingual collection, *It's Time to Talk About...*, published in Russia. Her poems have appeared in various journals and anthologies. She received two Fulbright scholar grants to Russia in 1996-97 and fall 2005 and teaches English and creative writing at Santa Monica College, Los Angeles.

Note: Some of the poems reprinted here first appeared in the following journals:

"The First Nights in St. Petersburg" in *West 47*, *Curit Journal* (Galway); "The Violin Teacher Gives a Lesson in How to Sing" in *Janus Head*; "The Violin Teacher Plays Bach" in *Half Tones to Jubilee*; "The Poplars of St. Petersburg" in *City Works*; "Birding" in *Nimrod*. "The New Russia" first appeared in the book.

from INTO THE ARMS OF PUSHKIN
Carol V. Davis

THE FIRST NIGHTS IN ST. PETERSBURG

I can tell you what is different, what the same.
Bananas are also imported, sold on street
corners and given over like bunches of small balloons.

The butter sliced here from a huge slab
into chunks of broken iceberg.
I remember pools of it formed after long dinners

in the heat of Indian summer at home.
Too tired to clean up, too hot for love.
From my apartment window

I see more windows.
A grandfather drinks tea
at a kitchen table.

Jars of homemade pickles
readied for winter line the sills.
In the courtyard cats

scavenge for food.
I want you to know what it is
to stumble in another language,

where effort is weighed against
outcome like spoons of sugar.
Shopkeepers smile secretly

at one another in recognition.
An old woman asks sweetly
Are these my children?

Her voice slides into rebuke
when I fail to understand.
It is then I hurry to enclose

my children set adrift in the unknown.

THE VIOLIN TEACHER GIVES A LESSON IN HOW TO SING

I take his voice, not knowing
if the words will trip, hesitant
as a toy coil on stairs, in his
language or mine.
Internalize it, play it back.
Even when the teacher explains
how the student must imagine the note:
hold it under the tongue like a magic stone
then widen the mouth and let it go.
There is the moment when the cage
door is opened before the bird flies out.
It knows its life is about to change
as yours is, when the mold of the canary's
feathers leaves the pillow of your palm
when the note is released without a waver
and the prayer drifting or steady
rises from your lips to God's ear.

from INTO THE ARMS OF PUSHKIN

Carol V. Davis

THE VIOLIN TEACHER PLAYS BACH

First an explanation
for his restless student. As the mouth shapes
into words, vowels lean on consonants, press
tightly, knocking over each other like dominoes.
Syllables drop at his feet in the confusion of
multiple languages: English for the student,
Russian between us. A triangle of anticipation
stretches like taut strings.

He picks up the violin,
eyes narrowing like the smallest crevice in
the Western Wall, where pleas, scrawled and
stuffed between stones, click in the wind.
The messages rise quickly to a slit in heaven.
Who are we to question such wisdom?

They say Bach's music
is like mathematics—all calculation and no
abandon, but as the bow slides into triplets,
gives way to trills, I think of the angels
on the ladder with Jacob. One angel stuck
his finger in the ground and a volcano erupted.

The allegro quickens
as if in a storm, but the violin teacher's wrist
ever soft and pliant as bulrushes lakeside.
The two wives, eleven children, cows and
sheep sent to the other side of the stream.
Jacob asleep on the rocks still.

Notes stack.
Angels perch on the ladder's rungs;
one descends and kneels.
A confusion of angles: elbows and knees
entangle in a coat of dust.
The allegro reaches its crescendo
in the uncertainty of conclusion.
How is it that the music can end?

The angel,
certain of defeat, touches the hollow
of Jacob's thigh and begins to sing.
The violin teacher lays down his bow
and opens his eyes.

THE POPLARS OF ST. PETERSBURG

Summer delayed this year
in the far north.
Late June and only now
the poplars rip open
their winter coats
shelling the sidewalks
with puffs of white stuffing,
pookh, in Russian,
summer snow.
The balls stick in the
corner of the eye
like a memory of sleep,
or slide onto the tongue,
lodge in the gullet.
Then expand in the belly
as unsatisfying as fistfuls
of snow to the hungry
old women who shuffle
into the metro, clinging
to passageways like
mollusks to a host.
First time visitors to the city
puzzled, then charmed;
the residents tired of it
and all that clogs this city—
broken trams, hundreds of cars
slinking towards Palace Square.
And the embarrassment
of this foolishness—too many
female trees planted by Stalin.
The *pookh* exposing the sex
of it, a parody of the bodies
pressing one to the other
on overcrowded trolleys.
No attraction, only necessity,
so that the shell of boundaries
thins and wears, the coating
of anonymity over the eyes
tearing in spots, while
all around the *pookh* beckons.

from INTO THE ARMS OF PUSHKIN

Carol V. Davis

BIRDING

Let me come back a birder.
Name with certainty that squawker
outside my kitchen window
I think is a Willow Warbler.
Next time, give me useful knowledge.
Names I can attach myself to
like the weight on a kite's tail
that keeps it from pulling
out of a child's fist in a sweep of wind.

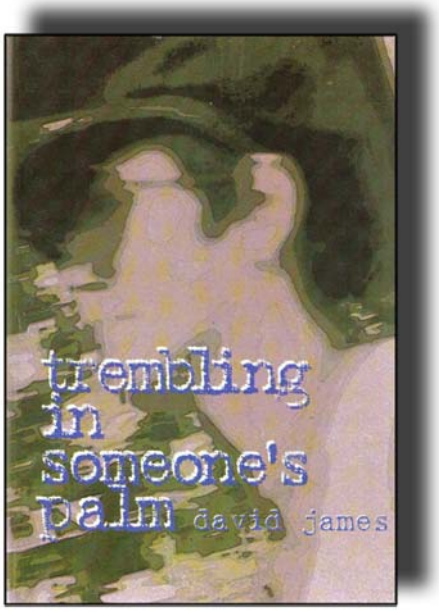
I forgot to tell you I am back in Russia.
But I am not asking for names in both languages.
Just reassure me that the birds
swirling outside my 5th floor apartment
are indeed Common Gulls swept in
from the Baltic ahead of the approaching storm.

It is September 1st—Day of Knowledge.
The balloons tied to the lampposts declare it so.
Seven year olds in maroon blazers
remind me of Red-breasted Mergansers
that lost their way from Alaska
heading west across Siberia.

Opening day of the school year.
I saw a girl in a ponytail fastened by fur
fluffy as a Willow Tit.
Her mother held one hand, grandmother the other.
I thought they would lift up in a whirl of wings,
the older generations so puffed up with pride.
They crossed over the bridge of the little river
that winds near my building.
The three of them bent over the railing
to call to the ducks below.

THE NEW RUSSIA

More a wave than a drift
the flakes churn, white froth arcing
over the fierce wind.
First blizzard of the season,
though elm leaves still shine like a constellation
of yellow suns against the morning gray.
The kind of day Americans
always picture:
Snow, buildings drained of color.
Dreary grandmothers weighed
down with sacks of potatoes and beets.
It's not like that anymore.
Now the spiked heels
of young women clatter down the pavement
toward the open mouths of designer stores.
No more hooded kiosks
line the boulevards where customers bought
dark loaves cut in half and men
stood about waving beer bottles.
This is the new Russia
of suntans from Egyptian holidays,
gated houses with security cameras,
foreign cars and chauffeurs waiting at the curb.
Still when the church bells summon
the faithful and the government shuts down another
newspaper it's hard to remember what century this is.



