

Spring 2009

# RATTLE

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

First Book Interview:  
Michelle Bitting's  
*Good Friday Kiss*

Bruce Cohen  
*On Submitting Poems*

The Impertinent Duet:  
Translating Poetry with Art Beck

Photography by Rachel Eliza Griffiths

2009 Neil Postman Award

Issue #31 Preview

e.6

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

This spring's newsletter introduces two new regular features. *Rattle* itself is aimed at readers of poetry, with the goal that anyone should be able to enjoy something from each issue, but the newsletters focus more on the writers of poetry, and the practice of the craft. With that in mind, we're going to run a series of first book interviews, focusing on the paths new authors take to publication. How does the first book come to be? The idea being that fresh advice might be sage advice, and that sharing the experience will be helpful to so many of us who are pursuing the same dream.

The other new feature is a column by Art Beck on the art of translating poetry—there are so many nuances to translation, it's such a minute struggle, that a translator's attention to detail can be very illuminating for poets writing in their native language as well. Besides, translation is becoming more and more a forgotten craft among poets, and we find the process fascinating.

Also in this issue, Bruce Cohen goes on a rant about the submission process, which, in addition to being informative, should help to blow off a little steam. *Nimrod* please don't hate us.

Artwork is provided by the photographer and poet Rachel Eliza Griffiths, and is a true supplement to our summer issue—another ten of her photographs appear there, in the thought-provoking and rich tribute to African American Poets.

Finally, I hope you'll forgive my self-indulgence in excerpting poems from my own first book as this spring's book feature. It would be foolish not to let *Rattle's* audience know about its publication, but I feel too self-conscious sending out mass-emails or advertising it on the website. This seems like the least-obtrusive thing to do—if you enjoy the poems, check out the book. If not, feel free to send me hate mail, or just pretend this never happened.

Timothy Green  
March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2009

## PHOTOGRAPHY

by

Rachel Eliza Griffiths

## ARTIST STATEMENT

“ Poetry is the common denominator of my work and of my relationship to humanity. Whether I'm working on portraits within a semi-controlled setting or working in a more candid sense—images from the street, faces in passing, surreal fragments, or at gatherings of people, I perceive my work as a conversation. For me, the work of photography and poetry must engage elements of intuition, intelligence, contrast, and craft to different modes of depth. My work tends to examine themes of memory, loneliness, Nature, melancholy, resistance, Time, activism, delight, race, history, absence, narrative, sexuality, dream, and language. I am a seer.

I nearly always photograph in black-and-white, digital or film, depending on the project. I prefer to work with natural light. I do enjoy the sense of theater implicit during studio settings. There is the anticipation of a moment that will be a surprise, perhaps dramatic, perhaps a mood of something entirely else, for both subject and photographer.

*Three Girls* and *The Final Call* were snapshots taken from the Harlem Book Fair in 2006. During that event, it was important to be anonymous yet fully connected in a kaleidoscopic experience. I never put my camera down (except to buy books or scribble lines for poems).

*Woman Holding History* and *Woman, Inauguration Day* are images taken from my experience on Inauguration Day. The tides of faces, millions, being transformed, was staggering. How opened, raw, radiant, and vulnerable.

The image of Baldwin's grave was taken the weekend after the inauguration. Leaving flowers, along with Langston Hughes' poem *I, Too America* and a copy of *Time's* cover of President Obama seemed obvious gestures to me. Malcolm X and Paul Robeson are also buried within five walking minutes from Baldwin. I believe in talking with the dead. It's quite evident that Baldwin and other artists certainly continue to speak to us.

Some photographers who matter to me are Gordon Parks, Lorna Simpson, DeCarava, Kanaga, Diane Arbus, Carrie Mae Weems, Lola Alvarez Bravo, Van Der Zee, Berenice Abbott, and Robert Frank. But I must also include artists, such as Van Gogh, Frida Kahlo, Degas, Bearden, Joseph Cornell, Rodin, Basquiat, my brother Adam, and Gauguin, all of whom I admire and study. And there are too many poets and musicians to name here.

Lately, I've also been working on recreating another language for photography. I dislike its vernacular because it suggests or forces a sense of aggression or transgression, complicit or invited, through naming. For example, words like *capture*, *take*, *trigger*, *aim*, *point*, and *shoot* often make me uneasy. But there are other words that are quite beautiful to me, like *aperture*, *silver gelatin*, *exposure*, *crop*, *shutter*, *the dark-room*. I don't think anyone finds the words *iambic pentameter* or *villanelle* dangerous. But I could be wrong about that.

I feel, for now, kindred with photographers who incorporate aspects of poetry and/or language within their work. Right now I'm working on a portrait project focusing upon the Cave Canem community to which I belong.

My photographs are contained poems. They are images, narratives, glimpses, moods, seasons, rhythms, self-portraits, blues, incarnations of light and shadow, whale-tails, sketches, always connected to an ancient, fluid, and ongoing “ conversation about the human condition.



BIO

RACHEL ELIZA GRIFFITHS is a poet, painter, and photographer. A Cave Canem Fellow, she received the MFA in Creative Writing from Sarah Lawrence College and the Masters Degree in English Literature from the University of Delaware. Some of her awards include scholarships to Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, Napa Valley Writers Conference, New York State Summer Writers Institute, North Country Institute for Writers of Color, Vermont Studio Center, and Soul Mountain. A Pushcart Nominee, her poetry, fiction, photography/painting has appeared in *Callaloo*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Comstock Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Puerto Del Sol*, *Ecotone*, *Delaware Poetry Review*, *Inkwell*, *Black Arts Quarterly*, *Lumina*, *Saranac Review*, *PMS: poem memoir story*, *Mobius*, *Torch*, *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *The Drunken Boat*, *Mosaic*, *The Acentos Review*, *Brilliant Corners*, and numerous anthologies. She lives in New York.

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

# THE 2009 NEIL POSTMAN AWARD FOR METAPHOR

*"A metaphor is not an ornament. It is an organ of perception."*

—Neil Postman, from *The End of Education*

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

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

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

Thoreau’s quiet desperation and hoped to help us avoid it. And he knew how to eat a peach and steal any number of plums from the refrigerator.

*"The medium is the metaphor."*

—Neil Postman, from *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

Although primarily known as an educationist and a media critic, Postman was, at his core, a “noticer”—and he particularly noticed what we do with metaphor and how metaphor shapes and creates our cognitive world. Much like George Lakoff and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Postman maintained that words (and words, in truth, are metaphors) are as much the driver of reality as they are the vehicle. Consequently, metaphor was not a subject to be relegated and limited to high school poetry units wherein a teacher drones on about the difference between “like” and “as” and considers the job finished. For Postman, the study of metaphor was unending and metaphors were as crucial as they were omnipresent; they served to give form to and dictate experience. Is America the great melting pot, or is it an experiment in unity through diversity? What metaphors are embedded in television commercials—are commercials, in fact, parables and/or metaphors for “Heaven?” Is language a tree or a river? If the medium is the metaphor, then what

framing mechanisms are at play when one reads Dickens as opposed to watching *Friends*? Can one “save time” without a clock? Can a certain medium of communication, say, smoke signals, convey significant truths? Can a poem? All of the above questions are questions that Postman pondered (and, come to think of it, they’re all good ideas for poems).

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

In honor and remembrance of Neil Postman, who died on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2003, we have established the Neil Postman Award for Metaphor. The *raison d’être* for the award is simple and two-fold: To reward a given writer for his or her use of metaphor and to celebrate (and, hopefully, propagate) Postman’s work, and the typographical mind.

