

Fall 2011

# RATTLE

*Poetry for the 21st Century*

Book Interview:  
Travis Mossotti's  
*About the Dead*

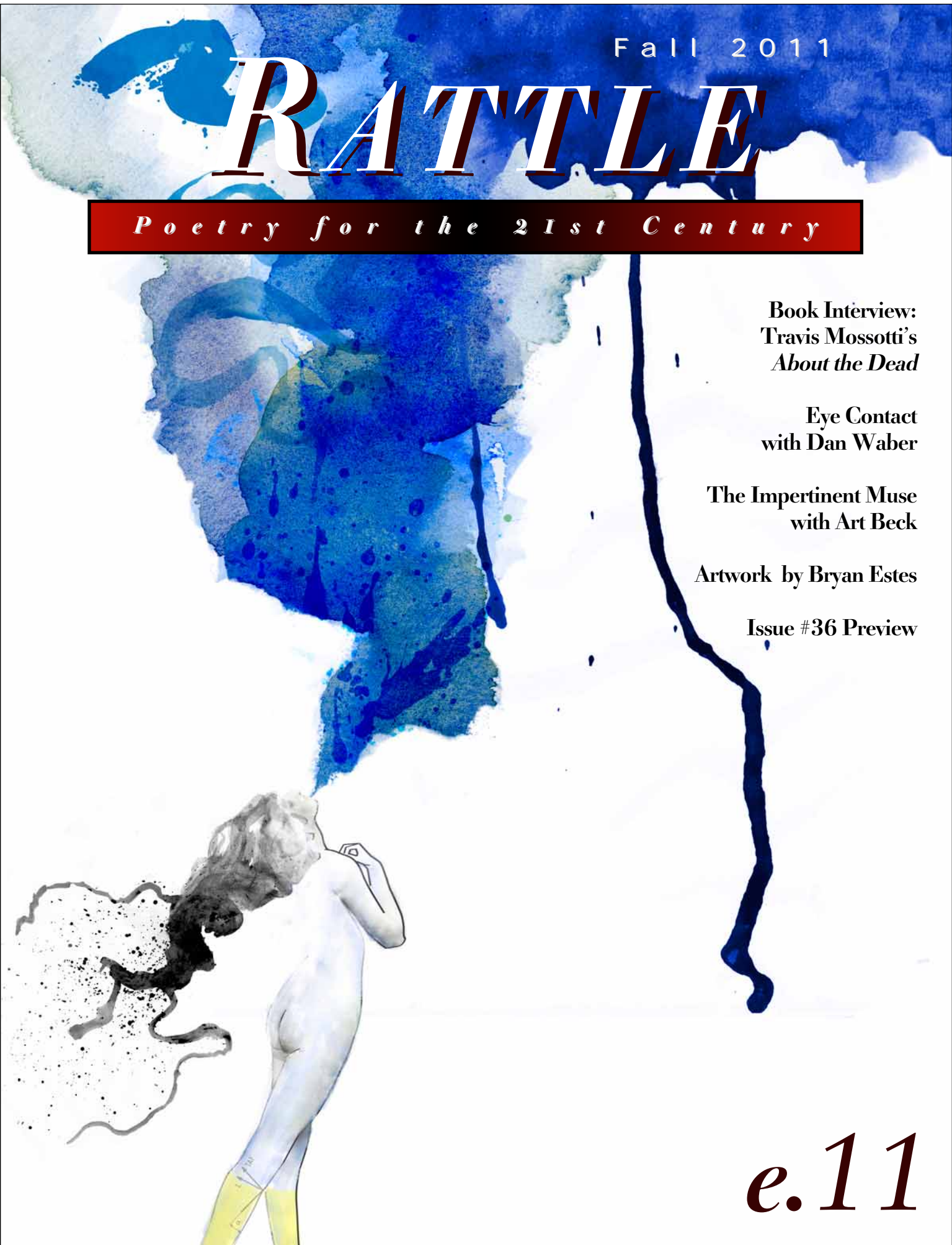
Eye Contact  
with Dan Waber

The Impertinent Muse  
with Art Beck

Artwork by Bryan Estes

Issue #36 Preview

*e.11*



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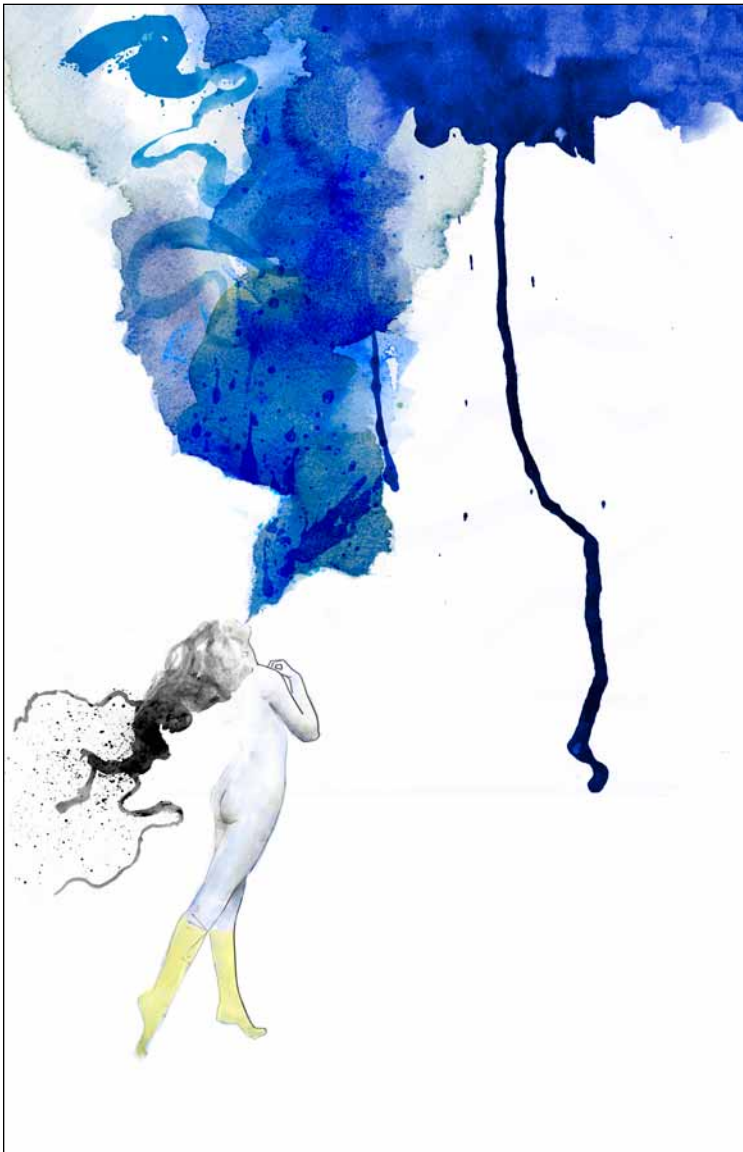
## ARTWORK

by  
Bryan Estes

### ABOUT THE ARTIST



**BRYAN ESTES** studies poetry among the corn and coal of the Middle West. He has read poems published in *Ploughshares*, *AGNI*, *Crazyhorse*, *The Kenyon Review*, and elsewhere.



Genesis 2  
Bryan Estes

## MORE REAL FACES

by  
Deborah Diemont

Dear Editors,

Colin Ward's "Pixel Poetry: a Meritocracy" in *Rattle's* e.10 issue is problematic. There are faulty arguments throughout, such as the assertion that "face-to-face" friends could not possibly give honest critiques, or that "onliners" uniquely care about the quality of their writing over fame. What I find compelling are the poems Ward includes, however it seems to me that he picks the quirkiest poets and claims them as the norm. Interestingly, in the case of Erin Hopson, he says that the poem she posted to a board was so good, the critics had nothing to say.

Ward emphasizes the beauty of the internet for shy poets—one can post anonymously—but he doesn't consider that the sheer magnitude of internet communication may not appeal to someone not fond of overexposure. I think momentarily of Elizabeth Bishop. A perfectionist, and by today's standards unprolific, she tacked drafts to the wall with words circled for their impreciseness. Imagine her incredulity reading Poetry Free-for-all guidelines about not posting more than two poems a week! I imagine she might be overwhelmed by numerous possible responses from people she didn't know. A poet like Bishop, who developed a distinctive voice and sensibility, might also find the system suspect.

Developing one's own sensibility takes not only time and patience but more trust in oneself than online boards (or MFA programs for that matter) seem to find reasonable. If boards are attractive to the shy, they are likewise meant to deal with our increasing isolation from each other, while taking minimal personal risk. Perhaps even more than

MFA programs, boards can speed up your creative process. You can get a fairly immediate response as to whether or not a poem works, whether or not others "get it." But no system can answer for the intangible qualities that will make a work transcend its time, or even thrill a reader in the now.

This is the paradox of the internet: collaborative and yet isolated. Therefore emotionally safer, but also more dangerous. Here, I'd like to talk about M.A. Griffiths. I've read her posthumous anthology and agree that she's a complicated poet with wide-ranging skills. She used internet boards as a means of interacting about poetry, but clearly, they were not the source of her gift. Griffiths's online friends have saved her work from obscurity, and in this sense, it's good that so much of it had been posted. And yet, that this lovely woman's work *had to be* saved by friends she'd never met implies the obvious: it would have been good to have more actual faces around.

Stanly Kunitz said that poetry is for life. Life isn't for poetry, but how easy it can be to forget that when you become deeply involved in an art. Sometimes I forget, too. We push real life aside so we can write, though of course it's life that we write about. The sacrifices we make for our art should honor the messiness of life, facing the page truly alone, and sharing work long-belabored face to face. It can be hard to find a critic you trust, and the people you know are always imperfect. Still, I think it worthwhile to give them a try.

Sincerely,  
Deborah Diemont  
Syracuse, New York

Note: We're always happy to publish thoughtful letters on any topic relating to poetry. If you have an opinion you'd like to share, send it in an email to: [tim@rattle.com](mailto:tim@rattle.com)

## RATTLE PRIZE

The following finalists will be published in *Rattle* #36, with the winner chosen by popular vote among eligible subscribers:

Pia Aliperti, Atlanta, GA  
"Boiler"

Tony Barnstone, Whittier, CA  
"Why I Am Not a Carpenter"

Kim Dower, Los Angeles, CA  
"Why People Really Have Dogs"

Courtney Kampa, Oak Hill, VA  
"Self-Portrait by Someone Else"

M, Portland, OR  
"To a Husband, Saved by Death at 48?"

Andrew Nurkin, Highstown, NJ  
"The Noises Poetry Makes"

Charlotte Pence, Knoxville, TN  
"Perfectly Whatever"

Laura Read, Spokane, WA  
"What the Body Does"

Hayden Saunier, Doylestown, PA  
"The One and the Other"

Diane Seuss, Kalamazoo, MI  
"What Is at the Heart of It..."

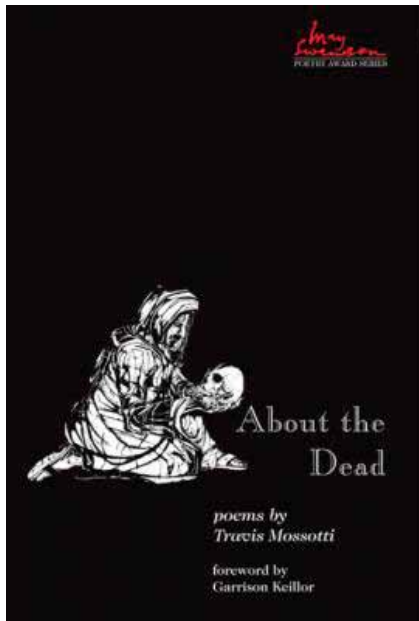
Craig van Rooyen, San Luis Obispo, CA  
"The Minstrel Cycle"

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

Bryan Walpert, Palmerston, New Zealand  
"Objective Correlative"

Anna Lowe Weber, Altoona, PA  
"Spring Break 2011"

Maya Jewell Zeller, Spokane, WA  
"Honesty"



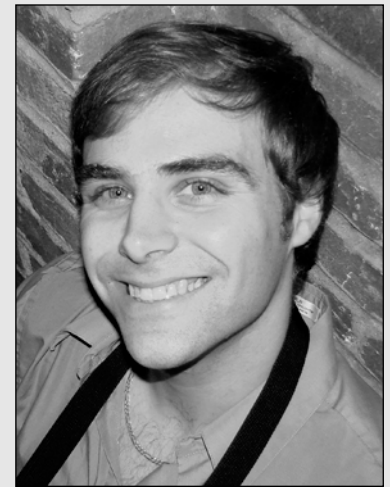
## ABOUT THE DEAD

by  
Travis Mossotti

Utah State University Press  
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TRAVIS MOSSOTTI received a BA in English and French from Webster University and an MFA in poetry from Southern Illinois University–Carbondale. Recently a faculty lecturer at the University of California–Santa Cruz, his poetry appears widely in literary journals, including *American Literary Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Cream City Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *Passages North*, *RHINO*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and many others. Mossotti was awarded the James Hearst Poetry Prize from the *North American Review* in 2009, and “Decampment,” the opening poem to *About the Dead*, was adapted to screen in 2010 as an animated short film <[www.decampment.com](http://www.decampment.com)>. Mossotti currently resides in St. Louis with his wife, Regina.