TREMBLING IN SOMEONE'S PALM

by
David James

March Street Press
3413 Wilshire
Greensboro, NC
ISBN: 1-59661-073-5
40 pp., $9.00, Paper

www.marchstreetpress.com
or
www.Amazon.com

Trembling in Someone's Palm is an eclectic book of prose poems by David James whose work often focuses on the unreal, surreal, bizarre and imaginative. Whether the piece is about a man talking to God about spring or a young couple who adopt a small table lamp, James accepts the premise and writes with a clearness that is deceiving.

DAVID JAMES' first book was published over 24 years ago by Carnegie Mellon University Press, *A Heart Out of This World*. Since then, he's raised three children (a teacher and two RNs) and has managed to stay married for over thirty years (to one woman). He's published four chapbooks with March Street Press: *Do Not Give Dogs What Is Holy*, *I Dance Back*, *I Will Peel This Mask Off*, and *Trembling in Someone's Palm*. He's recently tried his hand at playwriting and has had one-act plays produced off-off-Broadway, in Nantucket, and in Michigan. Though by this time in his life he's given up all hope of fame and glory, he feels like he's starting over each day, a newbie, thrown out into the world, naked and amazed. It's thrilling, but not pretty. (dljames@oaklandcc.edu)

Note: Some of the poems reprinted here first appeared in the following journals:

"A Burning Bush of Sorts" in *Lalitamba*; "The Writer Makes a Case for Inspiration" in *Mississippi Crow*; "The White Dream" in *Poetry East*. "A Visit from My Brother" and "The Gold Dream" first appeared in the book.

"James' writing is imaginative, clear, accessible, and funny. David is one of an all too small minority of poets who is able to use humor in his work. He is a writer who entertains without playing to his audience, a writer genuinely interested in the art of communication."
—Stuart Dybek

"I've been a fan of David James' and his excellent work for over two decades and can say—without hesitation—that here is a true original. Whether in prose or poetry...the results are always striking, sometimes scary, often hilarious, and well worth the read."
—Judity Minty

"These wise and humorous prose poems stun us with their illuminations of family, love, marriage, loneliness, sex, and creativity. James is a master of metamorphosis, literalizing his metaphors to recover the wondrous in the quotidian. Read this original book."
—Peter Stine

"David James is a hardass with a big ole heavy heart. If he writes it, you better believe it. He means it. And he means it with the subjects he explores and with the artistry he brings to bear on every poem."
—Jack Ridl

First of all, it's inexplicable that David James has only one full-length book of poetry to his name—A Heart Out of This World—*which was published by Carnegie Mellon University Press back in 1984. [...] Although the prose poems that comprise* Trembling in Someone's Palm *have certain antecedents, they successfully manage to escape the "anxiety of influence" that an earlier poetic generation so anguished over. In breaking new ground these poems have a twin appeal: what it is they accomplish, and what they point towards.*
—Marc Sheehan

from TREMBLING IN SOMEMONE'S PALM

David James

A BURNING BUSH OF SORTS

God spoke to me while I sat alone on the park bench. It was a sunny day, early spring; I could see buds on the trees.

"So, what do you think?" he said.

"About what?"

"All this life busting out around you."

I didn't expect God to say "busting out." I expected manifesting or conjuring.

"It's wonderful," I said. "Nice work."

"Do you think there are too many birds? I could cut back on a few species."

"No, not at all. It's the return of the birds that make me think of spring."

For me, the return of the robin was the beginning of spring. My wife says the first robin around our house is her grandmother, checking in on us. She used to love seeing the first robin. Then, the idea struck me.

"Here's a question for you, God. Is that first robin we see every year our Grandma Ketterer?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'd have to check the inventory and that takes a while up here."

"But in theory," I said, "do the dead come back to visit us as animals? Or as living things, in general?"

"It's possible," He said. "With me, anything is possible, you know."

I took that as a yes, thanked him, and ran home to tell my wife the good news.

THE WRITER MAKES A CASE FOR INSPIRATION

The man is writing his fifth novel. It starts, stops, and slides off the page like a wet sunfish. He wipes sweat from his forehead and thinks about foreskin, about what it must feel like to have that little piece of skin cut off as an infant, about the miracle of one word leading to another and, if you follow it, how that word takes a person to a level he never thought he could reach when he first sat down. In the novel, a man is writing his fifth novel. It is not coming easily. In fact, it's not coming at all. He sits in front of the computer and stares at a blank screen. He scratches himself between his legs and suddenly thinks about forehead, about a person with four heads, and how that person would kiss another with only one head, about the inadequacy of language to describe intention...

Thirty pages in, the author knows the man writing the novel will never finish it. He'll fool himself into writing for four or five more weeks, accumulating 127 pages in all. The man will let the manuscript go like he let his wife go, his jobs, his hair, his mother, his chance at making something out of his miserable little life. He'll drink cheap wine until he passes out, cutting himself above the right eye. When he finally wakes, the first line of a new novel will come to him and he'll find some paper and write—*A man wakes up on the kitchen floor, vomit dried down the front of his shirt, and begins to write his sixth novel.*

from TREMBLING IN SOMEMONE'S PALM

David James

A VISIT FROM MY BROTHER

I am peeing out my left ear, spraying green jello all over the kitchen cabinet. When I cough, a miniature train flies out of my mouth and sticks to the ceiling, circling slowly. So I carry my dead brother upstairs, lay him on the ironing board, and massage his open wounds. Within minutes, he jumps to his feet and sings a little song in Japanese. He begins to dance, shaking his skinny bootie, mimicking Michael Jackson. Suddenly, five gallons of Guinness appear in two large buckets. My brother takes one and I take the other. We submerge our heads into the beer and gulp, slobber, come up gasping for breath, and dive down again, laughing like we used to, like there's no tomorrow, like there's nothing I wouldn't do to bring him back to me.

Beach House
Lois Gold

from TREMBLING IN SOMEMONE'S PALM

David James

THE WHITE DREAM

A man I don't know opens his mouth to speak and light flashes out. As his mouth opens and closes, he creates a strobe effect, so the chairs and trees and stars dance in slow motion. I look down from the rooftop and jump into four feet of snow, burying my legs, up over my waist in the white stuff. I start swimming across the field, splashing snow behind me, gliding like a sled at times. Coming to rest by a pond, I sit at the table set up there, white cloth, china plate, hot mashed potatoes piled high. They taste like memories. I am eating my childhood: kite strings, baseballs, tadpoles. My mother steps into the room and smiles. I hug her and she turns into marble or porcelain, a frozen statue, arms out to embrace. Hanging my coat on her left hand, I begin to sing in Italian. From everywhere, birds fly in and land around my feet—swans, white geese, albino crows until it's a sea of white feathers. There's a light in the distance and I know it's mine, so I wade through the birds slowly, parting in front of me like the future, filling in behind like the past.

THE GOLD DREAM

When I cough, a gold nugget plops out of my mouth, the size of an acorn, but perfectly rectangular. I dip each one in vinegar to test its chemical properties. In the living room, there are now 719 gold nuggets stacked in the corner. For breakfast, we throw a handful of them in with our Cheerios and, of course, chew for hours.

"Good for your complexion," I say.

"But damn hard on the teeth," you reply.

And then we're shitting out the gold nuggets, peppered like corn in our stool. We're brushing our teeth with gold, cutting our toenails with gold, sewing our buttons with gold, putting gold in our eyes as contact lenses, cleaning our ears with gold, slicing up gold wedges for our omelets and fried zucchini dishes. Before long, I am gold and you eat me—and you are gold, so I eat you and then we're both traveling up an esophagus, wet and slimy gold nuggets trembling in someone's open palm.

WHAT'S *REALLY* WRONG WITH POETRY BOOK CONTESTS?

by
David Alpaugh

Note: As winner of the Nicholas Roerich Poetry Prize and owner of Small Poetry Press, David Alpaugh has both won and run a Poetry Book Contest.