Each year the editors will choose one poem from the two issues of *RATTLE* printed during that year and all poems that appear in the magazine are applicable. There are no entry fees or submission guidelines involved. The author of the chosen poem will receive \$100.

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

*Richard Jackson*

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SILENCES

*The world is made of water.*  
—Parmenides

I can barely remember, now, that unwritten poem in which you suddenly appeared, and which disappeared the way your Mohawk fathers disappeared from the valley I lived in once. I have only these words that seem as if they climbed up from the bottom of a dry well. There are so many things we don't hear: the hawk's talon piercing the skull of the meadow vole, the moon scratched by a branch of the hackberry, the cicada emerging from its cocoon in this false Spring. I am told that when I was young I watched a butcher push his hand down the throat of a lamb's carcass and pull out its heart. Can you imagine a silence so desperate to be heard? You said once we should be able to hear the language of fish, that everything comes to us on rivers of wind. John, the news has come that your own bones are turning into water, and I look out to the birds that have come to the railing and can't even remember their names. Just there, an early lily is trying to hold the morning's rain in the mirror of its petal. Where I live now, someone has cut away acres of trees, and the words for what they meant no longer exist. I am wearing the choker of bone you left for me. I don't know what that unwritten poem should have said, though I remember the image of coffins they have found in the desert, shaped to take the place of those bodies that have dissolved into air, and of the Antarctic ice sheet that is floating towards the sea across invisible, submerged lakes. Last week, the cranes arrived, as they do each year, at the Cherokee campsite on the Hiawassee. When they rose in groups to settle for the night by the river, their necks leaned into the sunset as if they were in a rush to leave their bodies behind. It is this way with everything we try to say. We want to grasp the heart, to hear what is beyond our hearing, but have only these words that disappear like mist from the tip of a wave, or the phosphorous trail a swimmer leaves in the sea.

—for John Anderson

- *Runner-Up* -

*Martha Clarkson*

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HOW SHE DESCRIBED HER EX-HUSBAND  
WHEN THE POLICE CALLED

He's the man who wants to live on Park Place  
but can only afford Virginia, the Pennsylvania line  
running through his backyard, fast as a chance.

He's the hat who owes a luxury tax.

He's a no-trump bid without all the aces. A queen  
finesse,  
eight ever, nine never, that fails to fall  
into the dummy just right.

He's down a trick.

Just call him Colonel Mustard, pinning Miss Scarlett  
against the conservatory wall but rubbing noses (literally)  
with Mrs. Peacock, endowed by her old money.

He needs cash and carries a lead pipe.

Slow to ante up, he's jackpot dreams, quad or flush  
scraping the felt for another card  
odds turning on the river.

He's a bluff on junk.

He's the joker pinned in bicycle spokes  
vanishing down the street.



## GOOD FRIDAY KISS

by  
Michelle Bitting

Winner of the 2008 De Novo Award

C&R Press  
P.O. Box 4065  
Chattanooga, TN 37405  
ISBN 10: 0-9815010-0-1  
ISBN 13: 978-0-9815010-0-0  
75 pp., \$14.95, Paper  
crpress.notilt.com

*There is something about these poems that is so immediate, so unflinching, so focused and visceral in their understatement, that I was, on first reading, astonished. On second reading I was astonished and deeply moved. On third reading I was astonished, deeply moved, and filled with joy!*

—Thomas Lux, 2008 De Novo Judge

*From first to last, these poems grab hold of the reader. Bitting speaks directly, clearly, with the authority of one who has lived in the body, rejoiced in the spirit and investigated the troubled mind. This is a new voice unafraid to reveal the self and willing to go the distance.*

—Dorianne Laux, author of *Facts About the Moon*

*In Good Friday Kiss, I find everything I want in a poetry book. Precise language. Daring poems. Unexpected wisdom. An ambitious range of voice and emotion. A sense of anguish and salvation. This is a first book to admire and a poet to watch.*

—Virgil Suarez, author of *90 Miles: Selected and New Poems*

*“Whether writing about mothering, marriage, or a brother’s suicide, Bitting unerringly finds the epiphanic moment that reminds us of what it means to be fully present in our lives. And despite everything—because of everything—to praise.”*

—Kim Addonizio, author of *What Is This Thing Called Love*

MICHELLE BITTING grew up in Los Angeles near the ocean. A fourth generation Angeleno, she wrote poems in college at U.C. Berkeley, where she studied theatre. She enjoyed careers as a dancer and a chef before marrying Phil Abrams, the actor, and giving birth to their two beautiful children. In 2001, she began writing and publishing in earnest, often scribbling poems in parking lots while she waited for her eldest to finish school, her youngest asleep in the backseat. In addition to years of dance, music, and culinary arts training, Michelle has worked part-time since 1998 in the toddler and preschool programs at a local parochial school in Pacific Palisades. Last year she was awarded a grant to collaborate with the non-profit CDI (California Dance Institute) implementing a poetry component to their LAUSD inner city middle school performing arts program. Michelle has been involved in hands-on outreach to the sick, hungry, and homeless for over a decade.

Bitting recently graduated with an MFA in Poetry from Pacific University, Oregon. Her poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Glimmer Train*, *Swink*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Narrative*, *Rattle*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Passages North*, *Nimrod*, and *Many Mountains Moving*. Individual poems have been reprinted on Poetry Daily and Verse Daily. Thomas Lux chose her full-length manuscript, *Good Friday Kiss*, as the winner of C & R Press’s DeNovo First Book Award.



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

“Trees” in *Glimmer Train*; “The Sacrifice” in *Rattle*; “Giving My Son His Meds the Morning of the Big Meteor Storm” in *Prairie Schooner*. “The Edge” and “Terminal” first appeared in the book.



# FIRST BOOK INTERVIEW

## WITH

# MICHELLE BITTING

by  
Timothy Green

*Note: The following interview was conducted by email through January and February of 2009.*

GREEN: Let's start with you. Was there a moment you realized that poetry was something you'd pursue seriously? That you'd actually be a poet with a book? My own first book just kind of gradually materialized, but there was a specific poem I wrote in an undergraduate workshop where something clicked—for the first time I really accessed that inner creativity, and I graduated from writing lines to really chasing poetry. Not that it was good, but something was different. Did you ever have an experience like that, or is poetry something you always knew would be a part of you?

BITTING: You know, I've always felt like I was supposed to do something in the arts, but it wasn't so clear which medium was mine for the long run, which one I'd like to take to the grave, until a few years ago. I sang in church in elementary school and in junior high and, just to embarrass and freak myself out, asked if I could sing "What I Did For Love" from *A Chorus Line* at the all school assembly. I acted in college and had a career as a dancer in my twenties. Yes, I wrote poetry, I had the poetic haunting when I was younger, but it really hit me, and I mean in the old cliché "by lightning" way, just after I had my first kid. Everything I've done in the arts and even my time as a chef led me to taking up the pen for real. The big epiphany in terms of believing I might have a book someday came as I passed the twenty-poem "keeper pile" benchmark, and began to

see the stirrings of a bona fide compilation. Of course, most of those poems were eventually thrown out by the time I got to *Good Friday Kiss*. Getting acceptance letters from Stellasue (*Rattle*) and Hilda Raz (*Prairie Schooner*) in the beginning stoked my fires, big time, and I certainly won't forget the day I was dropping my son off at his therapeutic preschool and got a call from the folks at *Glimmer Train* saying my poem "Trees" had won first place in their contest. Publishing isn't everything, but it does incite a desire to carry on.