### FROM THE PUBLISHER

Travis Mossotti writes with humor, gravity, and humility about subjects grounded in a world of grit, where the quiet mortality of working folk is weighed. To Mossotti, the love of a bricklayer for his wife is as complex and simple as life itself: “ask him to put into words what that sinking is,/ that shudder in his chest, as he notices/ the wrinkles gathering at the corners of her mouth.” But not a whiff of sentiment enters these poems, for Mossotti has little patience for ideas of the noble or for sympathetic portraits of hard-used saints. His vision is clear, as clear as the memory of how scarecrows in the rearview, “each of them, stuffed/ into a body they didn’t choose, resembled/ your own plight.” His poetry embraces unsanctimonious life with all its wonder, its levity, and clumsiness. *About the Dead* is an accomplished collection by a writer in control of a wide range of experience, and it speaks to the heart of any reader willing to catch his “drift, and ride it like the billowed/ end of some cockamamie parachute all the way/ back to the soft, dysfunctional, waiting earth.”

### PRAISE FOR ABOUT THE DEAD

“*About the Dead* struck me on first reading as an adventurous book grounded in real places and real people, and reading it was like following the poet up a steep climb on a rocky slope as he improvised his route, and at every step I was struck by the rightness of his choices, surprised by so many odd words that seemed so exactly right.

—Garrison Keillor



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

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## BOOK INTERVIEW WITH TRAVIS MOSSOTTI

by  
Timothy Green

*Note: The following interview was conducted by email through August and September of 2011.*

GREEN: First books of poetry tend to be patchworks of all the poems the author happened to get published in various journals over the years—sometimes with a core section that may have been an earlier chapbook or college thesis, but usually with a fringe of outliers that don't quite fit the general color scheme, so to speak. What struck me most in reading *About the Dead* was how much it didn't feel like a typical first book—and yet, flipping through the table of contents, it does ostensibly mirror that quilt-like criteria. What makes the book unique, I think, is the voice. The narrator is so full of an erudite grit, a kind of heightened twang with a unique diction, that I feel like I just read a series of epic narratives, rather than shifts through a range of styles and subjects. The speaker is the central character. I think it's possible to read any random sentence in any book, and immediately discern whether or not a distinct voice is present. But I have no idea how that works, or what a voice really is. Do you have any idea how your poetic voice developed? Is this a careful crafting of your own real-world voice, or is it something created outside of the way you think and speak? It's clearly one of your strengths—so what is a voice, and where does it come from?

MOSSOTTI: Maybe it didn't feel like the typical first book you describe above because I finished a draft of the manuscript before the individual poems started

getting accepted for publication, and that first draft wasn't too different from the final draft that won the May Swenson Poetry Award (same title, almost all of the same poems). I mean, don't get me wrong, journal and chapbook publications are a nice validation and a great proving ground for the individual poems, but they don't mean a thing in terms of a full-length book—first or otherwise. I've heard it's trendy now to publish a first book with previously unpublished poems, but this seems to me a bit of an overreaction, too. If more young poets simply read other poetry collections they admired with an eye for designing a book, maybe learned to trust their own intuition instead of just listening to others around them, I think they'd feel a lot more confident in putting their own collection together. In my thesis defense I was asked if I had any advice for the other young poets in the room: "So far as I can tell there is no such thing as a perfect book," I said. "You have to crucify that first one and have the confidence to move on."

Personally, my goal was to create a beautiful artifact full of, yes, "erudite grit," passionately told narratives with beautiful sound and imagery, memorable lines and a keen attention to scene. I can see why the speaker's voice stuck out to you most of all. I guess the voice in *About the Dead* is more than anything a result of the collision or collusion of varied diction and speech patterns—I've always

been fascinated by how naturally they can get along together, especially in free verse. I know what Frost said about free verse and tennis, but I've always felt that free verse actually demands a greater control of syntax and language than metrical verse, and complex, multi-layered narrative poems demand that *the thing be said right* if the speaker's voice is to register authentic within the setting(s) of the poem. Of course, Frost also famously said that "everything written is as good as it is dramatic. It need not declare itself in form, but it is drama or nothing." In my experience the drama is what makes the situations seem immediate and real for the reader, reinforces the occasion for the poem, and makes it possible for any speaker to speak with a conviction that is rehearsed, revised, palpable and resolute. I don't think my real-world voice comes anywhere close to my speakers' voices because I don't have the same luxury of revision.

GREEN: It's funny that you mention the tennis quote—only hours ago I read an interview with John Ashbery in *APR*, and was delighted to find someone else voicing the reaction I always have: Tennis with no net would be *hard!* It would take great skill and balance to make a game of it without that external encumbrance setting the ball's pace. It seems to me a perfect analogy, but not in the way that I assume Frost intended...

You also mentioned revision, and I'm fascinated by this idea that the book was complete and remained more or less intact between the first draft and the last. Describe your process of imagining this book. Did you have an idea for themes you wanted to address, and then write poems specifically toward those themes? If so, did you still find yourself writing poems that didn't fit, or were you able to stay on task? I'm wondering how you chose what your subjects would be and how that process worked itself out.

MOSSOTTI: So what if it's not exactly what Frost intended? I like that interpretation. He's too dead to take serious offense, and anyway, I think a little back

## BOOK FEATURE - ABOUT THE DEAD

and forth between poetic schools of thought keeps both sides sharp—we may not always see eye to eye, but free verse poets and formal metrical folk have too much in common to be separated by a common genre—as Pound wrote: “We have one sap and one root—/ Let there be commerce between us.” Personally, I’ll never carry hard feelings for any poet (big or small) who’s brave enough to try her hand at the craft.

With regards to *About the Dead* and revision: It’s true the first draft was very similar to the final draft, but many of the poems underwent heavy spells of revision over the course of the two years that it was shopped around. What else can you do? A few poems were added while others got axed (primarily from the final section, *As Broken in the End*), and things like the section titles and the Trethewey epigraph were a final flourish (I called them set dressing). But somehow at the end of the whole bartering process, the core imagining of the book remained untouched, which, I think was important—to hold onto the humility, fearlessness and discovery that inspired the book in the first place.

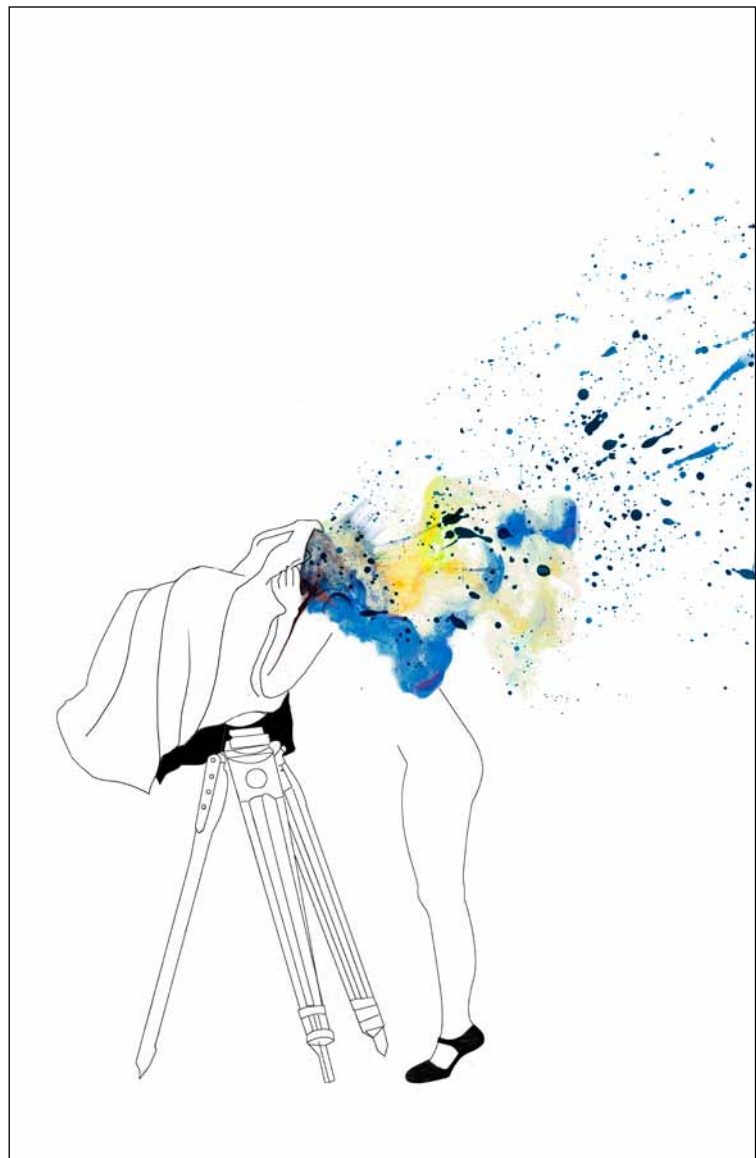
Since it was written around the title poem, the theme, tone and voice of that poem were used as starting blocks for everything else in the book. The subjects came naturally and were often a reflection of something else I was doing or reading at the time, but I never strayed from the idea of the manuscript. One poem led to the next. The process of writing it became focused and singular. I remember about a year ago someone asked me what would happen if it never got published—I don’t think it wasn’t meant in any malicious or condescending way, but I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to respond. I remember telling them that I didn’t accept *that* as an alternative, which I don’t think was idle bullshit or blind hubris. The book was finished. A person can only carry something so far. The details usually have a way of working themselves out.

GREEN: “About the Dead” is a great title poem, in that it serves as a key for inter-

preting the rest of the book. *St. Frances Contemplating a Skull...empty sockets contemplating St. Frances.* “What remains” looking right back at you. It’s a complicated nostalgia, where memory has its own animus, and so has the potential to conceal. Like a good storyteller, memories lie. Garrison Keillor’s blurb on the back of the book tells us that the poems are “grounded in real places and real people,” and I couldn’t help but wonder if that was true. Rather than ask outright how much of it is autobiography, let me ask this: As a poet, what do

you value more, the power of fact, or the power of fiction?

MOSSOTTI: Nostalgia should always be seen as complicated. When it’s taken at face value, nostalgia actually becomes dangerous. It can inspire the false belief that there could ever be such a thing as “the good old days”—as you said, memories are prone to lie, and lie they will. In nature, false or selective memory serves a valuable function (e.g., the ability to forget the pain associated with the birthing process helps mother and infant



*Genesis 8*

Bryan Estes

## BOOK FEATURE - ABOUT THE DEAD

bond more quickly), but in a collective, in politics for instance, nostalgia taken at face value allows groups like the Tea Party or the Front National (a similar party in France) to espouse regressive and destructive platforms—that’s all I’ll say on politics. In poetry, untempered nostalgia produces sentimental drivel, emotional pandering, which is dangerous for different reasons altogether.

As to whether or not Keillor’s blurb holds water, I’ll say this: poets are a product of their experiences and so too are the poems they write; it would be foolish for me to champion fiction or fact because they both rely upon and inform each other. I remember David Clewell said once to my undergraduate workshop that he didn’t care if the most beautiful beach we’d ever been to was in Guam: “Make it Tahiti. Tahiti *sounds* better.” He was talking about having an allegiance to the poem, not to fact or fiction, and I think when one is working in a craft as complex and nuanced as poetry one has to be willing to sacrifice the small autobiographical facts for the needs of the poem—for the larger emotional truth the poem is after. Otherwise, the poem will suffer and ultimately fail.

And vice-versa—sometimes the autobiographical facts are important (only inasmuch as how those facts relate to other aspects of the poem). For example, I’ve been working on a poem for well over a year now set in Yellowstone National Park, and there’s this scene where my speaker is standing in the bunkhouse at Tower Junction:

I noticed a chart on the wall I hadn’t before  
with color photos of invasive plants:

    bull thistle,  
    spotted knapweed, dalmation toadflax,

    houndstongue and leafy spurge.

The fact that the scene actually happened to me personally is irrelevant to the poem itself (outside of inspiring its creation), but I remember standing in front of that chart, writing down the name of each plant and thinking that they sounded almost too good to be true (hound-

stongue, seriously?). Here, the moment of discovery meshed so well with the quality of the thing discovered that the autobiographical fact became important to other aspects of the poem—inextricable almost. That isn’t always the case.

I guess what I’m getting at is pretty simple: in the end, fact or fiction, I think the poet’s allegiance to the poem is the *only* thing that matters. I’ve been reading the collected poems of Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko lately (just got it in the mail last week), and I remember reading a quote from *The Sole Survivor* where he says that “[a] poet’s autobiography is his poetry. Anything else is just a footnote.” That sounds about right to me. I can live with that.

GREEN: I don’t want to sound like I disagree with Keillor’s introduction; when he says “real,” I think what he means is “authentic”—and we’d all probably agree that that’s what actually matters. He also compares you to a rock-climber improvising his route, and “at every step...was struck by the rightness of his choices, surprised by so many odd words that seemed so *exactly right*.” That’s my chief pleasure in reading your work, too—these strange lines that fit perfectly. They’re all over the place...I’ll just open to one poem randomly, “Red Roof Inn,” and here’s the very first sentence: “The mattress had a dead man’s/ give to it.” Earlier you mentioned heavy spells of revision—are lines like these a product of careful revision, or the spontaneity of first drafts? As a poor reviser myself, I’m always curious what others mean by revision. I never seem to be able to achieve anything more than rearranging syntax...

MOSSOTTI: Authenticity is the magic word indeed, and I think some of that does come out of the revision process. But my revision process is different with every poem. “Getting Arrested” for example was a first-draft-best-draft poem that took me less than an hour to write; “Decampment” on the other hand, took nearly eight months of heavy drafting and revision (rewrites, adding lines and

entire sections, reordering, re-lineation, syntactical modifications, word choice, etc).

I know at least a few poets who believe that each poem must undergo a minimum of one hundred hours of revision, must have at least thirty individual drafts, oil change every three thousand miles, etc., but standardized models like that make me cringe—as Yeats said, “I like a poem to have fine machinery, but if this machinery is made to appear anything more than that, the spell of the poetry is broken.” Sometimes too much revision ends up breaking that spell, and many fine poems have been lost in the process.