Isn't that a rhetorical question? Everyone knows what's wrong with poetry book contests. They're rigged! In 2004 the web site *Foetry* began investigating personal connections between contest judges and winners. The poetry world was shocked by allegations that some of America's most prestigious prizes were going to the judges' students, friends, colleagues, even lovers.

Dishonesty! Cronyism! That's what's wrong with poetry book contests, right?

Not really. Most contest operators, screeners, and judges would never engage in the deplorable but statistically rare conduct outed by *Foetry*. I didn't know any of the parties involved in the judging process that led to my own book award. During the five years that I ran a national chapbook contest there were never any personal connections between my screeners and judges and the finalists and winners they selected.

A glance at recent headlines should assure us that there's no more corruption in "po-biz" than in sports, medicine, law, politics, media, religion, or any other human enterprise. To their credit, many contests responded to the concerns that *Foetry* raised by establishing clear ethical guidelines for screeners and judges and by taking steps to assure the anonymity of contestants. Manuscripts are more likely to be evaluated solely on their merit today than ever before.

Exclusive focus on the minor problem of contest fraud, however, has allowed more serious, systemic problems to go unnoticed. What's *really* wrong with poetry book contests? They are being rendered less effective each year by the supply side economics that has subsidized their exponential growth and that promises even more in the foreseeable future.

A well-advertised contest, judged by a well-known poet, will attract hundreds of manuscripts, each accompanied by a $15 to $25 reading fee. Five hundred entries at the industry standard of $20 a pop will net $10,000. That's enough to fund the cash award for the winning poet; compensate the judge and screeners; pay the bills for advertising the competition; and even cover the cost of printing the prize-winning book.

Since all but the advertising is payable *after* fees are received, contests are seductively risk-free. Anyone can set up as a publisher for little more than the price of a web site, a classified ad in a few literary journals, and some low cost, often free, announcements via internet poetry sites.

This risk-free dynamic is a powerful magnet, not just for existing literary presses and journals but for poetry entrepreneurs for whom book publishing would have been a financial impossibility twenty years ago.

The road to glut is paved with good intentions. Each additional contest-driven "publisher" believes that his or her contest is *special*; that it will advance the cause of poetry by introducing wonderful new poets to receptive readers via the prestige of a truly deserved book award.

But hold on to your ISBNs. There's a significant difference between an "entry" and a "submission." Traditional publishers are free to consider an unlimited number of submissions without obligation to accept a single manuscript. They are also free to solicit work from poets who have an established track record with at least a segment of the poetry reading public.

If 500 manuscripts fail to impress a traditional editor/publisher as marketable, or important enough to risk subsidizing—into the valley of rejection ride the 500! Many poets opt for the contest route only after being rejected multiple times by traditional publishers. If the same 500 manuscripts are entered in a contest, however, one of them *must* be given an award and *must* be published, usually with a glowing endorsement from the contest judge on the back cover.

Traditional publishers can deal with the fact that the supply of poetry greatly exceeds the demand by refusing to accept unsolicited manuscripts, and most of them are doing just that, making contests the only probable avenue for first book publication. The contest boom is further fed by the growing number of MFAs who need a book award if they are to have a shot at landing a position in a creative writing department. Since poetry book contest bottom lines depend upon entry fees, more and more wannabes are encouraged to put books together for entry in more and more contests every year.

Fifty years ago (around the time traditional publishers were introducing readers to Bly, Creeley, Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, Hall, Justice, Plath, Sexton, Snyder, et. al.) the Yale Younger Poets Series, begun in 1919, was still the only poetry book contest. Today, a short search of the web turns up over 300 chapbook and full-collection competitions sponsored by colleges, universities, foundations, literary journals, publishers large and small, and by a variety of local and national poetry booster organizations.

Even if contests merely continue to escalate at the rate of five or six extra competitions per year, an astounding minimum of 50,000 poetry books will be published *as distinguished award-winners* by the end of this century!

Remember Ionesco's *The Chairs*? The universe of exceptionally talented poets being finite, there's an almost theater-of-the-absurd irony in this "new math." It's not that most or, indeed, any of the prize-winning manuscripts are *bad*. Each has been chosen, after all, from hundreds of entries. All are well written, many quite readable. The trouble is, as Alan Williamson pointed out to a roomful of poets in Berkeley some years back, "The good poetry drives out the best."

As the number of contests, entries, and awards burgeons, the standard of excellence declines until even once prestigious contests like the Yale and Whitman trail wispier (and whispier) clouds of glory. Not even the most zealous poetry lover can purchase and read more than a fraction of the 300 (soon to be 500? 1000?) prize-winning books published each year. Pity the 22nd-century English professor who will have to read 50,000-plus prize-winning books, each claiming to deserve careful attention by anyone hoping to be an expert on 21st-century poetry!

Ezra Pound would be horrified to learn how little pruning is going on these days in the Garden of the Muses. Poetry book contests transform editors and publishers into bureaucratic bean counters. Instead of proactively working to discover great poetry, they spend their time writing and placing ads; logging entries; depositing checks; and distributing batches of poems to screeners, and finalists to the judge. Like Chauncey Gardiner in Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There*, most contest operators "like to watch," but take no active role in the selection process.

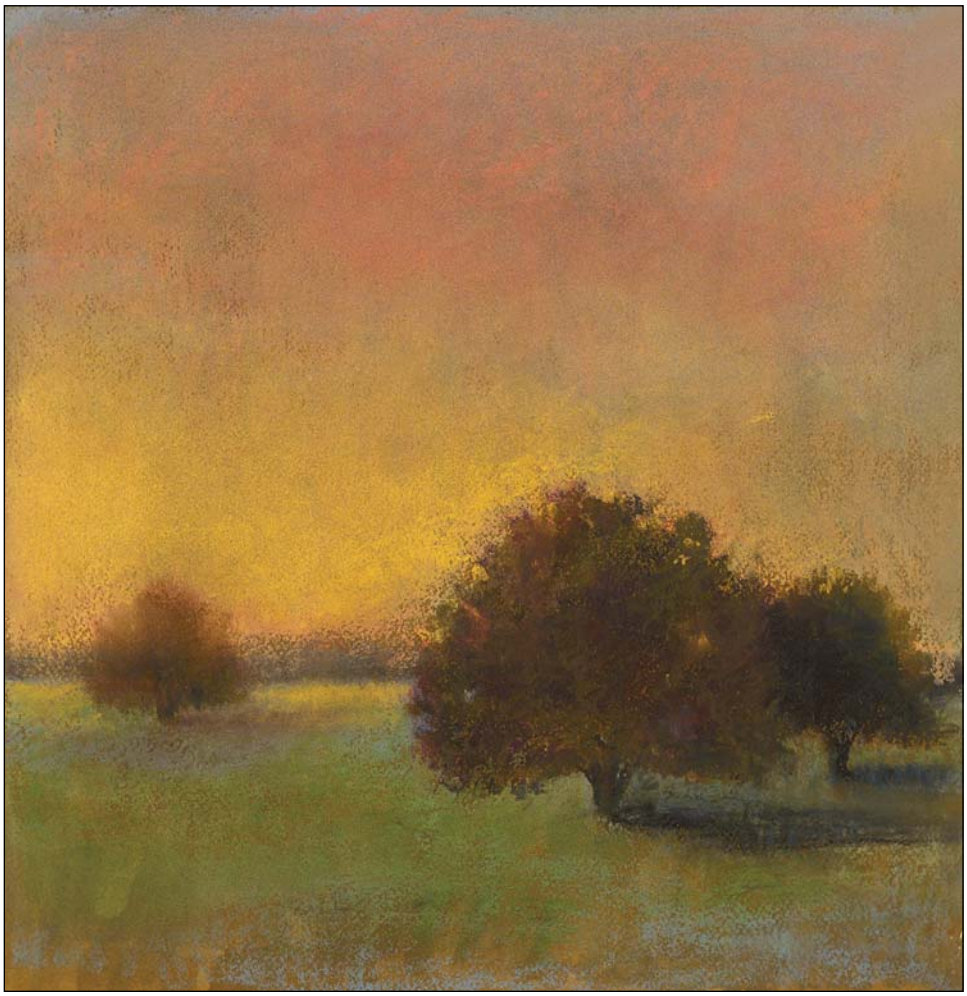
Nor should we assume that the poet judge is passionate about his or her choice. He has been hired not to discover a great book (that word is frowned upon in professional circles) but merely to choose the best of those presented by screeners who are often inexperienced MFA candidates. Trapped like a spider in a web, not of his own spinning, the judge is a relativist when it comes to taste. He must be satisfied with the juiciest fly that wanders in. Once he's rendered his verdict and written his blurb, the judge's commitment to the book, for all practical purposes, ends.