GREEN: That's something a lot of people try to deny, I think—that there are rewards beyond the writing itself that matter. Looking at the back of the book, several poems have won individual awards; I believe your chapbook, *Blue Laws*, won a contest by Finishing Line Press. And *Good Friday Kiss*, itself, of course, was published as winner of C&R Press's first annual De Novo Award. Obviously you must be happy with the contest experience, having had so much success, but would you recommend that route for other young poets? Were there times that you doubted whether or not it was worth the investment? And now that you have a book under your belt, are you going to continue entering them with new work?

BITTING: Sure, I'll keep submitting to contests—why not join in the fun? I don't send as much as I used to, mainly because

I wait for prizes offered by journals where I'd really like to see my work published, places that like to print some or all of their finalists. The entry fees really add up, yes, this is another factor, so I'm pickier about when and where I throw my money and words into the big spin. I think it's great that *Rattle* is able to offer such a hefty purse for its annual prize. I mean, you could actually live off that money for a couple months and write! How dreamy is that? And I'll bet you receive a ton of spectacular poems, people saving their best stuff to submit in hopes of winning five grand. The poem that took first place this year, Joseph Fasano's "Mahler in New York," was breathtaking.

GREEN: Ha, I asked that question and completely forgot that we have our own contest! Let me ask one more thing before we dive inside the book itself—had the manuscript *Good Friday Kiss* that won C&R's prize changed significantly from the first time you submitted it to a press? In other words, do you feel like the original manuscript was different from the book you have now? And if so, does that mean the contest process itself was constructive, in forcing you to self-edit?

BITTING: Yes! That's one of the huge benefits of entering book contests, the hardcore editing eye it encourages. Every time you submit you ask the questions all over again, and anything that doesn't fly can eventually no longer be ignored. The baby lived through two different titles before finding its name, *Good Friday Kiss*, and shed half the poems along the way. It took a few years to get it right, and frankly, I could have waited longer than I did to start sending the manuscript around, but them's the hazards of being new and over eager. On the other hand, the earlier versions did place in several contests, so I was encouraged to keep at it and improve the material.

GREEN: This is a nice segue into what I'm most interested in—the evolution of the book, how it went from, as you said, a twenty-poem "keeper-pile" to a full-

## FIRST BOOK - BITTING

fledged and strongly themed book. As it's published, there are five sections, each dealing with a different one of your relationships: brother, son, daughter, lovers, and finally yourself. When and how did that organizational structure emerge?

**BITTING:** Most of my early poems were about motherhood and dealing with my brother's death. The psychological compression of suddenly being "confined" with a baby, and in the wake of a sibling's suicide, triggered a survival-instinct need to write, I mean, it really was a lightning to the skull kind of phenomenon. The release and freedom and wisdom that I gleaned through the journey inside made life bearable, and miraculously, my little world of triumphs and trials became relevant to more than just me. So my subjects presented themselves like saints on burning stakes, their hair of smoke and flame—you know, I couldn't ignore them! And then over time it became clear which one of these poems belonged with the other. For a while I wasn't sure about putting the heavy brother and childhood poems in the front and then moving away from that to the domestic and sexual poems, or about placing all the poems about my son in one section. I tried mixing them all up, but it felt weird and disjointed, and I liked the idea of moving from the darker, intensely personal, childhood-related stuff to sections that contain more poems of awareness and connection with the world beyond my sticky cocoon.

**GREEN:** Well, if I might say, I think the arrangement really works. The darker content at the beginning haunts and informs the brighter world you're walking into. How long after your brother's death did you begin writing about it? Did you show those poems to anyone at first, or were they just for you?

**BITTING:** I'm glad you think so! The breakthrough poem on the subject of my brother was my poem "Trees" and I wrote that in 2001, about six years after his suicide. That one brewed for a good long time and then was triggered, released from its dormancy, when we

were having some tree-trimming work done at my house, when our kids were babies. It came down with the overgrown limbs, you could say. I've written other poems about my brother, some shared, some not, but that was the ringer and I could never have written it immediately after his death. Some people can do that, maybe as you become more of a master, but I know I need eye- and heart- adjustment time when the really big shit hits the fan.

**GREEN:** Tell me more about that wisdom you gleaned from writing. Is there a specific a poem that was particularly revelatory for you? Particularly cathartic?

**BITTING:** You know, again, I have to name "Trees" as a pivotal poem as far as acknowledging the redemptive and cathartic power of writing poetry. There are numerous poems, well, the whole book *Good Friday Kiss*, really, is a huge purge and hopefully artfully executed enough to be meaningful to others, beyond my personal experience. But that poem, which won the *Glimmer Train* Poetry Open (the last year the contest existed) made something lovely and transcendent out of a truly ugly, terrifying and bleak occurrence. At that moment, I understood what could happen, and the more I write, the better I become at writing through the storms, to gain insight and connect with a greater self when the immediate nail-biting, cigarette-lusting one is overwhelmed by life. When I fall to pieces and need art to reassemble my scattered self. I love how Palestinian poet Ibrahim Nasrallah puts it: "Writing is our best opportunity to understand ourselves clearly. Therefore, the secret of writing resides in the fact that we become whole in the act of writing, unlike any other moment in life." I think that's so right on! And he should know, writing such soaring, beautiful verse under the worst of circumstances.

**GREEN:** One of my favorite books on writing is actually a children's book, Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. The metaphor is that the mind is

a sea—your consciousness is all you can know from the surface; you can read the currents, feel the waves knocking your boat around, glimpse the occasional fin of a shark... But writers are fisherman, throwing out lines and pulling up all the mysteries of the deep. Maybe even slaying some of the beasts that stalk us. I can't help but think of how that metaphor works in another way, with poems like "The Sacrifice," which we originally published in *Rattle* #27. When you sent us the poem, about a mother staying up late to sew her daughter's Isadora Duncan costume for a school play, it was a powerful and emotionally charged piece, but without knowing the context, it seemed the subject was simply domesticity. The parent's affect muzzled out of necessity. Obviously the mother was struggling through something, but we didn't know what. Given the context of your brother's death, the reference to Duncan's drowned children is suddenly no longer figurative—and that final line, which we always loved, becomes brutal: The mother watching the daughter on stage doing "the hard, privileged work of feeling for both us." Here you are, pulling this beautiful beast out of the inky sea, and we didn't even know what we were really looking at. Which again demonstrates that this is a book, rather than just a collection of poems. This is a long build-up to what might be a very short question: How did your mother respond to "The Sacrifice," which in the end is really a heartfelt "thank you"? And how has the rest of your family reacted to the subject matter of book?

**BITTING:** I'm glad you see it as a thank you—how great! I'm reminded of that signature poem by Sharon Olds, "Station," where she says: "We spent a long moment/ in the truth of our situation, the poems/ heavy as poached game hanging from my hands." I certainly had that moment of recognition when I was writing "The Sacrifice." I was looking at, and discovering, in retrospect, what my job or function or *duty* as a family member was, even from an early age and via a number of mediums, as a channel for what others could not express.

## FIRST BOOK - BITTING

There's your beast, your shark fin, your "mysteries of the deep" or what Olds refers to as "poached game," I guess. When it's accurate it's always deadly beautiful, a little dangerous—isn't it? In a family of extreme and often wildly fluctuating emotional energy, you choose your armor: a costume, a box of paints, a guitar, etc... For my family still living, I hope they can accept this bringing forth of the darkness as a good, positive, redemptive thing. A rough song strung with barbed-wire notes, but one of grace, nonetheless. That may be too much to ask. I believe my mother is proud and, understandably, a little freaked out. I hope to write more poems of blatant praise, in time.