I’m glad you mentioned Keillor’s “rock-climber” analogy, because that’s exactly how I felt writing this book. There’s a level of improvisation in composition that’s different from any clever bit of revision—it’s riskier, and I’ve always found a bit of my style is informed by those risks: for instance, my ability to leap from one word, one image, one line to the next is (to a certain extent) what makes my speakers unique. Usually that leaping comes from the initial drafting.

“The Dead Cause,” for example, was a first draft that Robert Pinsky picked as the winner of the James Hearst Poetry Prize from the *North American Review*. But a poem like that is the exception, not the rule. In my opinion, revision (no matter how slight or severe it may be) keeps poems honest.

GREEN: “Decampment” has been turned into a wonderful animated short film <[www.decampment.com](http://www.decampment.com)>, which I’m sure will help it—and thus poetry—reach a wider audience, and also give readers a new way to experience the book. I always have mixed feelings about multimedia poetry, though—art is art is art and I’d never want to argue against any of it, but poetry is a sound-painting on the mind’s canvas...if you’re given the images up front, is it still poetry? Does it matter if it’s not? Or maybe an easier question—do you prefer reading the poem, or watching the film?



## BOOK FEATURE - ABOUT THE DEAD

**MOSSOTTI:** Both Josh and I had mixed feelings going into the project, simply because we had seen what typically happened with animated poems. But we discussed it for nearly two years before the production actually started, which gave us loads of preproduction time to consider how many ways it could go wrong and how many ways it could go right. So first off, we decided there would be *no* floating words to clutter the images; second, we would adapt images to the scenes selectively and only so long as they meshed with the action; and finally, we chose to keep the focus on the speaker of the poem and let him deliver it. Is it poetry? Ostensibly yes, but it's also its own project. It's an animation with gorgeously hand-painted backgrounds, sound effects, lighting and a brilliant score.

And even though I guess I'm kind of boring when it comes to my own personal working definition of "poetry" (i.e., words on a page broken into lines), much of the animation works to accentuate what is often a barebones reading of the poem by a speaker who just happens to be sitting on the front steps to his house (e.g., the entire third section) instead of standing in a café or shuffling papers at a lectern in some university multi-purpose room. As with any poetry reading, the film requires each audience member to listen closely and to actively engage his or her imagination and knowledge of the craft. And I think it does matter how it's defined, at least a little. There is so much celebrated poetry that is

aesthetically pleasing and inventive on the page that dies in the mouth, so to speak.

Josh took an early interest in this project because the poem sounded as good as it looked on the page, and it had a narrative that was strong enough to not only survive the process of adaptation but to flourish in it. He took great efforts to understand and respect poetry as a medium in general and made great personal sacrifices (i.e., worked literally on nothing else for eight months of production) to bring this particular poem to the screen; which goes an unfortunately long way to say, I honestly don't think I could prefer one over the other, just like I don't think I could have a preference for a poem on the page versus a poem read aloud (read well anyhow) at a poetry reading—both occasions are inseparable parts of the same experience.

**GREEN:** I imagine "Decampment" won't be your last cinematic collaboration, but what about a second book—you mentioned a poem set in Yellowstone. Do you find your new work to be heading in different directions, or is *About the Dead* more of a first stop on a longer journey?


**MOSSOTTI:** I have two more completed poetry manuscripts that I'm shopping around right now, and while they share some formal, stylistic and content tendencies, I don't see them as extensions of *About the Dead*, which isn't really what you were asking though—I'll say this: I believe a poet's oeuvres are journeys of chance, should be explorations, and should always be seen as striking off in a new direction with an awareness of where the poet's been (if not also where he/she is ostensibly headed). I'm fascinated with place, not just with this country, but let's start there: the buildings, land, rivers, oceans, wildlife, all of it, and I don't feel like it's a place that can be wrung dry. We have a big damn wild country, and too many poets take it for granted or cordon themselves off to a particular quadrant or urban center or rural pit stop or strive to escape it by

being that international lyric-translation-octolingual-scholar-genius-jet-setter poet of mystery.

When I was an undergrad French major, I took a few international students on a classic American road trip at their behest (Iyad from Syria, Sylvie from France, Mariko from Japan, and Maria from Guatemala), and to them, the Waffle House in Tallahassee was an adventure. Coming back home to St. Louis at sunrise, Iyad leaned over from shotgun and told me: "You have a beautiful city." I couldn't recall ever thinking of it with a sense of ownership, as a beautiful thing, and I'd certainly never attached any personal sense of pride to the thing itself (city as object). But, I guess then, my work continues to be inspired by this idea of loving the place you occupy, no matter if you've been there 30 minutes or 30 years, no matter how used, boarded up, or bulldozed it may seem. This love is certainly there in *About the Dead*, and it's certainly there in the two subsequent manuscripts I've finished writing.

As for more film collaborations: we have some ideas, but we'll just have to wait and see what comes of them.

**GREEN:** Thanks, Travis, I'll be looking forward to it.

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from ABOUT THE DEAD

Travis Mossotti

## ABOUT THE DEAD

At the museum, I stop at a painting: *St. Francis Contemplating a Skull*.  
An upturned human skull nestled in his joined hands—

empty sockets contemplating St. Francis. What remains  
of the dead fascinates me. In Paris I wandered

the Catacombs for hours looking at the bones—  
stacked so neatly. The plagues were so efficient

at producing bones to stack—the churches' graveyards  
dug up and brought by horse-cart under moonlight

to the vacant sarcophagi of the old Roman quarries.  
At Père-Lachaise I witnessed a young couple fucking

on Jim Morrison's grave. They kept it up for nearly  
twenty minutes before they were forcibly removed.

The man's cock remained a hard, diligent protester  
bouncing as they hauled him away over the cobblestone path

out of the cemetery—something still locked up inside him.

## SAXIFRAGE

The gym's boxing room has the sunken décor  
of a Fifties bomb shelter—a heavy bag  
girthier than an elephant's penis, loafing  
pendulumatic long after the barrage of punches  
have stopped. I used to imagine pummeling

the chops of the guy who slept with my ex.  
*Thump, Wham! Thump, Thump, Wham!*  
Knucklebone. Catharsis. Wingèd prayer  
field-dressed like a pheasant. But sooner  
or later, everyone has to move on: tornado

swipples a huddle of yearlings from the field,  
event horizon of the astrophysicist's wet dream,  
ice-cream truck caterwauling over a cliff,  
karma mule-kicking the dimwit wiping dust  
from the dictator's silly fresco. *Thump, Thump,*

*Thump, Thump, Wham! Thump, Wham!*  
How useful would all the hitting actually be  
at say, fending off a grizzly bear? Blitzkrieg?  
Ice age? Fists already chafing rosily. Sweat  
bilging the usual spots. Sweet grass, duck weed

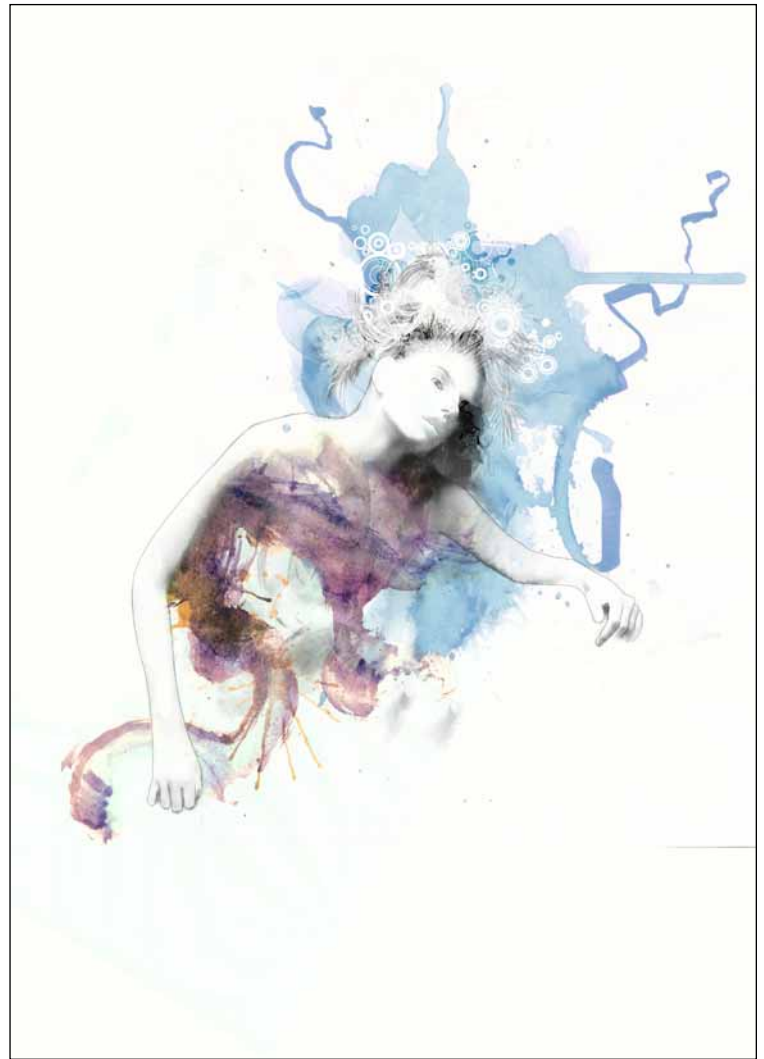
tupelo, box wood, juniper, box wood, juniper,  
flotillas of swamp sunflowers! Quickly now!  
Fasten the heroic couplets to stone tablets.  
Help me etch the stupid past into the future. *Thump,*  
*Wham! Thump, Wham! Wham!* Florida's not just

for the elderly anymore. Picasso. Latrine. Homunculus.  
Filch. And as for the guy that slept with my ex, I never  
moved on; he's still my flower that splits the rock—  
each punch ratcheted squarely into a pit  
of black canvas, my all-purpose jackstraw.

from ABOUT THE DEAD*Travis Mossotti*

## ONLY THEN

The Hemingway Short Story is a stubby, torpedo shaped cigar that responds well to fire. It lasts in the way we last: smoke of our body becoming air, becoming breeze, becoming the cold front that slams its thick skull against a tree, against a forest, against the town, where as a boy, I slept with a brown teddy bear—threadbare buttons in its grooved sockets—that bear had seen it all come and go and knew the familiar sting of quarrelsome parents lighting the hallway, had often buried itself in the backyard under the silver maple: a makeshift graveyard where the sun fell to its knees, the winsome sun pressing a shadow against another grave. I left flowers. My father would light those stubby brown cigars and lean over the rail of the back deck like a Buddhist shaving his head in the dark; he would smoke and stare past the forest and imagine the coming winter and the next and before long his parturient gaze fell back upon the house, and I could smell the rush of spent tobacco as he brushed past. I can smell it now. We don't talk about such things in polite conversation although I wish we could. Then I could show you the night a tree fell on our house, the truculent wind escaping the forest's lungs, the lightning bluing our crushed wooden deck, my mother's ruffled blackwatch nightgown, felled tree snug against the roof, a hundred years of growing towards this scene.

*Genesis 7*

Bryan Estes



## EYE CONTACT:

### A LOOK AT VISUAL POETRY WITH DAN WABER

#### #5: Kevin Yuen Kit Lo

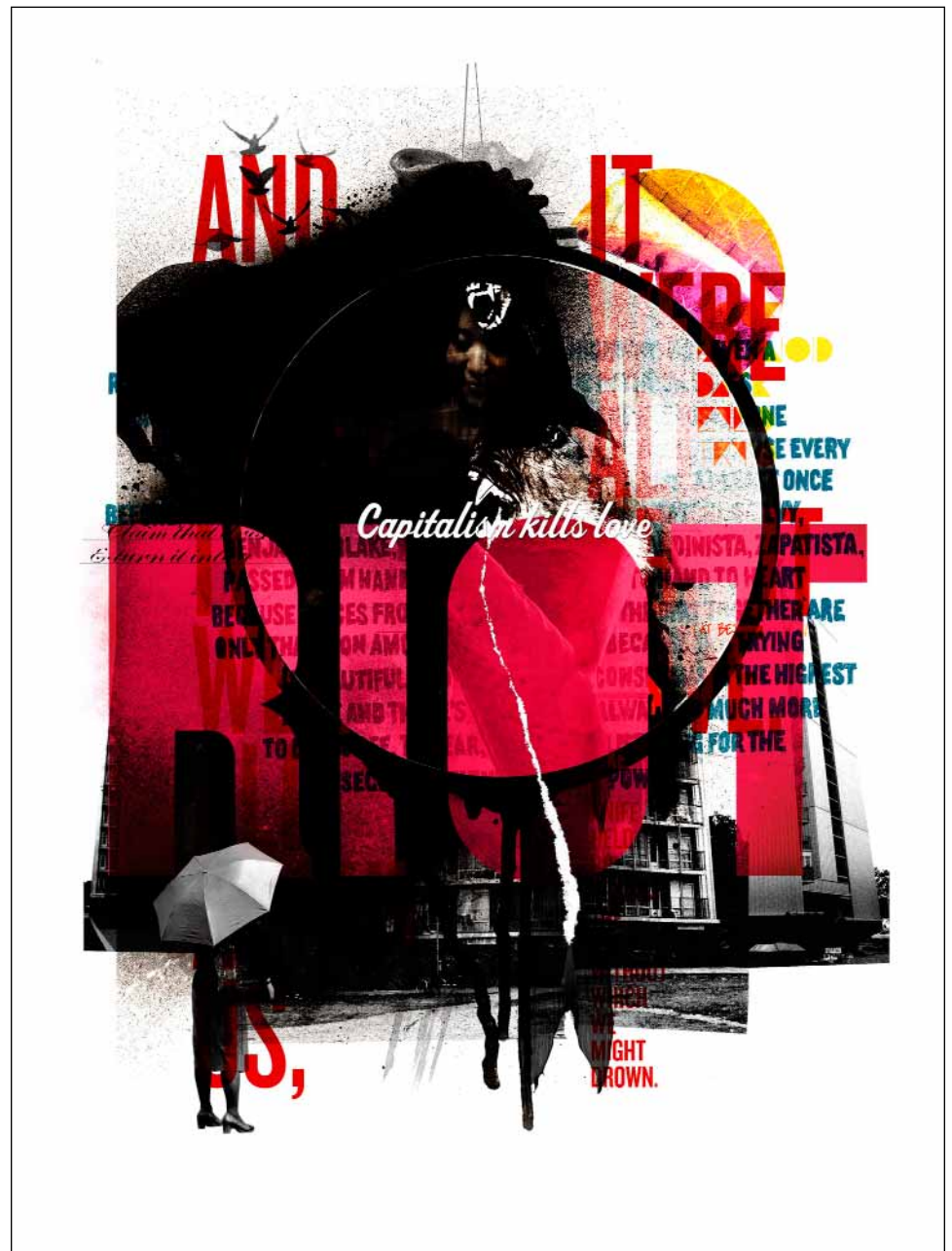
Note: All electronic submissions of visual poetry are automatically considered for Dan Waber's biannual "Eye Contact" column. If you're interested in having your work featured, follow the regular guidelines at: [www.rattle.com/submissions.htm](http://www.rattle.com/submissions.htm)

The avant-garde and the establishment have a strange sort of symbiosis, or maybe co-dependency is a better word. They feed each other, they feed off of each other, and each is the reason the other exists. Fine art and graphic design share a similar set of tensions.