In many cases the judge could pick up the phone and get a better book from a friend, colleague, student, spouse, or lover. Paradoxically, contest ethics rule that out. Were contestants to learn that a judge had strayed outside his web of official entries to procure superior poetry he would be whipped down the slopes of Parnassus by *Foetry*-maddened bloggers furiously crying, "Shame!"

Which brings us to the profile of the typical contest judge. Who better to select the best collection of poems than a widely published, celebrated poet—a winner of many prestigious awards in his or her own right? Oddly enough, if the goal is to have contests decided by impartial brokers the standard profile leaves much to be desired.

When I ask poet friends if they plan to enter a particular book contest and the answer is "No"—the negative is always followed by the assertion: *There's not a chance in hell that X (or Y or Z) would like my work!*

We need only mention a few superstar poets who have also judged contests—John Ashbery, Billy Collins, Louise Gluck, Jorie Graham, Richard Howard, Philip Levine, Sharon Olds, Charles Simic, C.D. Wright—to remind ourselves that poets become famous for recogniza-



Golden Light
Lois Gold

ble subjects, tones, and styles. They are often affiliated with partisan aesthetic movements: Mainstream, Confessional, New Formalist, New York School, Language Poetry, etc. Many have announced their predilections via essays or interviews in books and journals.

Asked to name four or five of the best contemporary poets W.H. Auden quipped, "It isn't a horse race, you know." Race tracks have an absolute method for measuring and determining winners, as do golf, tennis, shot put, and most competitive sports. Poetry contests are more like Olympic figure skating or *Dancing with the Stars*. Preference for one contestant over another (given the most qualified judge in the world) is ultimately subjective, unverifiable; there truly is no "accounting" for taste.

Still, it's quixotic to pretend that poet judges will not prefer work akin to the sort that they write and espouse. No matter how good the poetry, it's unlikely that a "New Formalist" will award a prize to a "Language Poet" or vice versa. My poet friends are right not to waste their twenty bucks.

It might make more sense to have contests judged by non-poetry-writing English professors—specialists in American literature who have no aesthetic horse at the starting gate. It would also rid contests of distracting po-ethical concerns that occasionally arise from inevitable connections between poet-judges and contestants who frequently associate and socialize in classrooms, workshops, and at writers conferences.

Needless to say, my suggestion is a non-starter. Though English professors would probably be more objective and impartial referees, they lack the name recognition crucial for a successful poetry contest. The more famous the judge, the more entry fees. As always, po-biz trumps *ars poetica*.

Someone flicks a switch with an ad or two and the poetry express gallops down the track! The P.O. saddlebags get fuller and fuller as the deadline approaches. Six months after it passes, the lucky finalists are announced by letter or email. Then the judge weighs in, and the publisher proudly announces the name of the winner and title of the book. A year or so later (*lente, lente,* oh horses of the write) the book finally appears. A few copies are sent with a press release to literary journals for "possible review." (Don't hold your breath; rather than deal with hundreds of prize-winning books, most editors throw up their pens in despair and review none.)

With no direct commitment to the poetry it should not surprise us to learn that contest publishers are minimalists when it comes to marketing their winners. Whereas a traditional publisher must sell hundreds of books to remain solvent, and must therefore take potential readership into account when selecting manuscripts, the contest publisher need not be concerned with readers at all. Having met his expenses in advance, and in some cases even turned a profit, he need not sell a single copy of the prize-winning book. The first edition was, in fact, sold-out before it was a tear or twinkle in the judge's eye to readers who bought it blind, knowing neither title nor author.

It is routine practice for contests to throw in the winning book as a consolation prize for non-winners. In most cases losing poets constitute the main readership for award-winning books! May I suggest that they are perhaps the least likely critics to receive the book favorably?—that many of them begin reading with a question that would not be asked by readers of a traditionally published book? (*How could Judge X possibly choose these poems over mine?*).

Finally, and perhaps most worrisome, book contests subtly corrupt the art by substituting the petty goal of winning for the grander one of writing original poetry. Contests have their unwritten conventions which, if followed, will increase likelihood of success. Study as many prize-winning volumes as you can; adjust your style and content accordingly; and you may find yourself in next year's winners' circle.

Poetry book contests privilege serious poems over humorous ones; pathos over wit; "sincerity" over virtuosity; they eschew satire and persona; and devalue variety in favor of consistency of theme, form, tone, and "voice." A swerve into the ineffable in the last few lines of each poem will keep your work "open" and "risky" in conformance with current MFA workshop practice. Prefacing poems with epigraphs from fashionable poets (usually in translation) will let the judge know that you are or aspire to be professionally hip.

When in doubt refer to one of the many how-to, poetry-for-dummies books from creative writing department pros. They may be judging some of the contests you enter, so learning their tips for writing the way they do will stand you in good stead.

Above all, keep in mind that poetry collections must be novelistically structured. Before Emily Dickinson's heap of 1,775 untitled poems could be competitive she would have to discard 1,700 of them; give each of the remaining 75 a title; sort them into three thematic batches, each with a section title and epigraph; and come up with a catchy "umbrella" title (*Wild Nights* might be a hit with student-screeners). This procedure is so *de rigueur* these days it's as if there were a bumper sticker slapped on every collection, boasting: "My other book is a novella."

Every once in a while, to be sure, an exciting, original book of poetry is selected by this suicidally inefficient process. Unfortunately, when this happens a book that deserves to be widely read is just another dim star lost in the milky way, barely able to shine its light beyond the captive audience that the contest launches into orbit around it.

Imagine what twentieth century poetry would be like had Ezra Pound, Mrs. Alfred Nutt, John Quinn, James Laughlin, Barney Rosset, Cid Corman, Lawrence Ferlinghetti been content to be uncommitted contest coordinators rather than passionate editors, publishers, or patrons of the art. Behind *The Waste Land, North of Boston, Patterson, Howl,* and other landmark books of the last century were men and women willing to risk money, credibility, even imprisonment for

poetry that mattered.

The reader may be wondering why I've limited this article to poetry *book* contests. Are not my criticisms as applicable to single-poem contests run by literary journals, including the one in which this essay appears?

Once again my answer is: not really.

Single-poem contests do what contests should do—distinguish excellent work, without the negative side effects that book contests produce. The likelihood of the judge recognizing an associate is much less when a single-poem (rather than an entire book) is on the table. Nor do single-poem contests add one jot to the glut that is increasingly marginalizing, even obscuring the best poetry. The winning poem appears on page x of the multi-page journal. A poem will appear on that page with or without the contest. By encouraging poets to submit their best work single-poem contests improve the quality of poetry published by the journal. Finalists frequently appear along with the winner(s), and the average quality of poems available to editors is heightened.