GREEN: Megan pointed out that the broadest theme of the book might be the inability to escape one's physical body, for better or worse. All of the characters, yourself included, seem to be dealing in various ways with the biological cards they've been given, some trying to escape, others trying to accept. Were you conscious of that theme as the book was coming together, or was it something that only emerged later? And what do you think draws you to that subject?

BITTING: Yes, to escape the body by diving deeply into it, right? In this country, we do not love, I mean, truly love, the body enough. Hopefully, it's going to turn around, this un-Whitmanesque loathing slash obsession and profound irreverence for and inability to accept the flesh. I know a progressive Episcopalian priest who acknowledges what spiritual damage is being done and the need for a more joyful, embraced sexuality among his congregants. The extreme exploitation and demonization of the body, the projection of what's taboo and sacred in the most backward, repressed ways, is the source of some pretty twisted behavior and legislation in this country. I suppose I'm writing through the body to become one with it, and at the end of that is freedom, release. Ultimately, there's no denying the terrors and beauty of the body.

GREEN: Last question—what's next? That might be harder to answer than it seems; I've talked with a lot of poets about the sophomore slump—birthing your first baby is such a momentous process, that you're left with a kind of post-partum depression. Or maybe just a sense of being lost, overwhelmed by all the possible directions you could go. Are you feeling that, or is the path ahead already clear for you?

BITTING: No, it's not so clear at all, though I'm not feeling the debilitating post-partum effect so severely because I had a semester of an MFA to finish up when the book came out, so my energy was focused there. Now that I've completed it I'm a bit at sea, yes, but not exclusively due to the after book-birth let-down. I'm so caught up at the moment with sheer survival and figuring out how to take care of my family, I guess

you could say I've got some hardcore distractions. It is becoming arrestingly clear that I have more than enough material for a new book, so I will have to spend some time puzzling together a manuscript in the not-too-distant future, and I look forward to doing that. My head and heart are so full at the moment, and I'm really looking at other artists' work, trying to figure out ways to write that are true for me, but not necessarily in the same comfortable vein I'm accustomed to. Right now, it's crucial I just find time to write and that the lines surprise and move me in ways I didn't expect.

GREEN: Thanks, Michelle, this has been a pleasure.

BITTING: The pleasure is mine. All good things to you and *Rattle*!

2009  
RATTLE  
POETRY PRIZE

1st prize:  
\$5,000  
plus TEN \$100  
Honorable Mentions

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

For full guidelines, see page 32.

from GOOD FRIDAY KISS

Michelle Bitting

## TREES

My mother worries about trees in my yard,  
 the Eucalyptus, their overgrown heads,  
 how a bold October wind  
 could roll the leaf-heavy blankets  
 down to smother us, curled in our sleep.  
 She's minus a son already—  
 so statistics on falling  
 trees are meaningless, she  
 moves a beat ahead  
 of doom's grim boot.  
 Men arrive with ropes  
 and saws. A whisper chipper  
 settles in, blocks half  
 the driveway. As the first  
 sweeps of lopped green  
 drop from the sky,  
 slapping the startled lawn,  
 I can't help but think  
 of my brother,  
 his long, beautiful hair—  
 honey-brown in summer,  
 falling across tanned cheeks  
 every girl in school  
 longed to taste,  
 an athlete's torso  
 they dreamed of exercising.  
 When he died  
 I drove with my parents  
 to the stuffy Tudor  
 on Montana Avenue  
 where he became a box  
 of dust, soft and gray  
 as rabbit ears.  
 The stiff man in pinstripes  
 handed my father a sack—  
*the clothes your son was wearing—*  
 he said, apologizing.  
 Steering home  
 we pulled over to review  
 the balled-up tee-shirt,  
 sweatpants, underwear—  
 suicide rags,  
 his Great Escape suit.  
 And it was then, seeing  
 how little was left,  
 bringing my brother home in a paper bag,  
 I saw my father lurch,

topple forward,  
 his heart tumbling down,  
 catching ours with the crush of it,  
 and I knew there was no point in scurrying  
 or calling for help—  
 we could never get out of the way.

## THE SACRIFICE

I think about how you stayed up nights, Mother,  
 drinking coffee at your sewing machine,  
 finishing my Isadora Duncan costume—  
 diaphanous number cut from a swell of black crepe  
 for the mad-grief dance after her children accidentally drowned.  
 Remember waking to find the garment realized—  
 dark offering you draped across the ironing board,  
 fastidiously stitched seams that stroked  
 my just-coming curves so I'd be beautiful,  
 drunk in the lights of my junior high stage,  
 and you out there in the hushed cool of your reserved seat,  
 hands folded, resting now, the little bobbin of your heart  
 spinning inside its quiet nook while you watched me  
 do the hard, privileged work of feeling for both of us.



from GOOD FRIDAY KISS

Michelle Bitting

### GIVING MY SON HIS MEDS THE MORNING OF THE BIG METEOR STORM

*Astronomers predict this year's Leonids meteor display, expected to appear before dawn Sunday, will be a dazzler worth missing a little sleep.*

—Joseph B. Verrengia Associated Press Science Writer

Today, like every other, the crucial practice:  
the typed bottle pulled from kitchen shelf.  
Plastic syringe plunging deep into thick  
orange fluid, I draw the potent stream  
to the prescribed mark, and with one thin squirt,  
dose a cup of cran-apple juice so he won't  
taste anything sinister, won't know his parents  
are messing with his head. Amazing, how little  
it takes to turn the lights on, to make  
the synapses, sleepy dogs, sit up and bark.  
This morning as I dispensed the tiny  
blitz of chemical that lights up his mind's  
shadowed corners, people everywhere stood  
in parks, on mountaintops,  
wore pajamas on their soggy lawns,  
waiting to see a shower of flaming dust  
that turned the sky's dark dome  
into something rare and spectacular. All those  
eyes fixed on bright heavenly bodies.  
All those chins lifting up.

### THE EDGE

What my daughter calls it—the line  
we cross when this life ends,  
the last grass trampled  
under hardening arches  
before the cliff runs out, before  
stepping into air. That night  
we snuggled after tubs  
she said it—hair a damp curtain,  
daisy p.j.'s, the two of us cross-legged  
on the quilt, my disintegrating Hanes  
revealing the sloppy V of curls,  
a two-inch scar from groin to thigh.  
“You're a little closer to the edge, Mom”  
she repeated, touching where she knows  
sour fruit's been plucked,  
the bad tumor nut. Skated a pinkie  
along the red dermis ridge—keloid dash  
that is neither a mouth turned up  
nor down. Not moon of approval  
not arc of misery  
but an expression hammered flat  
with acceptance.