Visual poetry exists in that space between the textual and the visual where it is often disregarded by both as being no child of either. Dick Higgins gave it a home under the umbrella term "intermedia," but inviting it into another home is still a way to say it has no home of its own.

I say visual poetry has no home because it belongs everywhere it goes. It is ubiquitous. From corporate logos to international signage, from software interface conventions to event posters, from display fonts to music videos, we are swimming in a sea of visual poetry, of the sign self-aware. Or as Paul Valéry may have said, "To see is to forget the name of the thing one sees."

Poets are always among the first to go missing in regime changes, because they're dangerous. The power that poetry has is the judo throw of paradigm shift. Those in Title Case Power are (rightly) afraid of those who are able to wield this less-flashy but ultimately more effective lowercase power. Culture-jamming organizations like Adbusters regularly recruit professional graphic designers because they know that in today's hypermedia world these are the people with their hands right on the controls of public opinion. They know how to push the buttons, slide the levers, and twist the dials that make us think we thought of that ourselves. What happens



*Capitalism Kills*

Kevin Yuen Kit Lo

## EYE CONTACT

when a poet who is also a graphic designer decides to use his powers for good?

Check out this series by Kevin Yuen Kit Lo. When I first saw these five pieces I was struck by how arresting the images were, how the visual elements snapped

right in front of my eyes and led me by the nose smack into the text. Then the text held me there. Then it got fun.

Once I decided that I wanted to show this work I had to decide which ones to select. Normally this column presents two or three images. So I started

comparing and contrasting and looking at how I could best represent the whole by only some parts. I knew I wanted to use “Capitalism Kills Love” because I love that densely layered but not cluttered look. Then I wanted to include one other and got stuck between wanting something visually minimal to contrast, or a bit more linear textually (also to contrast). I placed “Capitalism Kills Love” on the left, and began cycling through the other four on the right, to see how each worked in relation.

That’s when I saw it. That’s when I knew I needed to show all five pieces.\* “Capitalism Kills Love” is both the sum of its parts and greater than the sum of its parts. Like individuals and society. Taken all together, this is visual poetry that changes the way I look at the world around me because it changes the way I look at myself, and vice versa. It is the image in the text “like a knife held up against the rain, without which we might drown” as much as it is the subtext in the image of the figure with the umbrella come to claim. Guttured open we become paranoid; it takes a measure of wanting to be the sun to impel social change. Put together the pieces, they will take you apart. Take them apart and they will put you together.



KEVIN YUEN KIT LO is a graphic designer, independent publisher, and generally engaged and enraged global citizen based in Montreal Quebec. He publishes the magazine *Four Minutes to Midnight*, exploring the intersections of typography, poetics and politics. He holds an MA in Typo/Graphic Design from the London College of Printing and a Graduate Certificate Degree and BFA in Design Art from Concordia University.

DAN WABER is a visual poet and multimedia artist living in Kingston, PA. For more, please visit his website:

[www.logolalia.com](http://www.logolalia.com)

\*For the full series, see pages 17, 20, 22, 24 & 27.

## KEVIN YUEN KIT LO

## ON THE CREATION OF “CAPITALISM KILLS LOVE”:

“ This series of image/poems draws from a writing process I have been exploring for the last few years, which I’ve dubbed a fugue, elaborated principally within issues of the magazine *Four Minutes to Midnight*. Emerging from an interest in expressing a collective voice, generated through dialogue, the fugue is essentially a “cadavre exquis,” rewritten, remixed, and reset in typography over an extended period of time. Many diverse writers have contributed their words to it over the years, channeled through the voice of the collective editors and my typographic design.

The “Capitalism Kills Love” series was created when Aram Tanis contacted me with a series of beautiful black and white photos for the magazine. I felt such a strong kinship between his photography and our words, so I proposed another level of remix, combining his images with excerpts from the latest fugue. The title is one final piece of appropriation, stolen from the French artists’ collective Claire Fontaine’s work of the same name.



Original Photograph used for “And We Wish” (p.20)

ARAM TANIS graduated from the Gerrit Rietveld Academy and did his two year residency at De Ateliers in Amsterdam where he was guided by Marlene Dumas, Steve McQueen and Fiona Tan among others. He exhibited his work around the world, including at Witte de With (Rotterdam, NL), Van Abbe Museum (Eindhoven, NL), CCD Photospring Festival / Arles in Beijing (Beijing, CN), Coalmine (Winterthur/CH), General Store (Sydney, AU), The F.U.E.L. Collection (Philadelphia, USA), MK Gallery (Berlin, DE), Westminster University (London, UK), and many others.



## THE IMPERTINENT DUET: TRANSLATING POETRY WITH ART BECK

### #5: *The Poetics of Exile and a Belated Review*

This is a volume I've wanted to write "something" about since I first came across it in the '80s. Dimly, I remember someone—it's maddening, but I can't remember who—passing on a review copy he'd been given, thinking I might be interested since I'd just published a selection of Rilke translations. That was serendipitous; I can't imagine I would have sprung for the cover price of \$24.95 in 1985 dollars, probably the equivalent of \$50 today.

What I vaguely dreamed of writing in the '80s, wasn't a review, but a selection of translations from each of the three poets integrated with quotes from their letters. But my one abortive semester of beginning Russian had left me with only the barest inkling of the Cyrillic alphabet. "Someday, I'll take a course," I thought, but someday never came. Now, finally, wanting to talk about some esoteric translation concepts, I find myself re-reading these letters and wondering if revisiting the 1926 correspondence between these three poets might help to frame those slippery ideas.

#### I. THE MOTHER TONGUE AND TRANSLATOR TRAITORS

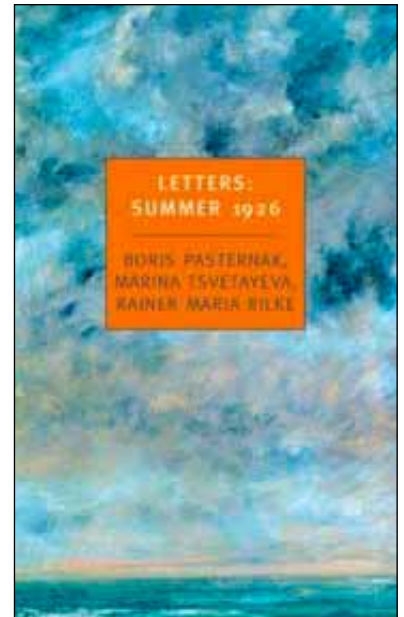
The Italian saying, *traduttore, traditore* (translator, traitor) is often quoted as a maxim on the difficulty of literary translation. But I think the roots of that expression lie deeper, in the concept of a "national literature." When I was a kid, there was a popular Book of the Month club anthology of *Best Loved Poems of the American People*. That title sounds quaint today, not because Americans aren't fond of poetry: As many as ever probably are, including most *Rattle* readers. It's that we

no longer think of loving poetry as a "people," but rather as individuals with personal tastes.

The *Best Loved* anthology came out in the '50s, a time when most Americans were beginning to sense that the 20<sup>th</sup> century might actually be becoming an "American Century." We were exporting—no longer protecting—our culture. And while Americans were voraciously gobbling up foreign films, books, music along with strange food and foreign trade profits, our national literature was elbowing its place onto an international stage. So many American icons were expatriates: Hemingway, Eliot, Pound, Stein. And even those who stayed home looked at their home with quizzical eyes. Faulkner's South bore little resemblance to Stephen Foster's.

With this kind of self-confidence, cultures become cosmopolitan. They're happy to both export and import literature. They're nourished by, rather than afraid of, foreign influence. Not to be political, but within our still self-confident culture, buzz-phrases like "American Exceptionalism" and "English Only" seem mostly bandied about by politicians who make a point of distancing themselves from the "elite establishment." Their "culture protectiveness" is actually counter-cultural, more a reaction to, than a conservation of, a vibrant expansive culture.

English is one of a handful of world languages. "Smaller" languages spoken by a relatively small number of people tend to be more naturally protective of their identities, which for good reason they perceive to be at risk. There's often a tendency to insist that their "national treasures," their "best loved poems," are untranslatable. For their more protective



LETTERS: SUMMER 1926  
by Boris Pasternak, Marina  
Tsvetayeva, Rainer Maria Rilke.  
Edited by Yevgeny Pasternak,  
Yelena Pasternak & Konstantin  
M. Azadovsky. Translated by  
Margaret Wettlin, Walter Arndt  
& Jamey Gambrell. Preface by  
Susan Sontag

A New York Review of Books  
reissue, 2001. Originally  
published in Germany by Insel  
Verlag in 1983, and in English  
translation in 1985 by Harcourt  
Brace Jovanovich.  
ISBN 978-0-940322-71-4

intelligentsia, translation has an aura of insult and colonialism. From this perspective, translation is as much theft as communication. A year or so ago, the ALTALK chat group of the American Literary Translators Association was "visited" by a Vietnamese expatriate who, in a long back and forth thread, expressed extremely hurt feelings about the critical success of John Balaban's translations of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Vietnamese poet Ho Xuan Huong. Nothing could sway her sincerely held sense of violation.

If some native speakers view translation by foreigners as inherently inept, why, as a general rule, can so few native speakers translate poetry *out* of their own

## THE IMPERTINENT DUET

language, no matter how proficient they are in the target language? Is it because appropriation by outsiders is one level of felony, akin, say, to burglary? But handing your own national treasures to foreigners is a kind of treason, an offense that exacts a much higher penalty. Are these some of the dynamics of the Tower of Babel?

And national treasures have a way of escaping. No one is more treasured by Poles than Chopin, who spent most of his life self-exiled in France, and whose excised heart had to be smuggled into occupied Poland for secret burial. But can present day Poles hear anything in Chopin that the descendants of the Prussians, Russians and Austrians who divided up their country in the 18<sup>th</sup> century can't?

## II. EXILE: TSVETAEVA, RILKE, PASTERNAK, 1926

And of course, large dominant cultures and languages have their own unease. If the '50s ushered in a sense of America having arrived, the '20s in Eastern and Western Europe brought a nervous sense of something ominous about to arrive. Yeats' *The Second Coming* was written in 1919:

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

...

And what rough beast, its hour come  
round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Poetry seems often predictive, not in any sagacious sense, but instinctively, like a dog sensing an earthquake long moments before the first tremor is felt. Rilke's *First Duino Elegy* has a lot in common with Eliot's *The Wasteland*—the theme of facing existential issues without being able to access the traditional comforts that lie in ruins; a poem that seems written from a crack in the order of things. But while *The Wasteland* was published in the aftermath of WWI, the *Elegy* dates from 1912. Rilke almost eerily foreshad-

ows that cataclysm, weighing and discarding one explanation after another for his vague angst until finally settling on a central image: "those dead youths...taken before their time." Their "very names tossed aside like broken toys." These were images triggered by old inscriptions in a church in Italy, not a conscious prediction. But within two years the images became suddenly contemporary.

A timeline may be helpful in relating to the correspondents of *Summer, 1926*. Susan Sontag, in her preface to the new edition lists some happenings of that

summer, among them: Gertrude Ederle swam the English Channel. Rudolph Valentino died in a New York hospital. The architect Antonio Gaudi was hit by a trolley in Seville and died in the street.

Among the books published that year: Hart Crane's *White Buildings*, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, D.H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent*, T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and volume two of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Although not mentioned by Sontag, Isaac Babel's seminal short story collection, *Red Cavalry*



*And We Wish*

Kevin Yuen Kit Lo

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appeared in Russia in 1926.

Preceding 1926, (and gleaned from the internet) the early '20s saw:

In 1920, The League of Nations. Voting rights for women and Prohibition in the U.S. The first commercial radio broadcast. And, in Russia, after several years of brutal civil war, the White army finally evacuated The Crimea.

In 1921, hyperinflation broke out in Germany, and the lie detector was invented. Peasant unrest swept Russia, but was finally suppressed by the Bolsheviks who also suppressed new demands for free elections.