Single-poem contestants who receive the journal as an entry-fee benefit are treated not just to the work of the winner but to dozens of other poets, many of whom have proven track records and most of whom are being published through the regular submission process. This comparative dynamic encourages evaluation of both the winning poem and the judge's decision; and that can lead entrants to reevaluate their own aesthetics, preferences, biases—a useful exercise that the hermetic nature of book contests cannot provide.

In the long run, the only genuine honor for a poet is *readership born of love*. Such readership does not always happen in the poet's lifetime (Blake, Whitman, Dickinson); but when it does it continues for generations, even centuries. As one thumbs through issue after issue of *Poets & Writers Magazine*, each announcing yet another crop of poetry book winners, it's difficult not to feel that one is watching the caucus race in *Alice in Wonderland* where, as the Dodo explains, "*Everybody* wins, and *all* must have prizes."

Alice can hardly keep from laughing when the solemn-faced Dodo presents her with an "elegant thimble" (taken from her own pocket) as all the animals cheer:

> Alice thought the whole thing very
> absurd, but they all looked
> so grave that she did not dare to laugh;
> and as she could not think
> of anything to say, she simply bowed,
> and took the thimble,
> looking as solemn as she could.

Book awards may look impressive on a poet's resume, cover letter, grant proposal, or workshop-leader bio; but readers do not fall in love with poems because they win prizes, and *accreditation* is a poor substitute for readerly love. What we need now more than any time in the past is not fifty or a hundred thousand "distinguished prize-winners" (each brandishing his or her thimble)—but *a few good books*. As more and more publishers and poets drink not from the Pierian Spring but from an intoxicating bottle labeled "Poetry Book Contests" their failure to offer readers poetry that matters becomes more obvious each year.

Shall we continue to curtsey like Alice? Or dare to laugh?

Marshland
Lois Gold

DAVID ALPAUGH's latest collection, *Heavy Lifting*, was published in 2007 by Alehouse Press. His first collection *Counterpoint* won the Nicholas Roerich Poetry Prize from Story Line Press. Publications where his work appears include *The Formalist, Raintown Review, Poetry, Zyzzyva,* and *California Poetry from the Gold Rush to the Present*. His article "The Professionalization of Poetry" was serialized by *Poets & Writers Magazine* in 2003, drawing over 200 letters and emails and wide discussion on the internet. He lives in Pleasant Hill, California, and coordinates a popular Bay Area poetry reading series in Crockett. (www.davidalpaugh.com)

CHAPBOOK ROUNDUP: CARRINGTON, ELLEN, KESSENICH, & MCGLYNN

by
Andrew Kozma

Chapbooks are a special breed. In many ways, they are just as difficult as a book in terms of the poet reaching out for publication, and the overlap between the two isn't as large as one might think. In short, the chapbook is not a stepping-stone towards full-length book publication. There is no magical path to follow threading magazine publication to themed-anthology inclusion to chapbook to full-length book to literary greatness and a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship just around that final corner.

While I stand by the statement above—much to my chagrin, as I wouldn't mind a magical path—the building-upon-previous-accomplishment nature at the base of it reflects more truly what I see as a writer's growth. First, one begins by writing *a* poem, and through looking at that poem, learns more about poems in general. Each poem after that expands understanding of what a poem is and what it can do and what, in that particular writer's mind, a poem *should* do. Once the writer starts delving into the history of poetry, either through classes or reading on their own, there's the inescapable conclusion that all poems are related, through form, subject, or direct communication—Ezra Pound's "translations" of Li Po's Chinese originals or the countless poems written "after" the style and specific poem of another poet, such as César Vallejo's "I will die in Paris…" and Donald Justice's response "Variations on a Text by Vallejo." From here, it's a small step to see that this history is enacted in miniature in one's own writing. Themes repeat. Images echo. Poems argue with one another, or work together to create a more complicated argument.

By now, you've probably guessed how chapbooks work into this scheme. First there's the single poem. Then there's the group of intimately related poems: the chapbook. Then there's the larger collection of poems, the widely scattered shotgun blast: the full-length book. And although it seems like I'm privileging one over the other, I see the gradations more along the line of flash fiction, short story, novel—each an independent form requiring its own skills and rewarding with its own particular pleasures, and its own pitfalls.

A chapbook, more so than full-length book, requires tightness, cohesion, and careful arrangement of poems. In a short story, it's often said, there's no room to waste a sentence or to expound on a particularly clever tangent; you only have a limited amount of time, so don't let the reader wander. In a chapbook, it's the same—there's an expectation (notable exception: the Pudding House Greatest Hits series) that the narrative is clear and the connections between the poems tangible as ligaments. Don't be deceived by all the comparisons to fiction: narrative here isn't plot—though it can be—as much as continuity. A coming-of-age story, a study of certain emotions, an exploration of form, even something as direct and difficult as the evocation of a strong, singular voice, all of these can work as an organizing principle as long as the poems talk to each other. There's no room for poems that simply take up space. This lack of room is also a blessing, as this means chapbooks can be concentrated examinations of a particular problem without bowing to the need to fill forty-eight pages.

HARD BLESSINGS
Patrick Carrington
Main Street Rag, 2008
ISBN: 978-1-59948-115-9
42pp., $10, paperback
www.mainstreetrag.com

REVERSE KISS
ellen
Main Street Rag, 2005
ISBN: 1-59948-006-9
35pp., $7.00, paperback
www.mainstreetrag.com

STRANGE NEWS
Lawrence Kessenich
Pudding House
Publications, 2008
ISBN: 1-58998-669-5
32pp., $10.00, paperback
www.puddinghouse.com

SCORPIONICA
Karyna McGlynn
New Michigan Press, 2007
ISBN: 978-1-934832-01-1
30pp., $8.00, paperback
thediagram.com

Now that I've set the ground rules for this review, let's start with the chapbooks. The first two I'll be talking about are put out by Main Street Rag, both part of the press's Editor's Choice Chapbook Series. The chapbooks are Patrick Carrington's *Hard Blessings* and ellen's *Reverse Kiss*.

Patrick Carrington has skill as a poet, and he demonstrates that through this collection that orbits the story of a man at war with his desires, since those desires

often lead him astray, whether through alcohol or sex or some other physical need that causes him to treat the world as a repository of objects destined for his use rather than a habitat for subjects who are just as full of needs as himself.

> There are no clocks here. Who needs
> them?
> Not me. After the regular intervals
> of heartbreak, scars are the way I keep
> time.
> I count my defects to bring back the night
>
> I drew your scent in, so slowly I thought
> I'd never have to give it back.
> ("Lullaby of Atlantic City")

Carrington's poems are formal in that they're shaped, a free-verse carefully arranged into stanzas that are most often divided by subject and theme rather than number of lines. The lines, similarly, are breaking at points to emphasize each line as a thought and a complete unit, an allowance for surprise in poems that keep narrative on a tight leash and use images in an expected way.

Which is not quite the way I want to say it. Here, expected means *overdetermined*, and overdetermined means *the setting up of a premise that the poem does not stray from*. In too many of Carrington's poems, once an image is laid up for the reader's eyes, it spins willfully and predictably into variations of itself, the image becoming the guide for the poet's imagination, so that when the speaker in "Pattern" brings up cloth as a metaphor for relationships or the speaker in "Jonagolds" holds up an apple orchard to symbolize a life, well, that's almost all you need to know. Alternatively, sometimes images that escape the poem's overarching metaphor simply seem ill-thought out: "Resisting the Pull" has a "hand... reaching/ toward a cheek it has wanted/ to touch for light years" without taking into account that a light year is a measure of distance, not time.

In the worst of his poems, the man who speaks has his voice filled with too much self-pity, and no reason for the reader to look beyond his hard, dented shell. But in the best of Carrington's poems, like "Nowhere" and "Lullaby of Atlantic City," this poet takes the persona of the troubled man and makes him empathetic and real, with language that is true to the voice and beautiful on the page and in the ear.