Then we opened a book  
and found a fairy tale to read  
even darker, more outrageous than our own.



from GOOD FRIDAY KISS*Michelle Bitting*

## TERMINAL

*for Philip*

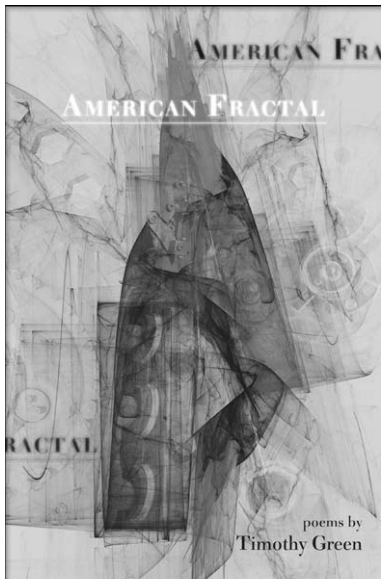
Just before I stepped my naked feet  
 through the airport security portal  
 with the other stunned passengers  
 waiting to board Flight 306,  
 I thought to rummage my carry-on—  
 one quick sweep in case I'd neglected  
 to remove some personal item  
 the bored but vigilant officers consider dangerous now.  
 You know the drill, love—hairpins,  
 matches, nose trimmers, staple-guns,  
 travel-size packets of arsenic.

In a side-pocket found  
 the small plastic box holds  
 my newly fitted dental guard—  
 discreet acrylic device clips  
 to the enamel so I won't grind my teeth, sleeping.  
 I was surprised; maybe I blushed,  
 being in public like that—  
 exposed and my nerves flying about.

But I gave the box a few shakes anyway,  
 because I love how it sounds like dice  
 clack-clacking against the walls  
 of a cup, as dentures might.  
 How even after 15 years  
 my receding gums, my morbid frights  
 are no big deal for you.  
 And though it can take a little longer  
 to get the sex fired up these days,  
 there's your steady, tender touch  
 through every take-off and landing.

*Three Girls with Bugs and Tweety*

Harlem, 2006  
 Rachel Eliza Griffiths



# AMERICAN FRACTAL

by  
Timothy Green

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Each portion forming a reduced-size copy of the whole, a fractal is forever fragmented, both chaotic and ordered, endlessly complex. Timothy Green's *American Fractal* sees this pattern emerge from the fabric of modern culture, as it navigates the personal, the political, and the metaphysical, in a lyric dreamscape in which an eerie chaos lurks just behind the façade of order—where “what looks like / a river...could be a log...as if accident were / the fundamental attribute of life.” In separate poems, one man sells ad space on his forehead, while another examines the multitudes of his own voice on an audio cassette recorder. Each life is but another section of the fractal, the past and the future two mirrors that face each other to perpetuate the illusion of infinites. At turns evocative and sweetly ironic, Green straddles the line between accessibility and complexity, exploring “how the wind whispers our secrets,” how “that little tremor” of understanding “touches your sleeve, lets go.”

TIMOTHY GREEN was born in Rochester, New York. He worked in an mRNA research lab, and as a group home counselor for mentally ill adults, before moving west to serve as editor of the poetry journal *RATTLE*. His poems have appeared in many journals, including *The Connecticut Review*, *The Florida Review*, *Fugue*, *Mid-American Review*, and *Nimrod International Journal*. Green has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Rhysling Award, and is winner of the 2006 Phi Kappa Phi award from the University of Southern California. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife, the poet Megan O'Reilly Green. *American Fractal* is his first book-length collection.



*Looking for the order within disorder, Timothy Green would “wake the body from its only available dream.” Green appreciates how strange this order can be, and that the extraordinary is the hallmark of the individual. In these poems, a man auctions his forehead as ad space, cutlery rains from the sky, spiders devour their mother: in other words, here is life.*

—Bob Hicok, author of *This Clumsy Living*

*“In American Fractal, Tim Green braids together an alert and nimble intelligence, a liveliness of phrasing, a polished sense of form, and a whimsical surrealism—braids them and brings them to bear on our contemporary world. The result, poem after poem that sidles up to the truth and smacks it on the lips or, playfully or in earnest, upside the head.”*

—Gregory Orr, author of *The Caged Owl*

*“The poems in Timothy Green’s American Fractal find love within love; landscape within landscape; the ‘I’ and ‘you’ nestled within the bigger ‘I’ and ‘you.’*

*Unpredictable, uproarious, and true to the wonder of the moment, Green’s poems are chockfull of magical imagery that blurs the waking and dream life.”*

—Denise Duhamel, author of *Queen for a Day and Kinky*

*“Timothy Green’s American Fractal is a remarkable study in the refraction of language. As with memory, language bends and shapes itself, defining and redefining images like opposing mirrors, reflecting an infinite succession of epiphanies. The effect is evocative, energized and sure-footed, full of nuance and thematic dexterity, as in his exquisite poem ‘Hiking Alone’ where insights like glimmerings in a ‘box of moonlight,’ are made translucent by the kind god of this fine poet’s imagination. This book has the gift of passion. It has fire at its core.”*

—James Ragan, author of *The Hunger Wall and Lusions*

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

“The Body” in *Mid-American Review*; “After Hopper” in *The Pedestal Magazine*; “A Constant Lack of Hunger” in *Hazmat Review*; “Beach Scene” in *Slipstream*. “Cutlery” first appeared in the book.



from AMERICAN FRACTAL

Timothy Green

## THE BODY

in the dream I wake to a poem about trains      what it is  
 that insists      that crawls      clamors      the  
 windowpane clasped shut against a wind      outside bare  
 branches in a dry heave & I rise      over the swelling  
 resolution      not to rise      I rise      consider the light  
 switch      consider the electric blanket warmth      I rise  
 instead      go to the window which is no longer a window  
 but a box full of moonlight      & down there in the meadow  
 just a handful of starspecks in the foxglove      her hair is  
 blue grass      & the first thing I think of are the wet walls  
 of howe caverns      that tourist trap back east      the  
 pipe organ      the bridal altar      the river styx  
 stalactites & stalagmites fusing      the slow settle of lime-  
 stone      bicarbonate      a blind bat on a billboard  
 unfurling leather wings      unfurling night      unleashing  
 a gust of      supersonic transience      an old dog's call  
 to supper      *twenty miles to go*      *fifteen*      *get*  
*your wallet ready*      & there it is again      the unmis-  
 takable whistle      the bleating      the bleeding      the  
 letting off of steam      & she's by the tracks with some-  
 thing in her hands      a silver shining thing & through  
 the silent distance      through the square hole in my

bedroom wall      I know there's nothing left to call it but  
 hope      though it's just a quarter      a nickel      a  
 dime      general washington's hope      your twenty-five  
 cents worth of hope      a handful of gum balls      a  
 plastic egg full of costume jewelry that would stain a tiny  
 finger green      it's just the sedimentary      the senti-  
 mental dream token hope      the hope you go to hell  
 the hope you forgive me      the hope you remember to  
 hope at least      love      & she sets it down on the far  
 track as if dropping her hope into the cool slot of a jukebox  
 the low clink clambers up from inside my throat      as  
 she steps over      both tracks      over the shimmering  
 shining thing      over the glittering fluttering tumbling  
 turning thing now lifting at its edges      the thing that's  
 always more than whatever it is because      there's the  
 whistle again      the rumble      a distant thunder  
 because the past can't hold the future      the present  
 rumbles on      *five miles almost there*      *hush now*  
 it sweeps past      two geometric lines that never touch  
 & there's the lamplight      the steamstack      the hot  
 metal glow      & at her heels this unnameable sadness  
 this burden      the eternal space there between the train's  
 first passing      & the wind that follows      a second later  
 to wake the body      from its only available dream



from AMERICAN FRACTAL

Timothy Green

## AFTER HOPPER

*Nighthawks, 1942*

She says that everything is *after* Hopper.  
 That posh hotel—you looked about to slap her,  
 but never did. Sometimes she'd wait at night  
 in her blue robe, face folded like the note  
 you didn't leave crumpled in a coat pocket.  
 Sometimes she'd stand in broad daylight, naked  
 before an open window, flesh so pale  
 and round and full it seemed about to pull  
 a tide of ruttish men up from the street.  
 But mostly it's the red dress. The cut straight,  
 sleeveless, loose. And her mouth is only lipstick.  
 She says you never even see her talk,  
 but just *about* to talk, *about* to smile.  
 She says that every moment is a jail;  
 this diner is her prison of endless light,  
 the ceaseless hour always getting late—  
 yet no one moves. Her cigarette remains  
 unlit. The busboy doesn't lift his hands.  
 You could write a thousand lines, she says,  
 on all the things she never does or has.  
 How she seems so sad she might have cried.  
 How you only see her *almost* satisfied.