In 1922, insulin was discovered, Ataturk founded modern Turkey, Michael Collins was killed in Ireland, and Mussolini marched on Rome.

In 1923, Hitler was jailed after the Beer Hall Putsch, and talking movies first appeared.

In 1924, J. Edgar Hoover was appointed to head the FBI. In Russia, Vladimir Lenin died. Trotsky's bid to succeed him was defeated and Stalin began to consolidate power. The Soviet Union was formally recognized by Britain. Mussolini's new government also exchanged diplomats with the USSR.

1925 brought the Scopes Monkey Trial in America. In Germany, the ambitious Nazi party formed its own special force, the SS. In Russia, the old Bolshevik Politburo leaders Kamenev and Zinoviev broke with Stalin; they would later be shot. Stalin's errant daughter Svetlana was born. She defected to the West in 1967 and wrote a memoir that sold well, but lived an always troubled life.

In 1926, Rilke is 51 and living in Switzerland. He's being treated in a sanatorium for leukemia. He's dying, but in accordance with his wishes and consistent with medical custom at the time, is spared the full details of his prognosis. Born of German-speaking parents in Prague, in the then Austrian Empire, Rilke has been more or less an alienated wanderer most of his life. He lost most of his possessions when he had to move from Paris at the onset of WWI. Returning to Austria, he was drafted. After undergoing the trauma

of basic training, he was assigned to clerical duties in the War Archive. After the war, he lived in Munich for a time. But the threatening political climate (in which he found himself stateless after the breakup of the Austrian Empire) led him to settle in Switzerland in 1919, where he ultimately managed to acquire first Czech, then Swiss citizenship. Despite secure recognition as a poet he remains dependent on the informal patronage of cultivated friends. This is, in part, due to the plummet in value of the German mark in which most of his royalties are paid.

In 1926, Marina Tsvetaeva is 34 and living with her husband and two children in France. She's still only a modestly known poet. Maybe it's more helpful to consider her, not just in context of her life until then, but of a future she, thankfully, couldn't foresee. To quote the summary first paragraph of her lengthy Wikipedia entry:

Marina Ivanovna Tsvetaeva (8 October, 1892–31 August, 1941) was a Russian and Soviet poet. Her work is considered among some of the greatest in twentieth century Russian literature. She lived through and wrote of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Moscow famine that followed it. In an attempt to save her daughter Irina from starvation, she placed her in a state orphanage in 1919, where she died of hunger. As an anti-Bolshevik supporter of Imperialism, Tsvetaeva was exiled in 1922, living with her family in increasing poverty in Paris, Berlin and Prague before returning to Moscow in 1939. Shunned and suspect, Tsvetaeva's isolation was compounded. Both her husband Sergey Efron and her daughter Ariadna Efron (Alya) were arrested for espionage in 1941; Alya served over eight years in prison and her husband was executed. Without means of support and in deep isolation, Tsvetaeva committed suicide in 1941. As a lyrical poet, her passion and daring linguistic experimentation mark her as a striking chronicler of her times and the depths of the human condition.

Something of Marina's state of mind in 1926 might be gleaned from her answers to a questionnaire forwarded by



Marina Tsvetaev, via Wikimedia

Pasternak from the Soviet "Section of Revolutionary Literature," which was compiling a bibliography of contemporary Russian writers. She noted that her father was a... "son of a priest... a philologist working in European languages... Professor at Kiev University, then at Moscow University... Died in... 1913.... He left all he had (not much because he was always helping others) to the public school in... the village where he was born..." Her mother: "of aristocratic Polish blood, a pupil of Rubenstein, a woman of rare musical talent. Died early. My poetic talent comes from her..." One of the questions asked for her "First Encounter with Revolution." Her answer: "in 1902, 1903 (emigre); second in 1905, 1906, Yalta...); no third encounter." 1917 is conspicuously absent.

On her history as a poet:

I have been writing poetry since age 6, publishing since 16. Have written poems in French and German... I know no literary influences, only human influences.

Her favorite contemporary writers were:

Rilke, Romain Rolland, Pasternak... I have never printed in rabid rightist publications, because of their low cultural level... Never have and never will belong to any school of poetry or politics. In Moscow I belonged (for purely material



## THE IMPERTINENT DUET

reasons) to the Poetry Section of the Writers Union.

...

Things I hold most dear: music, nature, poetry, solitude. Completely indifferent to public opinion... Feel possessive only toward my children and my notebooks... Would inscribe on the finished product: "Ne daigne" (Never condescend). Life is a railroad station; soon I will set out—for where? I will not say.

In 1926, Boris Pasternak was 36 and

living in Moscow with his wife and young son. He was in love with Marina Tsvetaeva—or maybe more accurately in love with the idea of Marina. He hadn't seen her for four years and knew her only briefly then. Their "affair" has been styled an "affair of letters" and no one really knows if it had ever been physical. But that summer they're talking about connecting and/or not connecting with more than just letters. From Boris to Marina, May 5, 1926:

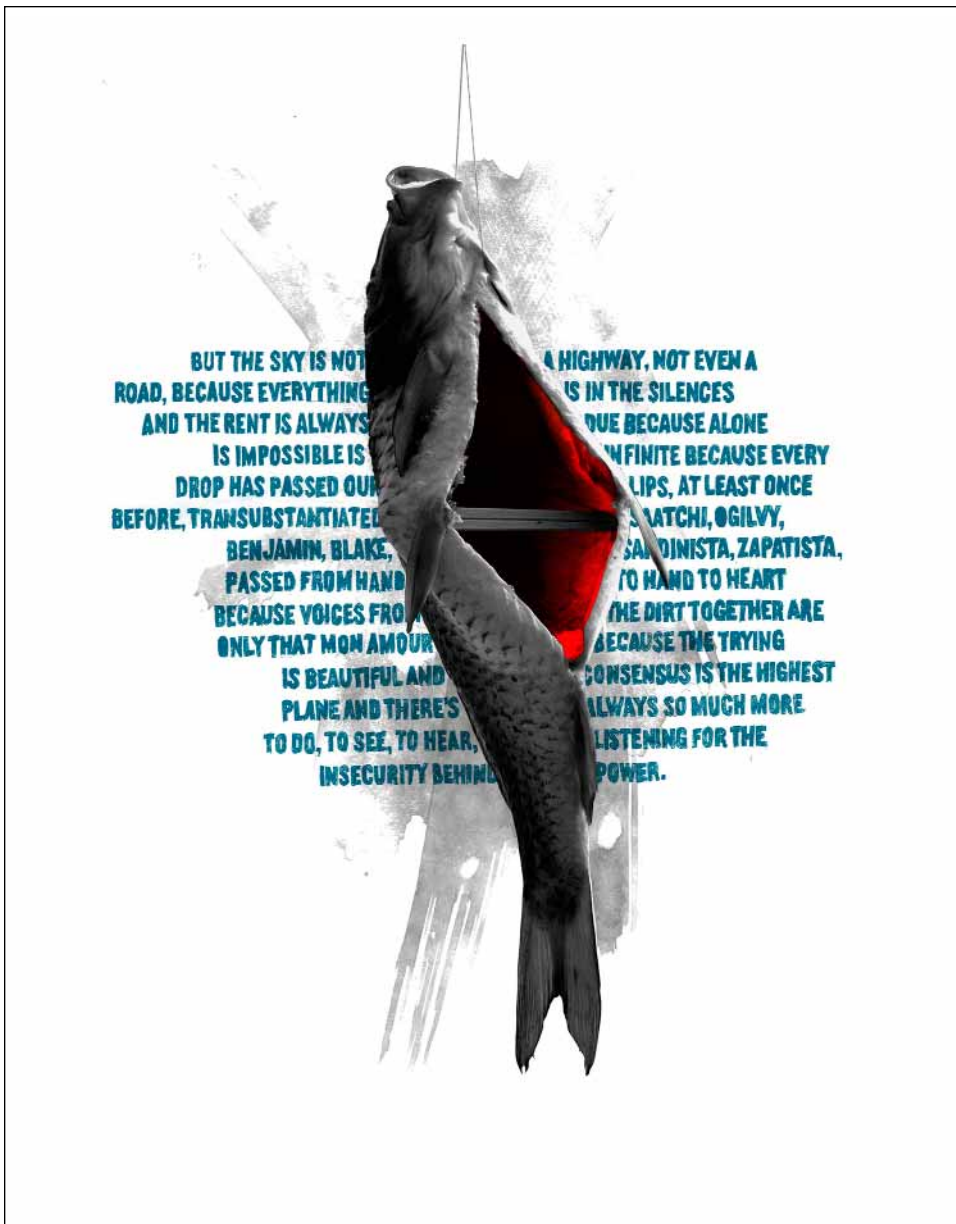
...when I received your chilling letter from Paris...found that I would not see you in St. Gilles. I knew it before the letter arrived. The coldness of the letter mitigated the harshness of the fact. And yet, put me on ice as you will, the fact is unendurable. Forgive the excesses I allowed myself then. I should have shown restraint. I should have kept everything to myself as a vivifying secret until the day we met. Until then, I could and should have hidden from you a love that can never die, for you are my only legitimate heaven and wife... Whenever I murmur your name, Marina, little shivers run up and down my spine from the pain of it...

Pasternak, unlike the other two, wasn't an exile, but belonged to a class that had been exiled from relevance by the government of the Proletariat. His parents and sister were emigrants, members of the elite intelligentsia who voluntarily escaped the new Russia. His father, a well-known portrait painter, his mother a skilled concert pianist, lived now in Berlin. But Boris seemed to navigate the revolution safely enough, a member of the writers union, making his living by translating German, Georgian, and English poetry, and later, notably, Shakespeare. Educated in Germany, he was at home in a tradition of Russian cosmopolitanism that dated back to Catherine the Great. But he was living in a culture that, while espousing revolutionary modernity, was led by an increasingly suspicious and isolated clique.

Despite Marina's last minute demurral at their only half-planned, fantasized tryst, her letters continue to give Boris reason to feel his advances remained welcome. On May 23, perhaps feeling expansively liberated by the last minute cancellation, she writes to Boris from the coastal village of St. Gilles:

Alya has gone to the fair. Mursik [her son] is asleep. The one who is not asleep is not at the fair, the one who is not at the fair is asleep. I alone am not at the fair or asleep. (Loneliness deepened by being a loner. Everyone else must be asleep for me to feel I am not asleep.)

Boris this is not a real letter. The real ones are never committed to paper.



*Fish*

Kevin Yuen Kit Lo

## THE IMPERTINENT DUET

Today, for instance, while pushing Mursik's carriage along an unfamiliar road—roads turning here, turning there...I talked to you all the time. Talked to you Boris, loved it, breathed deeply, easily... I took your head in both of my hands and turned it toward me... It was a gray day, besides (the color of sleep) and no wind. But I felt Pentecost in the foreign air...

Several pages along these lines follow, and then an interjection:

But there's one thing Boris, I don't like the sea. Can't bear it. A vast expanse and nothing to walk on—that's one thing. In constant motion and I can only watch it... And the sea at night—cold, terrifying, invisible, unloving, filled with itself... As I would have hated Jehovah for instance, as I hate any great power. The sea is a dictatorship, Boris...

She rambles on for another page or so, then ends:

Oh Boris, Boris, lick my wound. And tell me why. Show me that all is as it should be. No, don't lick it, cauterize it... I do love you. The fair, the donkey carts, Rilke—everything, everything is within you, within your enormous river (not ocean, I won't say ocean). I so long for you, it is as if I had seen you only yesterday.

### III. ASKING RILKE'S BLESSING

In Boris and Marina's back-and-forth about meeting, the question arose, "well where would we go?" The postulated answer was that the epistolary lovers would elope to visit Rilke. Why Rilke? What did Rilke have to do with Boris and Marina?

The answer begins in 1925 when Rilke's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday was noted in the press and congratulatory letters began to arrive. One of them was from Leonid Pasternak, Boris' father. Leonid remembered Rilke from his visits to Russia prior to the turn of the century. Rilke was barely into his twenties then, an as yet unformed, if ambitious, writer; the son of

a railway clerk with only vague notions of how he'd survive. He'd been taken in hand by a 36-year-old sophisticate, Lou Andreas-Salome, a wealthy married novelist, psychologist and essayist whose friendships included Nietzsche and Freud. Her marriage was platonic, but her tutelage of the fledgling Rilke was sexual as well as aesthetic and literary.

Lou had been raised in Russia. Her father, although German, was a general in Russian service. She was as well connected in Russian as in Austrian and German circles and when she took her pup of a poet to Russia, the trip included a visit to Tolstoy arranged by Leonid Pasternak, who was illustrating one of Tolstoy's novels for serial publication.

Leonid's letter to Rilke invoked an understandable nostalgia in someone who'd just turned 50, and who may also have instinctively sensed his health, as well as his youth, slipping away. He replied immediately with a warm, long letter.

Leonid, the proud father, had also mentioned his "elder son, Boris...a young poet, already acclaimed in Russia. He is your most ardent admirer...who, I may even say, calls himself your pupil..." And in a postscript to his reply to Leonid, Rilke remembers:

Just now, in its winter issue, the very beautiful, important Paris periodical *Commerce*, edited by Paul Valery...has published very impressive poems by Boris Pasternak in a French version...

So one thing led to another: Leonid quoted Rilke's comments to Boris. Boris composed a long, laudatory letter to Rilke and asked his father to forward it. And, because Switzerland and the USSR had severed diplomatic relations, Boris Pasternak asked that if Rilke replied, he do so through Marina Tsvetaeva, "a born poet" who "lives as an emigrant in Paris."

### IV: AN ABRIDGMENT AND CHANGE OF DIRECTION

This seems as good a point as any to, all



Boris Pasternak, via Wikimedia

too briefly, summarize the exchange of letters and move back toward a theme I've been circling.