Dreams & Reflections
Lois Gold

ellen's *Reverse Kiss* doesn't gather force until the end of the book, when suddenly the airy voice that has poetically set its sights on weather, on flowers, on other poet's poems, this voice settles into a subject that matters to it: the death of a parent, and the tangled weave of feelings that accompany a parent's decline into old age.

Too many of ellen's poems in this collection seem unshaped, as does the chapbook as a whole. It harkens back to when a book of poems was simply a collection of what had been written since the last collection, and here it feels like there was no culling. When a poem begins

> Hass speaks of cormorants
> I have always wanted
> the word *cormorants*
> in a poem
> ("13 ½")

it really doesn't have anywhere else to go—it has achieved its, and the poet's, apparent goal. Which is not to say that a poem couldn't start that way and twist into a new shape just a few lines

onwards, but most of ellen's poems, even those with cud to be chewed over, often fall into just what you might expect from the title and the opening lines. And sometimes the formal shapes she sets herself, mostly in terms of repetition and chant, are imbued with excitement, such as with the beginning of "Sing":

> sing for the trails
> a single seed
> for the green surrounding green
> the unintentional click
> of a camera in the back seat of a car
> an executioner

But after that opening, the images that evoke with their strangeness and mystery devolve into shapeless phrases and triteness ("sing for a laminated tee shirt/ the power of a teenager/ to wear color/ over a mended bra").

The poems at the end of *Reverse Kiss* hint at complexity. The narrator isn't afraid to bring forth the exhaustion that comes from taking care of an aged parent, or the resentment that grows from having one's own life in its prime tethered to the end of someone else's. Unfortunately, what could come across as a moving examination of hard feelings instead paints the speaker as mean-spirited and unsympathetic. The ellen who in this section writes "in the deep hollow/ of which dying is a part" is capable of much greater poetry. It is not here.

I apologize for the next part of this review in advance.

Lawrence Kessenich's *Strange News* makes me angry. By the time I was done reading the book, I wanted to destroy it. And I'm sorry to say it, but it's true, and I'm going to try and explain why.

In essence, Kessenich's Pudding House-published chapbook seems to conform to the ideals I put above. The title is the rubric for the construction of the book, the conceit that each of the poems is based on some piece of unattributed "strange news", such as the fact that "[t]hree babies were born at the 1969 Woodstock music festival" ("Generation Gap") or that "[i]n 1909, impresario David Belasco had an apartment built above his New York theatre to which he often invited young actresses" ("The Bishop of Broadway"). Sometimes, he'll break from this pattern, such as when he uses the adage "[a]n idle mind is the devil's workshop" to imagine the devil in his mind, at his workshop ("The Artisan"). In none of these cases, however, does the poem overtake the conceit, or justify its existence (the poem's *or* the conceit's).

And I wouldn't be angry if Kessenich was clearly a no-talent hack. At that point, the book and he would be easy to dismiss, not worth the act of criticism. And, clearly, Kessenich is often writing with an eye towards humor—which I wouldn't mind if the humor was there to draw out. But the best premise, and Kessenich does find some interesting ones, cannot stand by itself: so what if you write a poem from the perspective of the tightrope walker who crossed between the Twin Towers watching the towers fall? It's not enough to put the relation there and say, *Wouldn't that be something?*

The answer: Yes, it would be, if there was a poem behind it. Poems are made of connections, the drawing out of unexpected resemblances and intriguing perspectives. Poems, for better or worse, need to say something, preferably in a way that shows the mind behind the words, that unique being that makes *this poem* unique, that allows us to read a poem about flowers and enjoy it even though we've read thousands of poems about flowers before this one raised its conventional little head.

There is no voice hiding in *Strange News* or, if there is, the thoughts it has to say are banal and the images it uses to express them are often misplaced, tonally and spatially. How else to explain a straightforward poem about a group partying while watching test atomic explosions from a rooftop in Las Vegas that includes the following

> And when I ejaculated, the white cloud
> of my semen mushrooming inside of her
> ("Bombed in Las Vegas")

and does so with no sense of humor, no sense of irony, but expects that image to be powerful, moving, and taken seriously.

Right now, I'm looking at a window where a hunting spider is trying to catch an insect on the other side, the concept of glass incomprehensible. That's how *Strange News* makes me feel about the poet who wrote it. And despite all the awkward line breaks, awkward images, and awkward poems here, there's the sense that this poet, Lawrence Kessenich, could write a good poem if he would just step back from the glass and notice his own reflection.

Karyna McGlynn's *Scorpionica* is a beautiful book, both in design (like Carrington's *Hard Blessings*) and content; this is not that surprising, since the chapbook was published by New Michigan Press, the same people associated with the on-line magazine Diagram, a journal overly concerned with design and appearance. But outside of the visual aesthetics, McGlynn's book fits the idea of a chapbook I put forward at the beginning of this review: the book is a coming-of-age story of a young woman told chronologically and from multiple perspectives—an easily comprehensible premise, and yet only a few of the poems take the easy road in terms of narrative or image.

This is not to imply that the book is non-narrative or non-linear, though you might be forgiven for thinking so upon reading the first poem, "Animals Going to Hell."

> Quiver gentle over their sins,
> taste the spring melt.
>
> Nothing on the television
> about taboos or the mongrels
> which are unto our city—
>
> Who is
> letting you go, ma chienne?
> Where will you crawl to die?
>
> The blossoms
> on the tomato-plants are falling
> fast this year, only June now.

This morning here, a little girl
came into our kitchen,
a rifle through her empty leash.

That's the entire poem, and if you can enter into it, let it enter you, then you'll have no difficulty with any of McGlynn's poems, many of which are more distinctly narrative, but none of which loose their tight grip on language or abandon belief in the evocative image. Her poems dance within an awareness of line and form whether in couplets or in free-verse style blocks where shape is chiseled out of the exact right word turning the line back into itself. These poems exhibit an awareness of adult life in a dash for the erotic that isn't afraid of raunch, whether with summer camp girls or flowers. Here's both:

We knew, intimately, the location of
every penis
on the grounds of Camp Mystic for
Girls—
each man a burning "Y" beneath
our eyelids.
("The Men of Camp Mystic")

Loose, the violent bulls-eye genitals
of overblown poppies, bloody dinner
plate
("Suburban Barbarism")

I admit, I like poems that resist me, that call to be re-read because you've been skimmed like a stone along a beautiful surface. But that resistance is also a matter of complexity, by which I mean an awareness that life is not simple, and a poem which provides a simple answer isn't even a beautiful lie. These poems aren't difficult, but they do show craft, a depth of language, an awareness of poetic technique, a wealth of tools that demonstrate McGlynn is beyond her apprenticeship and is writing poems full of emotion and weight, not with ease, but with the appearance of ease.