Woman, Inauguration DayWashington, DC, 2009  
Rachel Eliza Griffiths



*from* AMERICAN FRACTAL

*Timothy Green*

A CONSTANT LACK OF HUNGER

He like a healer  
lays hands on the dash  
of his new-bought Buick  
straight-eight, every  
door a different color,  
the hood three shades of  
rust—no windshield but  
he thinks about the wind,  
dry junkyard like a dusty  
mill as he turns it over  
with a grind and click.  
It growls and spits.  
He thinks about a dog  
in back, a six pack,  
and maybe it's enough.  
He'll paint his motto  
on the bumper:  
*What doesn't kill us  
just takes longer.*

BEACH SCENE

*Phillip C. Curtis, 1962*

Everywhere their clothes are coming apart, falling  
off. The wind  
blows silk shreds of confetti.

At the beach, a gray gull circles, eyeing the glitter,  
the glitz, the pink  
tassels like intestines fishermen

leave in heaps at the pier. One thing is always  
mistaken for  
another, as if accident were

the fundamental attribute of life—lightning strikes  
a rock, the rock  
becomes a heart, the heart

fits perfectly inside the hollow tomb of your chest  
as you watch  
their clothes come off, stitch by

painful stitch. That thumping, sputtering organ  
kicks and purrs  
one more time like it's New Year's

Eve in New Jersey, and everyone left in the room  
stops at once  
to moisten their perfectly parted lips.

from AMERICAN FRACTAL

*Timothy Green*

CUTLERY

*for Kim*

everywhere I look there's more of it a silver steak  
knife in the sewing kit a golden spoon book-marking the  
yellow pages ads for dry cleaning tennis lessons I  
lounged on steel tongs I look in the mirror & a pair of  
forks have become my earrings their ornate handles  
bounce against my neck when the toilet won't flush  
I find the bowl stuffed like a turkey with salad forks  
& soup spoons the plunger won't work I reach into  
the dirty water & pull it takes both hands & all my  
weight to rip them out I fall backward & it's raining  
cutlery bare arms shielding my face from the tinny drizzle  
I don't know where all this is coming from it's like  
the house is sweating metal shiny little droplets of  
perspiration form in every shady crevice every crack  
it comes in all brands & shapes oneida rowand  
sterling fancy spoons diner spoons baby spoons  
with rubber linings knives of infinite sizes an array  
of forks bent with bizarre unnamable purpose some  
of it is cheap but a lot is expensive I can tell the  
junk I just toss down the cellar steps but the stuff worth  
saving I hide under my bed I hoard them until I have full  
sets though how I'd entertain forty-eight people I have

no idea I haven't left the house in five years so maybe  
it's revenge I think maybe the walls are just sick of me &  
this is all the defiance they're capable of I stand on my  
coffee table & twirl eyeing the plaster *well it's finally  
working* I say *you're driving me crazy* but the  
walls hold firm at night it's impossible to sleep I roll  
over & utensils clang in the sheets they poke at me  
through the pillowcase & I'm pitching them to the floor a  
blind woman in a sinking canoe I heave & I heave until  
my arms ache & there's so much to sort by sunrise

## ON SUBMITTING POEMS: BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY

by  
Bruce Cohen

I wish I could tap together my ruby red L.L. Bean slippers and post questions to a Wizard of Oz Poetry Editor so I could unravel the esoteric truths and mysteries about what factors, what esthetics, he really considers when deciding whether or not to accept my poems, what the deal breakers are. To think that “famous names” on submitted poems don’t influence the decision making process strikes me as naïve, although I noticed a few magazines are now requesting that poets *not* place their names on the poems themselves, which is a very democratic idea. An anti-nepotism movement has been gaining momentum in all aspects of life in America. I’m not yet decided where I fall on that argument. Political graft has never bothered me as long as those crooked politicians support the arts and I believe friends should help friends; who could argue with that? I also wish there was Instant Messenger for poetry submissions. At the very least, for a small fee, magazines could offer same-day response service, like the better dry cleaners. This might be a wonderfully innovative way for magazines to generate revenue, keep subscription costs down and thereby increase readership. Screeners could even receive a small salary. Because I doubt these things will be coming along soon, I’ll take a mundane, less creative view of submitting poems to literary journals and throw in my two-cents worth to boot. I suspect we, poets, (fiction writers seem more patient and mature. I know; I’m married to one.) have a love-hate-mild infatuation-voodoo-pin relationship with

editors of literary journals. They have the power, of course, to make us rock-star famous, as much as poets can be rock-star famous. We want them to love us, find us sexy and attractive, admire our quirky sensibilities, and naturally, publish our poems. Sometimes we are so delusional we even hope that editors will solicit our work in the future, or grace their periodical covers with our cool, pouty photos, but let’s not get too carried away here. Not only do we wish for them to publish our poems, but we want them to drown us with a lavish confetti-filled praise parade, let us know that we are indeed, *the genius the literary world has been waiting for*. No writer since the advent of the printing press has approached the brilliant insights and deep human understanding that we have. No one, to date, demonstrates the linguistic talent or musical ear or explores so marvelously the world the way we do. No one else can break hearts with the simple stroke of a pen. We would like, please, to have that acknowledged. Aside from our intellectual brilliance and keen artistic vision, we would like to be interviewed on CNN to provide our vision of world politics and sports, both college and professional. Why not invite one of us to ring the opening bell on the New York Stock Exchange? Of course it is always nice when editors add in the fact that they understand why our genius has been overlooked for so long: the average editor is simply not perceptive enough to appreciate the true level of our, how shall I say this, genius. And we poets simply love our feedback, by snail or electronic

mail, by phone, carrier pigeon, or telepathic signals. Some of us even accept transmissions in our dreams, as long as you don’t reverse the charges. (Does that date me?)