Rilke did reply to Boris Pasternak's letter with a short, warm, collegial note. Some 34 years later, when Pasternak died, this letter was found, marked "most precious," in a leather wallet he always carried in his coat pocket, somewhat like a relic in scapular. Along with the letter, was a second sheet on which Marina had copied an excerpt from Rilke's letter to her describing his reaction to Boris' letter:

I am so shaken by the fullness and power of his message to me that I cannot say more today, but would you send the enclosed...to our friend in Moscow for me. As a greeting?

Despite Pasternak's early successes, it seemed Rilke's letter marked a turning point of self-acceptance and validation as poet. Perversely, moved out of all proportion, he seemed unable to bring himself to reply.

Marina and Boris continued their correspondence with no interruption. But an equally—if not more—lively correspondence sprang up between Marina and Rilke.

### V. ALL POEMS ARE TRANSLATIONS...

Why has it taken me all these pages to get to the esoteric (or maybe not so strange)

## THE IMPERTINENT DUET

concept I wanted to talk about? I think because Tsvetaeva says what I want to say much better than I can, and with much more authority. And the better you get to know her, the better she says it—she seems to say it in the context of her whole being. In June, Rilke sent her a copy of his just released *Vergers*, a volume of poems he'd written in French. He vaguely wondered whether he should be writing poetry in a non-native language. Marina's reply was immediate and ringing:

Dear Rainer: Goethe says somewhere that one cannot achieve anything of significance in a foreign language—and that has always rung false to me... Writing poetry is in itself translating from the mother tongue into another, whether French or German should make no difference. No language is the mother tongue. Writing poetry is rewriting it. That's why I am puzzled when people talk of French or Russian, etc., poets. A poet may write in French; he cannot be a French poet. That's ludicrous

I am not a Russian poet and am always astonished to be taken for one and looked upon in this light. The reason one becomes a poet (if it were even possible to "become" one, if one "were" not one before all else!) is to avoid being French, Russian, etc, in order to be everything...Orpheus bursts nationality...

This passage, from a self-exiled White Russian in Paris, might well serve as the *Internationale* of poetic translators. Poets of the world, unite! Translators, lose your chains. The idea that a poem isn't just a function of the language in which it appears, but of some underlying, pre-Babel, mother tongue—elevates poetry to an almost mystical evocation.

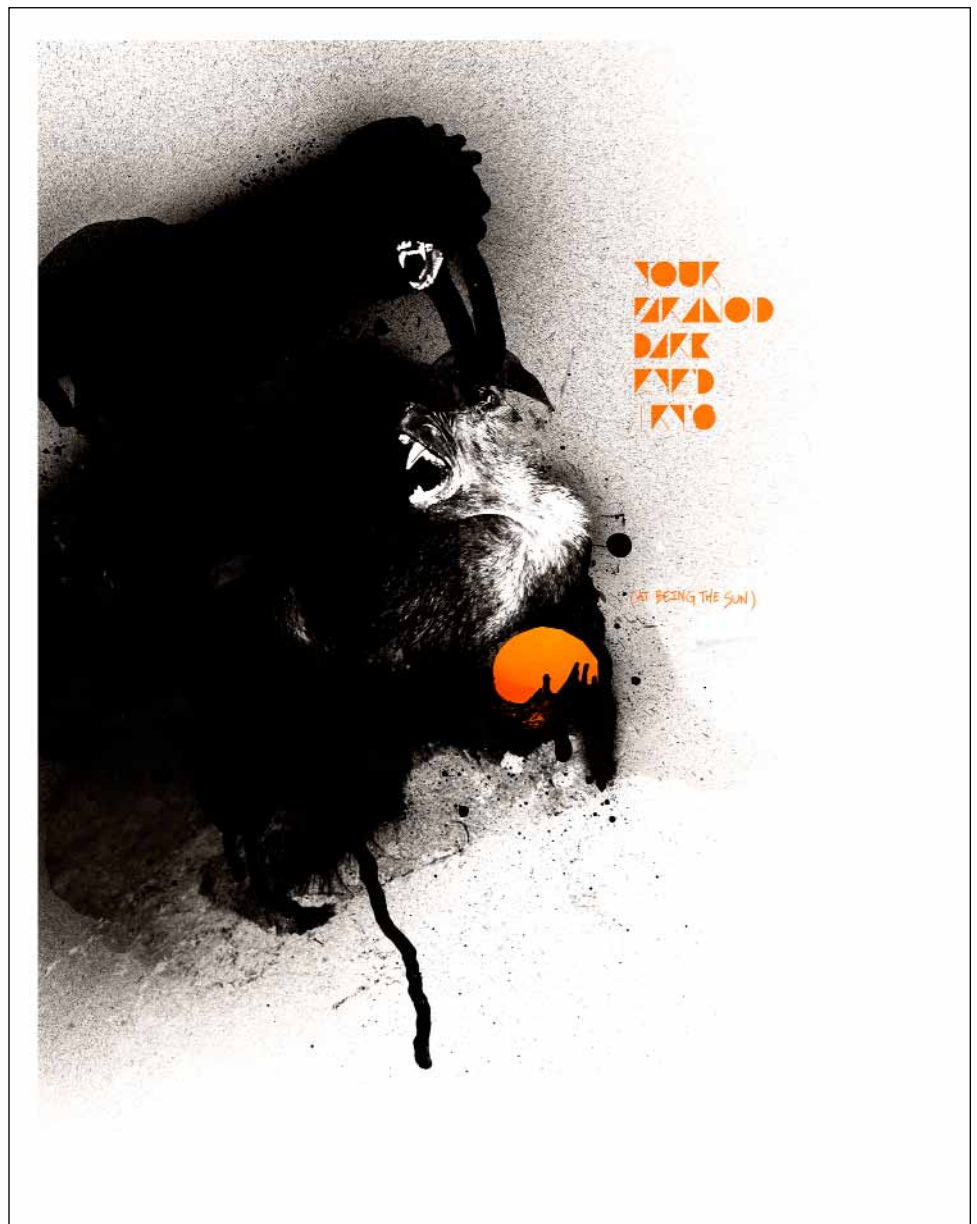
It also evokes a quasi-mystical observation found in various forms and similes across a broad range of commentators on literary translation. Which might be boiled down to the working translator's instinctive sense (or illusion) that apart from: a) the source poem and, b) the poem as transcribed in a new language; there's yet a third poem, an ur-text, as it were, that both the original and transcribed poems draw from.

An implication is that authentic

poems, (as well as all great literature but particularly poems), have a life of their own that not only outlives their authors—but may actually *precede* the author. Not all poems: There are verses like Joyce Kilmer's *Trees*, "made by fools like me," that entertain a generation, then pass away. But then there are those, albeit rare, works of another dimension, whose hallmark is a certain inevitability. Poems that *needed* to occur and, once brought to life, live and migrate generations, languages and cultures in ways not dissimilar from

music.

Obviously, except at the extremes, it's a continuum; there aren't just two classes of poems, rather a matter of degree. But, if you buy into this theory, the translator's need is to convey as much of that inevitability as possible. One metaphor for that inevitability is a culture-transcendent "mother tongue" in which the work somehow already exists: the antithesis of a "national poetry." A sense that the great stream of poetry and literature is an inaudible tongue that lurks in every



*Paranoid*

Kevin Yuen Kit Lo

## THE IMPERTINENT DUET

language, a tongue that's indifferent to whatever language it appropriates as a voice.

Or maybe another way to put it: We live in language and language lives in us, like the air we breathe, but the oxygen comes from the mother tongue. Of course, this is as old as Plato, but Marina Tsvetaeva isn't a philosopher; just a practicing poet making a matter of fact collegial observation to another poet.

### VI: RAINER AND MARINA

Tsvetaeva takes somewhat different tones when writing to Rilke and Pasternak about their work. She's effusive about Boris in writing to Rilke, has no problem stating categorically that Pasternak is the greatest living Russian poet. But when writing to Boris about poetry—hers as well as his—she's practical, editorial, encouraging but not idolizing. They may love each other's poetry, but when Boris and Marina talk about poetry they do so as helpful friends, not stormy lovers.

It soon becomes another story between Marina and Rainer: "Do you know how I fare with your poems? ... Lightning on lightning...that's how it takes me as I read you." And earlier in the same May 12 letter:

God. You alone have said something new to God. You are the explicit John-Jesus relationship... Yet—different—you are the Father's favorite, not the Son's...

Beyond her passion for Rilke's poetry, she quickly moves to a passion for something more—urgently pressing Rilke to meet her, in France or wherever. In an August 2<sup>nd</sup> letter:

Rainer, dusk is falling. I love you. A train is howling. Trains are wolves, wolves are Russia. No train—all Russia is howling for you. Rainer, don't be angry with me; angry or not, tonight I'm sleeping with you...

And Rainer, rising from his sick bed like Lazarus, warmly responds. Effusive about Marina's poetry, he writes an *Elegy for*

*Marina*, as a sequel to his nine *Duino Elegies* and styles it the tenth *Elegy*. You wonder if he's probably wondering whether this wild Russian might be a gift sent to cure the implacable pains now assailing him with evocations of his powerful first Russian love.

On August 14<sup>th</sup>, Marina writes:

Rainer, this winter we must get together...somewhere you have never been. In a tiny little town, Rainer; for as briefly as you like... Or in the autumn, Rainer. Or early in the next year. Say yes...

Rainer quickly replies: "Yes, and yes and yes Marina, all yeses to what you want and are, together as large as YES to life itself..." But he demurs about when, talks vaguely about "hauling myself in...out of the depths." She writes back, a long, rambling letter on August 22, that opens:

Rainer, just always say yes to what I want—it won't turn out so badly, after all. Rainer, if I say to you that I am your Russia...

And closes with: "I take you in my arms."

Rilke never replies—just silence. His illness has been kept quiet. Marina has no idea what depths he's in. Finally, on November 7<sup>th</sup>, using the occasion of informing him of a change of address, she sends a postcard: "Dear Rainer, this is where I live—I wonder if you still love me? Marina."

On December 31<sup>st</sup>, Marina writes to Pasternak: "Boris, Rainer Maria Rilke has died. I don't know the date—three days ago..."

### VII: THE BIRDS ON THE CEILING AND... LONDON

Her New Year's Eve letter continues: "We had planned to meet. He didn't answer my answer [to his last letter]. Then I wrote him a single line from Bellevue..." Marina ends by asking: "Will we ever see each other? Happy New Era, Boris! His Era!"

On New Year's Day she writes again,

clarifying that Rilke died on the 30<sup>th</sup>. With the sad realization that "Boris, we will never go and see Rilke. The place doesn't exist anymore."

But noting that she'd dreamed of an ocean liner and a train, she proposes a new destination: "Build your plans on London—on London. I tell you, I have long believed in London." She follows this with a cryptic sentence that's always evoked a totally unreasoned sense in me that before she left Russia four years earlier; that yes, maybe Marina and Boris were, at least once, lovers. "Remember the birds on the ceiling and the blizzards on the other side of the Moscow river?"

Both of them seemed to make a point of telling other correspondents that they'd met only a few times, and were unimpressed with each other. But they were both married, both living in treacherous social situations. What makes more human sense—that they found they were soul mates only after writing letters to each other? And how did this correspondence spring up between two people so unimpressed with each other?

Or perhaps their correspondence had a more tangible seed. Is it so unlikely that in a metropolis of everything suddenly turned upside down, two budding poets with such similar backgrounds recognized each other? And maybe, in some discreet blue hour, quietly consummated a spontaneous affection. Then, mused in the afterglow about escape.

Her letter goes on to beckon and imagine:

Never before have I sent for you, now the time has come. We will be alone in that enormous London. Your town and mine. We will go to the Zoo. And to the Tower... In front of the Tower, there is a steep little square, quite empty, only a single cat underneath a bench. We will sit there...

A totally impractical fantasy that she probably thought better of as soon as she posted the letter? It never happened, but that whim of a dream might have been her only chance to save her life.

## THE IMPERTINENT DUET

## VIII: NATIONAL TREASURES

*The Choice*

*The intellect of man is forced to choose  
perfection of the life, or of the work.  
And if it take the second must refuse  
a heavenly mansion, raging in the dark...*  
—W.B. Yeats

All three of the *Summer, 1926* correspondents were poets whose ambition was for “perfection of the work,” rather than “perfection of the life.” It’s too early to see how posterity will eventually value them, but their work has certainly survived several generations and their own century. But are they “national treasures,” poets who live at the heart of their cultures, resistant to export and translation? Well, how did their nations treat them?

Rainer: If there’s anything merciful to be said about Rilke’s early, painful death, it’s that he didn’t have to witness the events of the ’30s and ’40s. Clerking in the Austrian war office during WWI, he famously called himself a “witness to the world’s disgrace.” His last poems, *The Duino Elegies* and *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, might be characterized by an almost excruciating openness to the angst of the still emergent century. Would there have been anything left to respond to Hitler? And for the Third Reich, Rilke was definitely not a treasure, but vilified as so decadent and un-German that he even wrote in French.

Of course, Rilke’s German reputation has been rehabilitated, but his real reputation has become international. He may be the single most translated foreign language poet in English, with scores of versions that still proliferate. Nuances may be lost and translations vary, but not being German is no more an impediment to being moved by Rilke than it is to enjoying Beethoven.