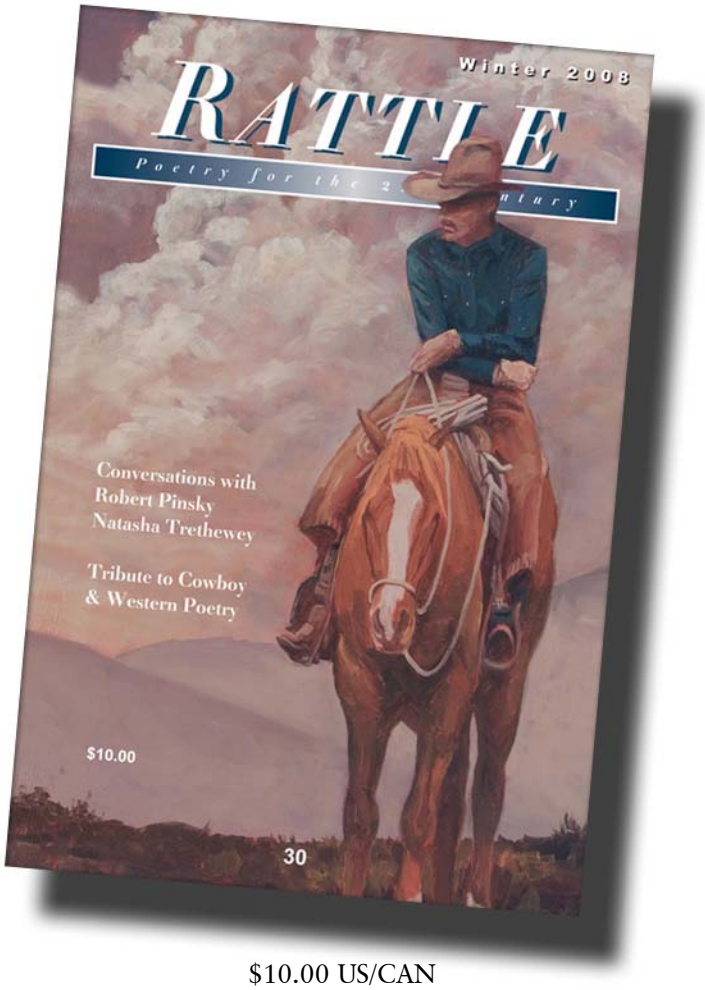
And this is not to say that there are no flaws here, no poems that leave off like unexpected dead-ends or images that reach too far and fall short. But unlike many chapbooks, many sold for just a little less than a full-length book of poems, Karyna McGlynn's *Scorpionica* is worth the price of entry. I'll leave you with these lines from the title poem that perhaps describe the poet herself, or the reader's intense pleasure in reading:

I figure and refill with figure, words
looping
their long unfinished tails along my lips.
("Scorpionica")

ꕥ

Venetian Light
Lois Gold

ANDREW KOZMA received his M.F.A. from the University of Florida and his Ph.D. in English Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Houston. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Zoland Poetry*, *Subtropics*, *AGNI Online*, *Dislocate*, *Hunger Mountain*, and a non-fiction piece was recently published by *The Iowa Review*. His first book of poems, *City of Regret*, won the Zone 3 First Book Award and was released in September of 2007.



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Robert Pinsky
Natasha Trethewey

TRIBUTE TO COWBOY & WESTERN POETRY

Releasing December 2008, issue #30 celebrates the poetry of the western range with work by 24 cowboy & western poets. Developing primarily as an oral tradition, the genre is often thought of as a hybrid between story and song—a collection of tall tales and folk ballads that sit well around the campfire. But the image of the cowboy has been mythologized by Hollywood, and the image of the cowboy poem has been oversimplified, as well.

Modern cowboy & western poetry is as complicated and eclectic as the modern cowboy—there are plenty of appearances by cattle and corrals and ranchers breaking horses, but the topics range from love and politics to ecology and philosophy. And while many of the poems speak in meter and rhyme, plenty of others roam wild and free. The tribute section even includes the longest poem we've ever published, a 20-page western retelling of *Beowulf* by Donald Mace Williams.

Also in the issue, Alan Fox interviews three-term Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky and Pulitzer Prize winner Natasha Trethewey. Along with 60 pages of open poetry, we share the 11 winning poems from the 2008 Rattle Poetry Prize.

TRIBUTE TO COWBOY & WESTERN POETRY

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RATTLE POETRY PRIZE WINNER

Joseph Fasano

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Phyllis Aboaf • Meghan Adler
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Douglas Goetsch • Rebecca Lehmann
Hilary Melton • Robert Peake
Debora Tobola • Amie Whittemore

from RATTLE #30, WINTER 2008

Poetry

Malcolm Alexander

SEMIOTICS

Ironic that within this ☮ sign, the outer circle of which
symbolizes the joining of hands of all nations,

looms a ready missile. Peace be damned, it middlefingers.
If you want a piece of me, give it your best shot.

So human nature yanks out from under us
the gantry of human achievement.

Yanks, yes, as in Yankees, often champions of a confrontation
the object of which is to bludgeon something

harmless and resembling a child's head. Head, as in warhead,
meathead, penis, love missile: pick the term which doesn't belong

to us. As much as we scratch our heads,
we discover that we are, inescapably,

our language. Just imagine, such strange symbols, indecipherable
across cultures as a chicken's scratch, on occasion

one's only, momentary ☮ before the head-chopping,
may one day be weighty enough to change the world!

And given the terrifying gravity of all meaningful things,
from whose unholy grasp neither we nor missiles

nor in fact anything escapes, if we fail to translate
our barriers into bridges, we may just conclude

ourselves. Ironic that only if we scratch
the sole sign-making species from the face of this planet

will ☮ be unavoidable.

Chris Anderson

REALITY HOMES

The falling of a leaf onto a pond is one movement
in a process composed of many movements.
It floats for a while, crisply. Then softens and sinks.
It's funny what comes to mind. All day you think
about a woman you haven't seen in many years.
Her soft, brown hair. The way the corners of her eyes
pulled down. It's not that you are filled with longing
or regret. But you are filled with something.
In a dream you climb a hill on the other side of town.
It is an arduous climb. At the end you are afraid
of falling. But then you look down and realize
all the houses are exactly like the house you live in.
In the distance, the same kind of highway.
Everything is the same. It's just on the other side.

from RATTLE #30, WINTER 2008
Cowboy & Western Poetry

Robert A. Ayres

IF YOU GIVE A GOVERNMENT TRAPPER A ROADKILL ARMADILLO

If you give a government trapper
a roadkill armadillo,
he's likely to take it home.

And if he takes it home,
and his wife's not there,
he'll take it in the kitchen,
stick it in her spaghetti pot—
tail sticking out the top—
fill the pot with water,
turn the burner on,
and cook it till it's squishy.

And if he cooks it till it's squishy,
and his wife's not back,
he'll scoop the innards from the shell
into her Osterizer blender,
add a little glycerin,
and push "Puree."

And if she's still not back,
he'll spoon dollops of pâté
into tiny Tupperware containers,
and stash them in her deep freeze
until he needs it for bait.

But if his wife comes home,
that's that.

Larry D. Thomas

STEERS IN SUMMER, LOWING

Against a backdrop of blue heaven
and mesas hot as blacksmiths' anvils,
still stunned by the musk of men
who castrated them as calves,

they blanket the bleak range
like an unrolled scroll of reddish-
brown parchment scrawled with a savage
calligraphy of horns. Tails lash

hides so sunstruck they're tanned
alive on racks of ribs
guarding hearts and the grand
bellows of lungs. The nubs

of grass they grind with giant molars
are but straw they burn to fuel
their hellfire breath. The lavenders
of the evening ahead are cool

foreshadowings of their fate
of cold storage lockers on whose dim
hooks they'll sway as sides of meat,
drooling the mouths of those who fed them.