In my years of blindly submitting my poems to literary periodicals, I have come across more than my fair share of generous, thoughtful, encouraging and welcoming editors, many of whom have never even accepted my work. There are editors who actually make you feel validated with a pleasant rejection slip. I am sensitive to the fact that most magazines can’t afford the luxury of personal replies, as they are bombarded with gazillions of submissions each year. Some even boast about the fact that they are only able to publish one half of one millionth of one percent of submissions each year. Sometimes, after reading some guidelines, I feel like I’d have a better chance of hitting clean-up for the 1927 Yankees. And there are editors who accept your work with just a form that makes you feel like the proverbial piece of poet-meat. I once thought, though I would never say this out loud, that I would prefer a well-written detailed rejection letter than a form acceptance. Not really of course, but I thought it for a second while riding majestically on my high horse. I have engaged in persnickety correspondence with big-name editors who have lambasted me for not honoring their code of ethics by my unforgivable sin of simultaneously submitting my poems to their journal (violating their guidelines) and (heaven forbid) having the same poem accepted at another journal before they had the honor of rejecting me, at least being offered the right of first refusal. By and large an OCD rule-follower who tries to be kind and professional, I thought I was being courteous by withdrawing my submission “immediately” after it had been accepted elsewhere; I even offered over the top apologies. I never make up stories, though I am tempted, and do, in fact, send an email or call the same day. Most editors send warm thanks and offer sincere congratulations. Next time they

## ESSAY - COHEN

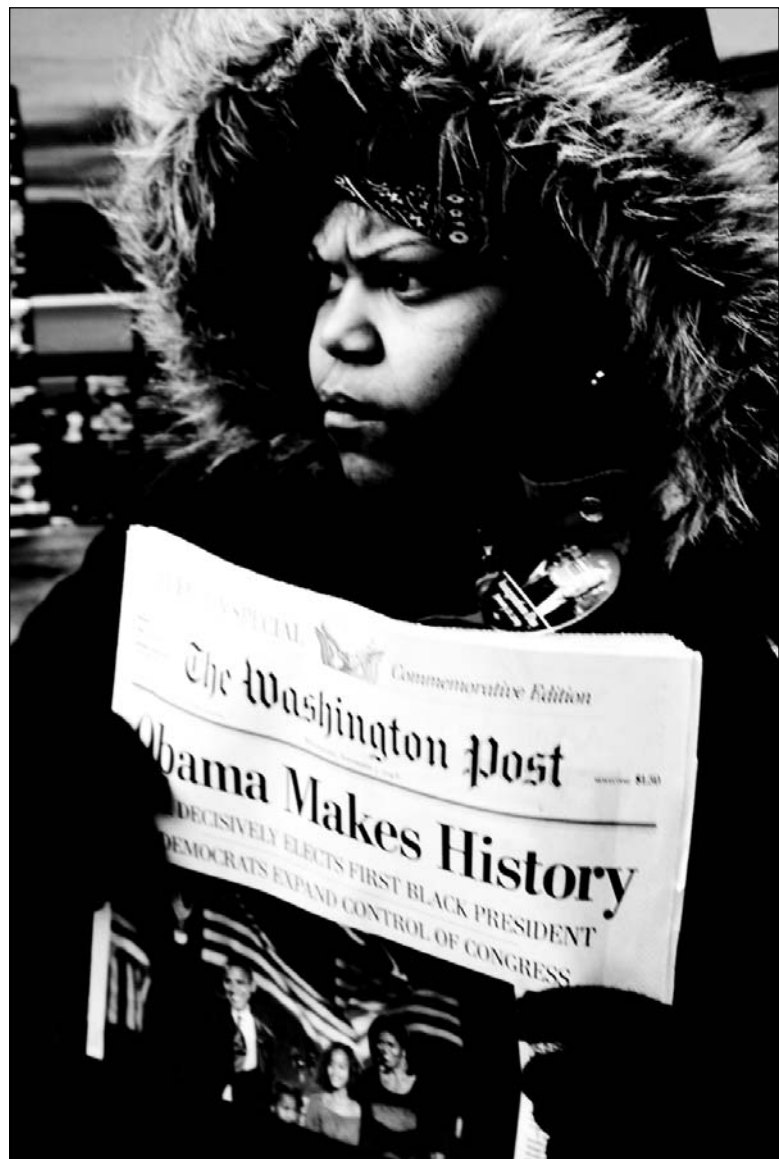
better jump on my poems before they get swallowed up by the competition. At least that's what I fantasize they think.

After being crucified by some editors, who I assume would not have been the bullies in the playground but the kids whose lunch money we took, who are seeking revenge instead of engaging in healthy therapy, I am genetically unable to let matters just drop in a mature way, because publishing a poem "by any means necessary" has so much effect on the world. Justice must be served. So, I am not afraid to engage in war, fighting dirty if I must, dragging out the heavy artillery of cancelling my subscription, assuming a fake pathetic persona to garner upper hand sympathy, infiltrating with literary spies, and shooting a bazooka of both Catholic and Jewish guilt, not to mention dragging out all the unspoken nasty weapons. You might be thinking, is publishing poetry worth it? The answer, of course, is an unequivocal *yes*. The world cannot continue like this. If an editor doesn't realize how difficult and time consuming and painful and full of longing it is to submit a poem, wait, wait, and wait by the mailbox, only to have the poem rejected for publication, who does? If an editor doesn't recognize how needle-in-a-haystack it is to get a poem accepted, who does? In one such particular case, after I dutifully withdrew my submission and the editor lambasted me for violating his magazine's "clear and specific" guidelines, the editor later wrote a beautiful criticism of one of my other poems from that same batch that he salvaged out of the quicksand slush pile and made some amazingly wonderful, detailed suggestions. He made the poem infinitely better and was kind enough to invite me to resubmit it, whether I chose to incorporate his revision ideas or not. Naturally I thought it was a trick. I assumed he was simply toying with my emotions, trying to throw me a bone of hope only to crush me for the umpteenth time. To my pleasant surprise, he later accepted the poem which was thrilling. I guess he felt bad for acting like a jerk. Maybe my scathing letters and threats made him

recognize that he was taking himself too seriously or maybe he thought I was a lunatic who'd storm into his office with an Uzi. Perhaps he simply didn't remember me, unable put two plus two together, and the poem wasn't half-bad.

Quite a number of years back, when I was a green, unhardened rookie in the poetry submission biz, a reputable magazine, whose name I don't want to mention as I assume the editorship has changed many times and I'm sure their practices are very different now, oh well,

it was *Nimrod*, accepted one of my poems, offered suggestions about revising another poem, consequently accepted that one as well, and I was on cloud nine where "I could be what I want to be." Dancing in the street. Then, months later, I received a letter indicating that they would, though highly unusual, have to renege on the acceptance due to unforeseeable and unprecedented difficult budgetary issues. They were sure I'd understand; I didn't. Crestfallen, I found it curious that the magazine continued to



*Woman Holding History*

Washington, DC, 2009  
Rachel Eliza Griffiths

publish, is still publishing, but mysteriously couldn't hold my poems over for the next issue. *Hmmm*. Maybe the next editor read my poems and thought, *Wow, these are really, really lousy. We can't publish this garbage*. As a young poet, getting an acceptance is a big deal. Poets take acceptance very seriously. Jennifer Knox, in one of her poems, acknowledges that she masturbates upon every acceptance. Well, at least she admits her utter abandoned glee. And having the carpet pulled out from your feet is a devastating blow, not to mention embarrassing. I had already bragged to my mother that my poems would be appearing in print. The disappointment literally killed her. At least that's what I wrote to the new editor who did not budge on his un-acceptance. I have nothing but ill will towards *Nimrod*, for eternity.