Boris, the one who stayed home, stayed quiet, survived, and engrossed himself in translating Shakespeare. His poetry had, and has, a high reputation in Russia, but, by most accounts, for its aesthetic brilliance—rather than cultural

force. This may have helped him escape the fate of so many contemporaries sent to the camps. Or, who—like Mayakovsky, Esenin, Yashvili, Fadayev...and on and on—committed suicide. In his 1959 memoir, *I Remember*, he talks about them and says: “Let us begin with the most important. We have no idea of the mental agony that precedes suicide...” Then he dissects the psychological process he imagines must precede suicide, the stripping away of everything that constitutes self:

...one turns away from one’s past...declares oneself a bankrupt, and one’s memories are nonexistent... In the end, perhaps, one kills oneself not out of loyalty to the decision one has made, but because one no longer can endure the agony that does not seem to belong to anyone in particular...

In that segment of *I Remember*, Pasternak conjures the final, suicidal states of mind of a litany of literary friends, concluding, inevitably, with Marina Tsvetaeva:

Marina...all her life, shielded herself by her work against...everyday existence. When it seemed to her that it was an inadmissible luxury and that for the sake of her son she must for a time sacrifice her all-absorbing passion, she cast a sober look around...saw the chaos that had not filtered through her creative work, immovable, stagnant, monstrous, and recoiled in panic. Not knowing how to protect herself from that horror, she hurriedly hid herself in death, putting her head into a noose as under a pillow.

*I Remember* also includes a section on *Translating Shakespeare* and a discussion of *Hamlet*, about which Pasternak, as its translator has a personal take:

Hamlet is not a drama of weakness, but of duty and self-denial... What is important is that chance has allotted Hamlet the role of judge of his own time and servant of the future. Hamlet is the drama of a high destiny...a heroic task.

It’s hard not to view *Dr. Zhivago* in context of that quote. In 1948, after

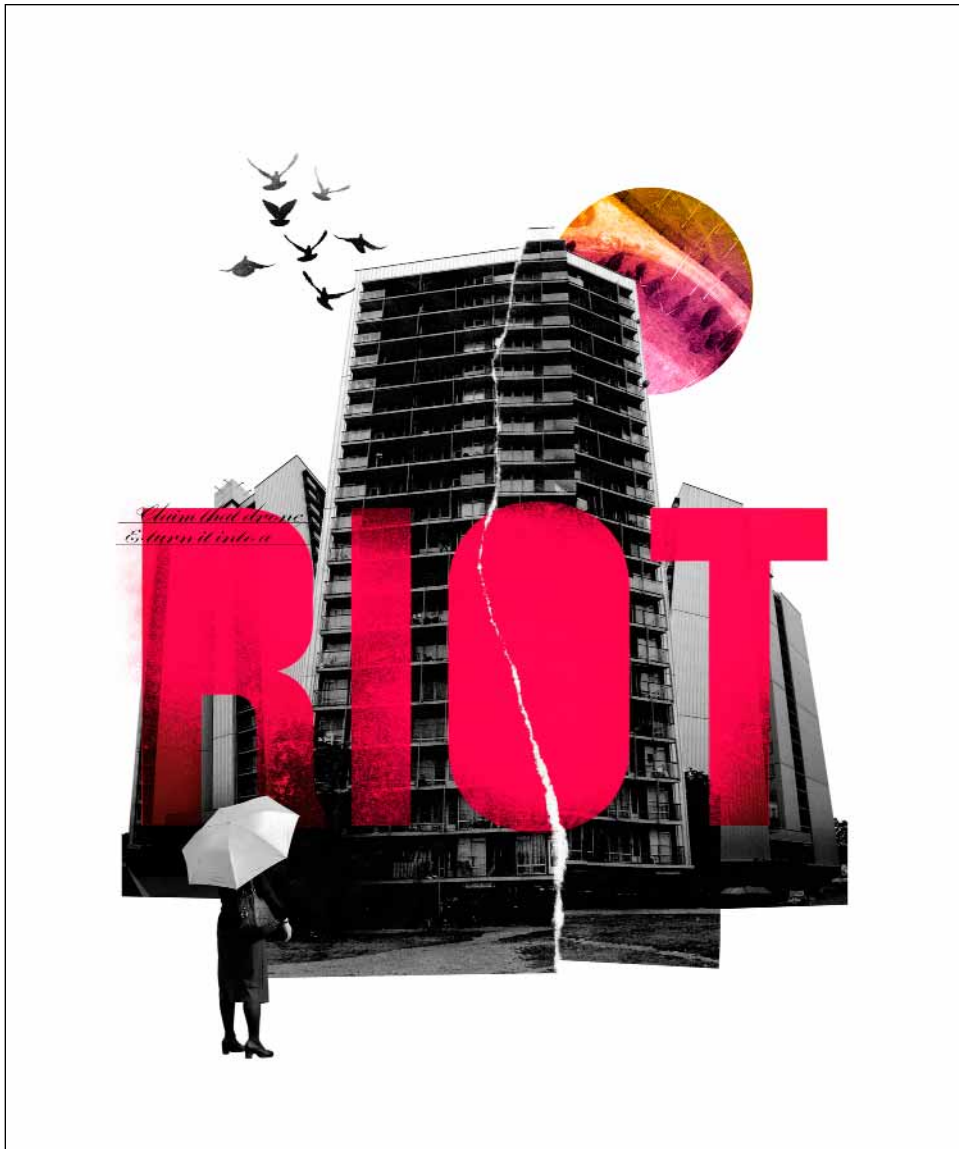
much hesitation, Pasternak began a novel: a poet’s novel, a story told in almost cinematic images. A novel with a poet protagonist that seems to repeatedly return to the well of poetry and a deep spring of musicality. All the while dealing painfully and openly with the era of Pasternak’s youth, a generation in which revolutionary pride segued into national horror.

Completed in 1956, *Dr. Zhivago* won the 1958 Nobel Prize, but only in translation. The manuscript had to be smuggled out of the country and didn’t appear in Russia until 1988. With serendipitous help from the lush David Lean movie, *balalaikas* and Julie Christie, *Dr. Zhivago* became an overnight international treasure, while virtually unread in Russian.

Marina’s work was much admired among Russian poets during her lifetime, but otherwise ignored or criticized in both Soviet and emigré circles. The house in which she hanged herself is now a museum and a Google browse of Russian YouTube’s will find several of her poems hauntingly set to music. But her poetry didn’t become popular until it was republished in the 1960s. As with Rilke, being in the public domain has been helpful in engendering translations and her poems seem more accessible and more successfully translated in English than Pasternak’s denser Russian.

Pasternak seems always to have carried a guilty conscience about not warning Tsvetaeva away when she asked, in 1939, what might happen if the family returned to Russia. But what could he have said? Their correspondence was as likely as not to be read by the authorities. And what choices did Marina and her family have? Her husband, who left Russia as a White officer, had become an NKVD spy and reputed political assassin. He was also a Jew. Would they have fared any better in German occupied Paris than in their homeland? Rather than a national treasure, Marina seemed closer to the international flotsam and jetsam of Europe’s pause between wars. And of course we have her own words: “I am not a Russian poet... I know no literary influences, only human influences... Life is a railroad station...”

THE IMPERTINENT DUET



Riot

Kevin Yuen Kit Lo

IX. CODA: A DIFFERENT BABEL

On September 22, 2010, the New York Times published an obituary for “Antonina Pirozhkova, Engineer and Widow of Isaac Babel.” Isaac Babel, for those not already familiar with him, was a Russian writer often compared to the young Hemingway. His *Red Cavalry*, short stories in the form of reporter’s dispatches from a Cossack regiment during the Russian Civil War, rivals Goya’s etchings in its matter of fact depiction of banal brutality. The stories have

the added edge of Babel being a Jew riding with the Cossacks.

Ms. Pirozhkova was actually Babel’s common law wife. His official wife lived in Paris with their daughter. Pirozhkova was 23, Babel, 38, when they met in 1932. Antonina also gave birth to a daughter, Lidiya.

Babel was a highly successful writer until his arrest in 1939. Possibly, his realism went places Socialist Realism no longer should. Or his name was named in interrogation by some other unfortunate. Awakened in the middle of the night by

the NKVD, Antonina was forced to lead them to Babel, and then allowed to ride with him to headquarters. When they arrived, they kissed. Babel said, “someday we’ll see each other,” then walked through the prison door without looking back. He was routinely beaten, interrogated, and then shot in early 1940. Antonina was never advised of his fate. The NKVD told her to forget about Babel and “regulate your life.”

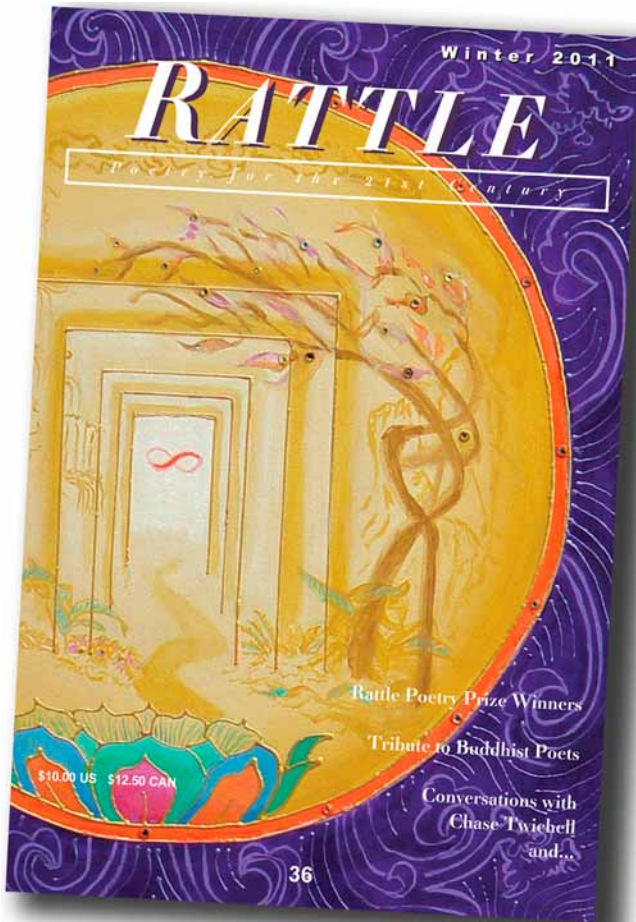
Antonina Nioklaevna Pirozhkova was an acclaimed Soviet engineer who rose to become chief designer of the Moscow subway system. But she also spent most of her life trying to find what happened to Isaac Babel and to rehabilitate his work and reputation in Russia. (His international reputation in translation never lapsed.) In 1954, during the Khrushchev thaw, she finally succeeded.

She continued her scientific career, teaching at the Moscow Institute of Transportation Engineers until retiring and, later, moving to the United States in 1996 with her daughter to be with her grandchildren who had previously emigrated. All the while she remained devoted to the memory of Isaac Babel and the dissemination of his papers. She was able to publish his diaries, in translation, at Yale in 1995. Her memoir of life with Babel was also published by an American press in 1996.

Antonina Pirozhkova died in Florida at the age of 101. Reading her obituary, I found myself imagining her schmoozing at a card table in some sunny retirement home, where someone or other would inevitably comment, “It’s a small world.”



ART BECK is San Francisco poet and translator, and a frequent contributor to Rattle e-issue. Those essays are collected online at <[www.rattle.com/artbeck.htm](http://www.rattle.com/artbeck.htm)>. Beck’s translation of the complete poems of Luxorius, a Roman poet whose 90 extant poems were literally lost for a thousand years, is scheduled for publication this year by Otis College Seismicity Editions.



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## TRIBUTE TO BUDDHIST POETS

This winter's issue of *RATTLE* highlights the work of 30 contemporary Buddhist poets. As Dick Allen writes in his introduction, Buddhism "is not a glimpse or gaze but an immersion. There's no glass, no other side." These poets don't write about Buddhism, so much as they seek to live it—"my small boat is no one on this water," writes Lola Haskins. All of their poems are full of compassion and mindfulness, informed by years of studying human experience from this unique perspective, which has much to offer Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike.

*RATTLE* #36 also features an open section of 33 poets, and the 15 finalists for the 2011 Rattle Poetry Prize—with the \$5,000 winner to be chosen for the first time by popular vote. In the conversations section Alan Fox's speaks with M.L. Liebler and Buddhist poet Chase Twichell.

### TRIBUTE TO BUDDHIST POETS

Dick Allen • Li Bai • Pam Herbert Barger • Karen Benke  
John Brehm • Toni Cameron • Louisa Diodato  
Teresa Chuc Dowell • Jeffrey Franklin • Robert Funge • Gary Gach  
Dan Gerber • Sam Hamill • Gail Hanlon • Lola Haskins  
Donna Henderson • Yang Jian • Bo Juyi • Alison Lutermaan  
Paul Pedroza • Peg Quinn • Diana M. Raab • Richard Schiffman  
Jinen Jason Shulman • Sarah Pemberton Strong • Arne Swanmell  
Robert Tremmel • Tony Trigilio • Chase Twichell • Jack Vian

### RATTLE POETRY PRIZE FINALISTS

Pia Aliperti • Tony Barnstone • Kim Dower • Courtney Kampa • M  
Andrew Nurkin • Charlotte Pence • Laura Read • Hayden Saunier  
Diane Seuss • Jeff Vande Zande • Craig van Rooyen • Bryan Walpert  
Anna Lowe Weber • Maya Jewell Zeller

### POETRY

Anonymous • Kathleen Balma • Grace Bauer • Michael Bazzett  
Jill Bergkamp • Destiny Birdsong • Jan Bottiglieri • Claudia Cortese  
Steven Coughlin • Hope Coulter • Sally Ehrman • Brian Fitzpatrick  
Alan Fox • Sonia Greenfield • Paul Hlava • Donald Illich  
Sean Karns • Quincy R. Lehr • M.L. Liebler • Joanne Lowery  
Charles Manis • Bruce McBirney • Wendy Oleson • Jason Olsen  
John O'Reilly • Jack Powers • Murray Silverstein • Karen Skolfield  
Virginia Slachman • Bruce Snider • Ephraim Scott Sommers  
Lianne Spidel • Jeanann Verlee

### ARTWORK

Toni Cameron

### CONVERSATIONS

M.L. Liebler  
Chase Twichell

from *RATTLE* #36, WINTER 2011

Poetry

*John O'Reilly*

### THE BITTERN AT ABBOTT'S LAGOON

the walk to the sea belongs to the sea  
we are drawn on as waves are  
the late light is sidelong  
a glance at a party  
passed from one guest to the next

few have binoculars out for the bittern  
on the other side of the lagoon  
the walk pauses where those  
who've been shown it show it to others  
like a face in a tortilla

for some time we forget about the ocean  
all of us eyeing this cryptic bird  
which deems itself invisible  
as we deem ourselves while exposed

soon darkness will sidle down  
brought to the hem of the Pacific  
that the bittern might recede  
into invisibility amid the reeds  
there upon its hunting ground  
a shy and terrible god like ours

*Bruce Snider*

### CRUISING THE RESTSTOP ON ROUTE 9

From where you stand you can feel  
the back road empty into the county,  
an endless need. Moths flicker  
at the bulb's lit nerve, coupling

and uncoupling over greasy linoleum.  
You lean against the sink, its faucet  
dripping, trying to form a word, night  
stalled between hand and zipper.