from RATTLE #30, WINTER 2008

Cowboy & Western Poetry

Donald Mace Williams

from WOLFE

[...] From deep
In the fierce breaks came a reply,
A drawn-out keening, pitched as high
And savage as if cowboy songs,
To strange, sharp ears, summed up all wrongs
Done to the wilderness by men,
Fences, and cows. With bared teeth then,
Ears back, the apparition skulked
Across the ridges toward the bulked,
Repulsive forms of house and shed,
Till now not neared. The next dawn's red
Revealed a redder scene. The pen
Where calving heifers were brought in
In case of need lay strewn and gory,
Each throat and belly slashed, a story
Of rage, not hunger; nothing gone
But one calf's liver. His face drawn,
Rogers bent close to find a track
In the hard dirt. Then he drew back,
Aghast. Though it was mild and fair,
He would always thereafter swear
There hung above that broad paw print
With two deep claw holes a mere hint,
The sheerest wisp, of steam. He stood
Silent. When finally he could,
He said, "Well, I guess we all know
What done this. No plain lobo, though.
I've seen a few. They never killed
More than to get their belly filled.
This one's a devil. Look at that."
He toed a carcass. Where the fat
And lean had been flensed, red and white,
From a front leg, a second bite
Had crushed the bone above the knee.
By ones and twos men leaned to see
With open mouths. A clean, dark hole
At one side punched clear through the bole.
"That's no tooth, it's a railroad spike,"
One cowboy breathed. Or else it's like,
Tom Rogers thought, a steel-tipped arrow
Such as once pierced him, bone and marrow,
Mid-calf when, riding in advance
Of wagons on the trail to Grants,
Attacked, he turned and in the mud
Escaped with one boot full of blood.
At least the Indians had a cause,
He thought. This thing came from the draws
To kill and waste, no more. He spat
And said, "I'll get hitched up." At that,
Two cowboys jumped to do the chore
While from the pile by the back door
Others, jaws set, began to carry
Cottonwood logs onto the prairie
Where horses dragged the grim night's dead
Like travois to their fiery bed.
Rogers, with hands in pockets, stood
And said, "That barbecue smells good."
But the half-smile he struggled for
Turned on him like a scimitar
And cowboys, sensing, kept their eyes
Down and said nothing. By sunrise
Of the next day the word was out
By mouth and telegraph about
The beast that crept out of the dark
And slaughtered like a land-bound shark,
Evil, bloodthirsty, monstrous. Soon
The story was that the full moon
Caused that four-legged beast to rise
On two feet and with bloodshot eyes
To roam the plains in search of prey
Like some cursed half-man. In one day
Three of Rogers' good cowboys quit,
No cowards but not blessed with wit
To fathom the unknown, and more
Kept glancing at the bunkhouse door
At night as if, next time, the thing
Might burst inside. "Hey, man, don't sing,"
One said as a guitar came out.
There did seem, thinking back, no doubt
That music must have been what stirred
The anger out there. Some had heard
The answer. They agreed the sound
Came after Ashley's fingers found
The highest note of that night's strumming.
"Play it again you know what's coming,"
Said one named Humphrey. [...]

EDITOR'S NOTE: The above is extracted from a 20-page modernization of the Old English epic, *Beowulf*. In the original, Beowulf, a hero of the Geats, battles Grendel, who has been attacking the newly constructed beer hall in Denmark, and later Grendel's mother in her den below the sea. In this passage, Tom Rogers, modeled after Hrothgar, ruler of the Danes, surveys the damage from the monster's first attack.

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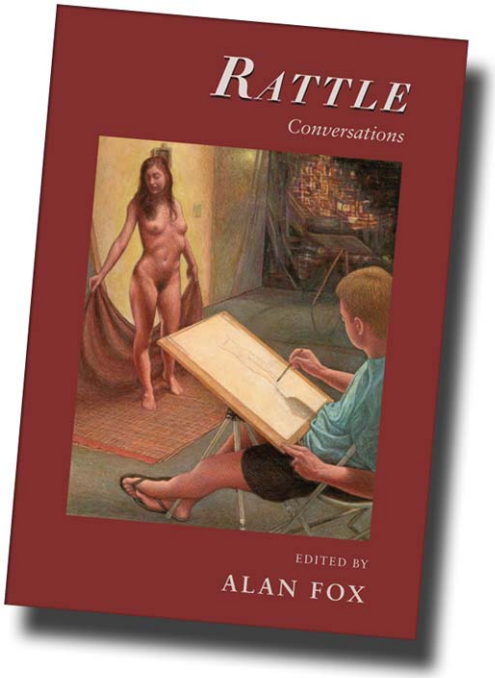
Edited by Alan Fox



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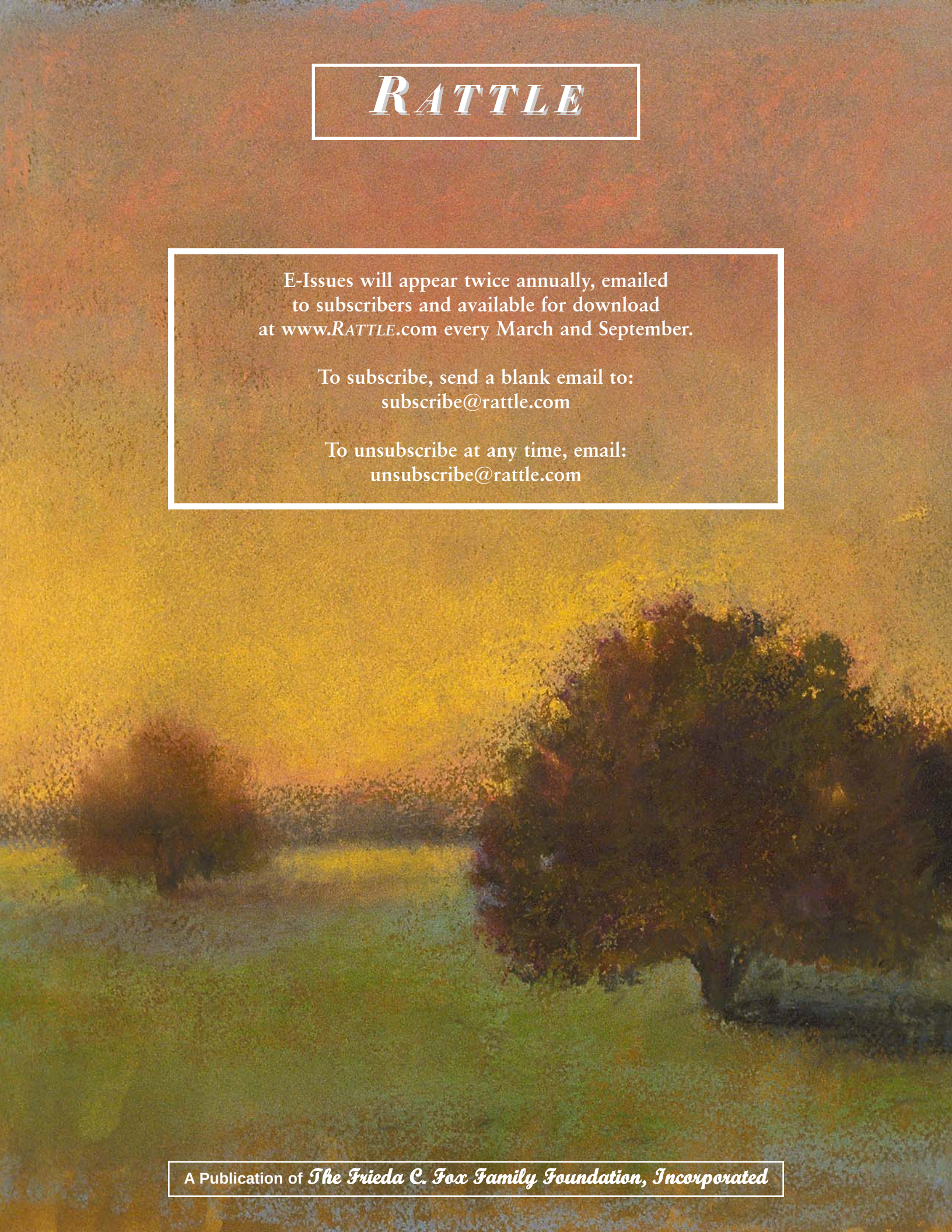

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