You know a man on his knees  
can read the scored tile, torque of  
his mouth filled with night and the marsh  
fields' dampness. Anything can happen

when the urinal flushes, but tonight  
the trucker won't look up. That's how  
it is sometimes, paper towels clogging  
the drainpipe, water blackened with rust.

Outside, cars deliver strangers  
past orchards where raccoons poach  
rotting plums from low cracked limbs,  
all that sweet flesh waking in the dark.



from *RATTLE* #36, WINTER 2011

*Tribute to Buddhist Poets*

*Dick Allen*

from *THE ZEN MASTER POEMS*

WHAT THE ZEN MASTER TOLD US

A single blind tortoise  
swimming in a vast ocean  
surfaces only once  
every century.

Floating on the vast ocean  
is a single golden yoke.

It is more rare,  
said the Buddha,  
to be reborn human  
than for the tortoise  
to surface with its head  
poking through the hole  
in the golden yoke.

You have this rare time.  
Do not squander your chance  
on the ephemeral.

Practice the dharma  
and, lest you get too serious,  
eat sunflower seeds.

Gaze  
at the waves on the water.

THE ZEN MASTER ON THE RAFT

The trouble with you, said the Zen master,  
to the ardent scholar  
and his ardent disciples,  
is you carry the raft everywhere  
but you've never floated upon it

and if you ever do,  
once you reach the other shore,  
can you leave it behind,

bobbing in the water?

THE ZEN MASTER ON THE RAFT II

perfectly adrift

from RATTLE #36, WINTER 2011

*Tribute to Buddhist Poets*

*Li Bai*  
(701 – 762)

ALONE ON MOUNT JINGTING

The birds have flown up high all together  
One cloud is lazily drifting  
And we never grow tired of watching each other  
sitting here—me, and Mount Jingting

—“made new” by G. G. Gach & C. H. Kwock

*Jeffrey Franklin*

THE EXCITEMENT OF GETTING A ROOM  
WITH A MINIBAR

If you were Gidget or Gigi or Glorianne from Kansas,  
you might kick both feet up behind like a miniature pony,  
sending the pleated skirt too high, squeal and run  
to bounce on the bed with flipped cockroach legs.

But instead you are tired after the happy disaster, the bad  
fantasy, the aging family members and mirror phobia,  
not to mention the failed restaurant. This isn't Daytona  
bike Week, nor your first time in Paris, and you are

all too aware what they charge for those dinky bottles.  
No, you've brought your own fifth, picked up  
at *Dino's Liquor and Car Wash* before you checked in.  
Today was not the day your happy childhood predicted.

You are sad with a sadness only a single room matches.  
This is your reward, this view of curtained windows  
exactly like yours, these industrially sanitized towels,  
this generic solitude... You slip off your shoes

and click on the scrolling menu of tonight's movies:  
a meteor the size of Cleveland, or sadistic murder  
justifies the most thorough revenge ever quenched.  
Things are looking up. You amble over to the minibar,

lift the white fluted paper cap from the cafeteria glass,  
and crack your bottle of *Sky*. For just one moment,  
your heart soars: there, in the plastic bucket,  
still smoking with cold, perfect lozenges of ice.

from RATTLE #36, WINTER 2011

*Tribute to Buddhist Poets*

*Sarah Pemberton Strong*

FISH TANK

My daughter has dropped two slices  
of her plum into the fish tank.  
The black molly, after circling around,

is nibbling at the sticker I neglected  
to remove: *Product of Mexico*.  
I'm on the phone long distance

with my teacher in England,  
who suggests I might begin  
each session of meditation

(Buddhist, from India) with a bit  
of appreciation for my body.  
Not for the cleverness

of my fingers, or the back handspring  
I could turn at the distant  
and limber age of thirteen.

*Consider your organs,*  
he says; *the liver, the kidneys,*  
*the spleen, all doing their work*

*so perfectly together.* Right now  
that work is taking place  
at a kitchen table in Connecticut,

where I'm watching my sweet girl  
with her fish, and drinking tea  
grown in the Yunnan province of China.

A China that is everywhere,  
just as is—my teacher says—compassion.  
And I believe him,

though mostly I forget it,  
just as I forget the factories  
inside me, how they work

throughout the night without pause,  
becoming visible  
only when something goes wrong,

as the glass wall of the fish bowl  
is visible to the fish  
only by the green bloom of algae

across it. Through which  
my daughter's eyes and mine  
now gaze through the water at

her offering, dropped down  
from another world  
that is this world.

from **A CONVERSATION**  
**WITH**  
**CHASE TWICHELL**

by  
 Alan Fox

*Note: The following is excerpted from a 24-page conversation conducted April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

FOX: So why didn't you become an artist instead of a poet?

TWICHELL: Well, I started off as a painter. When I was a kid I was fascinated by painting. Our art teacher got sick in grade school, and so they had to run out and find a quick replacement. They found a guy named George Chaplin who was a grad student at Yale and had probably never been around children in his life and they dumped him on our third grade and said, "Teach them." He was fantastic. He didn't really know what do so he started with Josef Albers' color theory, so we all had a stack of those cards and we would do exercises like, "Choose three colors and put one in the middle and make it come toward you. Now move them around so the one in the middle looks like it's farther away from you." We would just play with color. We didn't know it was sophisticated; we thought it was a game. So I learned a lot from him. He used to climb into the dumpsters at the end of every semester and fish out all the half-used-up tubes of oils and all the canvases the Yale students had painted bad paintings on already. So we had unlimited oil paint and he always gave us a canvas that had already been painted on, and we had to turn it upside down and paint on it, so it was already ruined before we even started, which got rid of all the fear of the blank page. And he moved all the furniture around so that all the desks were facing the wall, so you couldn't get nerv-

ous because of what somebody else was doing. And we just painted. That's all we did. And at the end of the class we'd bring them up to him and he'd make a comment, or not, and that was art class. I loved it. And I got so obsessed with it that by the time I went to boarding school when I was 14, my parents were really worried that I was going to become socially abnormal since I preferred paint to human beings [Fox laughs] and so they conspired with the school to not let me take art, and that's when I started to write poems, for revenge [both laugh]. So really painting was my first love. And I often wish, I always wish, that I had continued to do that. Because now I try—I do paint, in the closet. But I don't have any of that wild freedom and just playfulness that I had as a kid. I've actually been doing finger painting lately.

FOX: Ah.

TWICHELL: Which is really fun. I went out and for \$2.99, I bought the deluxe set [laughs] and painting on wax paper or, what do they call it, that baking paper that's shiny on one side and dull on the other—

FOX: Wax paper or something...

DAVEEN: Baking...

TWICHELL: It's baking paper, I don't know what they call it, but it's really cheap and

from RATTLE #36, WINTER 2011

*Conversations*

it's an endless roll, so you can't screw up too much. I try to write that way as well actually.

FOX: Say more about that.

TWICHELL: Well I think one of the dangers of writing for a long time is that you become more and more conscious of what you're doing, which eventually becomes a kind of reflex of self-consciousness so that you start to write something and you think, "That's no good," and you censor yourself, you pause, and it's very hard to just put the stuff out there and worry about it later. An interesting thing happened to me maybe ten years ago, before people realized that burning trash in your backyard was not ecologically a good thing to do. We all had burn barrels in the back of our yard—we live in the extreme wilderness in upstate New York in the Adirondacks—and we'd burn paper and stuff, because you have to pay for your trash disposal by the pound, so everybody burned everything that could be burned. And I had started a book, it was *The Snow Watcher*, I think, and I had maybe 25 pages, 30 pages, and I sat down one morning and I read it and I thought, "What? This is not the book I want to have written," and so I threw the manuscript in the burn barrel. Of course, I still had it on a floppy drive and I still had it on the computer. So the next thing I did was zap it off the computer. And then the only copy that was left in existence was the CD. And I threw it in. And I had the greatest sense of liberation, like "Phew, I'm free of all that, I'm not attached to it anymore."

FOX: Wow.

TWICHELL: And I was of course afraid that I would wake up the next morning and go, "You idiot, what did you do!"

FOX: Of course.

**TWICHELL:** But in fact I just felt relief. And at that point I started working on the computer instead of longhand. Because I used to keep every draft, in case there might be some gem in there that I'd overlooked, and I'd go back five years later and think, "Oh, I really was a genius, I just didn't know it at the time." [Fox laughs] And basically I go back through that old stuff and that's just what it is, the throw-aways; that's where they should have gone. And so I began to work on the computer, which I'd never done before, and it meant letting go of things all the time, just as part of writing. "I don't like the way this is going, am I going to stick with it?" "Nope, gone." Or just getting to a sticky part in a poem, being able to make the choice between saving it for later, throwing it away, or working it into the poem. And so I have two notebooks. One of them is called "The Compost," and that's where all those little scraps that might develop into something go, and usually that's where they stay, although every once in a while I will be able to use something somewhere or some snippet will turn out to be the seed of another poem. And then there's one called "The Orphanage," which is for polished, perfected bits in poems that look like poems, sound like poems, but are really fake poems. They all go live in the orphanage and I hope someday I can adopt some of them but so far they're all still in there.

**FOX:** That's great.

**TWICHELL:** It's useful. I can kick them out of the poems without feeling anxious about their fate because I can always go rescue them if I want to.

**FOX:** When I write a poem, I look it and say, "This is no good, it's never going to be any good," and just get rid of it.

**TWICHELL:** It's really hard to do that, though.

**FOX:** Yes.

**TWICHELL:** And there's a...I should call it a fantasy, I guess, in our culture—a lot of

people want to believe, especially if you're young, that if you are a poet, anything that comes out of your mouth might be poetry. Or worse, is poetry. [Fox laughs] So everything is holy and must be saved.

**FOX:** Yes. But also, I think we fall into the trap—if I'm a writer and I read poetry, and I'm reading your work, I'm reading your best work in finished form.

**TWICHELL:** That's right.

**FOX:** And then I'm writing something and I say, "Well, that's not nearly as good as what I read"—but it's a first draft! So we tend to compare our own first drafts with published work.

**TWICHELL:** That's absolutely true. A student came up to me yesterday and said, "When you write a draft, how many lines survive in the final draft?" And I said, "You mean, how many lines just came out right the first time? None." "Really?!" "Really."

**FOX:** Well, I think it's important to not censor when you're doing the first draft. Just let it rip.

**TWICHELL:** That's exactly right. That's why I was talking about finger painting. You try to do first drafts that are like finger painting. Just let it go. Worry later about whatever it is.

**FOX:** You used a word which struck a chord in me—"revenge." I try to live by the proverb, "Living well is the best revenge," but when I look in myself sometimes, I want revenge. How does that work for you?

**TWICHELL:** That sort of emotion crosses my mind from time to time, I must admit. [laughs] Actually my study of Zen has taught me a lot and I'm sure your study of insight meditation has taught you something too...

**FOX:** Yes.

**TWICHELL:** Which is that if I can remem-

ber, my little mantra that I say to myself is, "Not two." I and that person who just pissed me off are not two, we are one, and so it's a much more complicated dance then.

**FOX:** Yes, yes.

**TWICHELL:** A much more complicated relationship and kind of internal balance of things, if you can remember that. It's not easy to do it and I usually remember about 30 seconds after I've opened my big mouth and said something I wish I hadn't. It's a natural human feeling I think. The things that enrage me most, about which I would like to take revenge, are ecological matters.

**FOX:** Ah. Say more about that.

**TWICHELL:** Well, we were talking about this a little at lunch, but it seems to me that it's fairly obvious that it's too late for the earth, and that willful ignorance in dealing with it, I mean of human beings, is very, very upsetting to me. Not that I have any brilliant ideas, mind you, about how to fix it all, but I do kind of rage against the stupidity of humanity and the terminal self-destructive blindness that we seem to be in. And I think this is probably the first time in history where—well I suppose in the past—I was going to say, where the very life of the planet itself is threatened, but that's not probably actually true if you think back to various religions which have been apocalyptic, believing in the end of the world or that the sun god is going to come and stab us all to the heart or whatever it is, whatever form it takes. But I've had a lot of trouble dealing with my anger about that. I had the great good fortune to grow up in the Adirondack mountains, which is the last significant wilderness east of the Rockies. It's six and a half million acres, and I grew up right in the middle of it. And so I grew up in pristine wilderness and during my life I've seen it go from being basically untouched to damaged beyond repair.

[...continued in *RATTLE* #36]

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