Very recently, this sort of thing happened again. I received a phone call from the poetry editor of the *Florida Review* in the spring of 2008, accepting four poems. Four is a big number in the poetry world. I emailed him a confirmation and he responded in kind. When I didn't hear anything for six months and received no contract, I called the magazine, which had changed editorship. They stated that it was unfortunate and awkward, but since I had no contract, they would not honor the verbal or email commitment by the previous administration. They emphasized that they would, of course, have published the poems if a contract existed. Duh. If a contract existed? Even though I'm not a lawyer, I've watched enough Judge Judy to know that it is a law to honor a contract, and a verbal contract is worth something, too. Wasn't the past poetry editor a "representative" of the magazine? The new editor did, apparently, pass my poems on to the poetry editor (curious that they still had them if they weren't accepted) who said that the poems "didn't suit her vision of the next two issues." Silly me. I didn't realize editors had visions; I sort of imagined they accepted the best poems submitted unless they were publishing a theme issue. Naturally I had taken the

poems out of circulation, was heartbroken and I falsely assumed that the editors, being writers themselves, would know the disappointment of having poems accepted, then not. In their defense, they did offer to allow me to submit other poems (how generous of them). As a matter of principle, I can't. I guess it might have been reasonable, in order to maintain good will, for them to offer a reasonable compromise, say publish one of the four poems.

When I sent this essay slash rant to Timothy Green, editor of *Rattle*, who is one of the good guy editors, he made an excellent suggestion to include his favorite urban poetry legend, which I never heard, but is a terrific idea. He told me:

When I heard the story it was Donald Hall, because he was the Poet Laureate at the time...in reality it was probably Kay Ryan. When she was a young poet, Kay really wanted to get into *Poetry*, as everyone does. She submits several times, only to get the same photocopied form rejection. Finally she decides to include a note: "Dear Hayden [maybe it was Carruth at the time], Thanks so much for your thorough and expert suggestions on my recent submission, and moreover, I'm honored that you took the time to respond personally. I agree completely with your brilliant editorial eye, and have made each of the corrections you suggested. The poem has improved tremendously, and I hope you'll agree when you read the enclosed revision. Sincerely, Kay." Kay Ryan then encloses the exact same poem, without changing a word from the original submission. Carruth accepts the poem and thirty years later Kay is Poet Laureate.

It reminded me of a true story: a very close personal friend, very famous (I will not use his name as he is humble and I'm not a name-dropper) submitted a short story to a well-respected literary journal only to have the piece rejected with a form rejection slip. Inadvertently, he submitted the story again to the same journal and it was accepted. But that's not the end of the little saga. The story was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and won that. An agent read the story and

inquired if he had a novel, which he did. The novel was published to wide critical acclaim and he was offered contracts for future novels. His book was one of the Oprah books, made the New York Times Best Seller list, translated into foreign languages, the whole ball of wax. And now, he's wicked famous, a famous writer for eternity, all because he sent a story back (by accident) to a magazine that rejected the very same story. Go figure.

Most editors, though, are caring and work for the love of literature, groom and coddle writers with virtually no reward, save their own inner satisfaction. Though I've never been an editor myself (I'm paradoxically way too nice and not nice enough), I can imagine that it is an extremely grueling and time-consuming job. There are many editors who I would fight to the death to defend; that's how highly I think of them. Their kindness has made a profound difference in my self-esteem and positively affected the lives of so many writers. Some, on the other hand, are a little arrogant and I imagine might be placed below Dante's Hell, forced to read Hallmark verse for eternity while listening to squeaky recordings of my ninth-grade English teacher lecturing on *Paradise Lost*. So, I've created my own set of guidelines for submitting poems and some random observations, some of which might be construed as heresy.

- I FIND THE NOTION of no simultaneous submissions utterly ridiculous. The writer and editor have no commitment or agreement to one another, a blind submission is simply a shot in the dark, a risk taken by the writer. Sidebar: how does an editor know if you are submitting exclusively to him anyway? It can't be an honor system. Who in their right mind would trust a poet? Editors must cross reference every submission they receive with all the other magazines. Maybe that's why it takes editors so long to get back to you with your tiny rejection slips. The propaganda about understaffed and under-

## ESSAY - COHEN

paid editors may not be true; it might be an urban legend. It's still a competitive world, with free enterprise and stuff; hence, it should be illegal to dictate no simultaneous submissions, *except* for the magazines that truly honor their "response time" and that "response time" is within a reasonable timeframe: six weeks or less seems about right. Sidebar: what are the chances that your poems are so fabulous that they would get taken at two places at once anyway? I admit, (brag-gart that I am) that that has happened a few times to me and it's very pleasingly awkward. That's why I let the other magazine know immediately if a poem they are considering has been accepted elsewhere. Fair is fair. I think it's good to be polite. Most editors are grateful and congratulate me, happy that they have one less rejection notice to send out. However, once an editor accepts my work, or even writes a kind rejection note, I *always* honor his/her guidelines to the letter. It's my code.

Another way of thinking about it, shouldn't we ask as many women as possible to marry us in the hopes that one will? Sorry, bad example.

- **PLACING A LIMIT** on the number of times one can submit during a reading period is sensible—I like that idea. It's smart. It keeps submissions to a reasonable number. It sort of forces you to send your best stuff, since you have only one bite at the Garden of Eden apple, although most poets don't really know what their best stuff is. Sidebar: I assume that the zany, untalented poets are the only ones who suicide bomb the same magazine with infinite submissions. When there are more journals out there than the dollar figure of our national debt why keep trying to force your way into one? A matter of pride? Those nutty poets are the ones who don't have a snowball's chance in *Nimrod* of getting a poem taken anyway. So, maybe editors should only limit the number of submissions to the crazy

poets. Put that in their guidelines. Most of the rest of us have a little dignity and a sense of appropriate protocol.

- **I HAVE SUBMITTED POEMS** with the appropriate SASE that have never been returned. I have had poems, submitted through the internet, evaporate into cyberspace. I guess this happens by the law of averages if you submit enough poems, but it makes me feel like a parent out in the dark woods with a dying flashlight, calling the names of my children who have not come home. Everyday I wake up hopeful that they will arrive on my doorstep safe and well-fed, with a little treat from their journey. I cross that magazine off my list and send the poems elsewhere and vow to never send again. I'll show them. They'll be sorry. I order additional voodoo pins. *The New Yorker* is an exception; no matter how much they ignore me I send once a year, like a holiday.

- **I TRY TO KEEP** my cover letters short, professional, simultaneously humble yet full of accolades. I'd rather editors hated me for myself and my poems, not my cover letter.

- **BECAUSE THERE ARE MANY** editors who are courteous and efficient and clearly love what they are doing, every time I get a little money from a publication or a grant, I always subscribe to a few periodicals. The Karma Thing. I mean to send a note letting the good editors of those magazines know that I did so because of their diligence and respect for writers...not to mention the quality of their magazine. I sometimes actually write that note. Occasionally I even mail it. Sidebar: I hate a solicitation for a subscription from a magazine right after I have submitted to it, just before they reject my work. Show some guts, please. If your magazine is really good, I'll buy it. Honestly, it doesn't matter if you accept my work or not. Am I supposed to think that if



*The Final Call*

Harlem, 2006  
Rachel Eliza Griffiths



ESSAY - COHEN

I subscribe that my chances for acceptance will be increased? Do you think I won't if I'm rejected? If that's the case, I change my mind; I don't want to be published in your journal. I do have some standards.

- AS AN ELITIST SNOB with very particular, judgmental, inflexible tastes, I am often mystified by what makes it into the magazines. I shake my head in disbelief at the unimaginative drivel. I often reread the lousy poems several times, worrying that perhaps I'm the moron who simply doesn't get it. *Nah*. Some people actually see art differently from the way I see it, as goofy as that may sound. Maybe the editor simply has bad taste or only publishes his friends. Maybe he has too many undergraduates screening the poems and the only poems they publish are the watered down ones a majority can agree on. Since they probably haven't read enough good poems in their lives, they probably just don't know the difference. I like magazines where one person controls the content. You know then, with whom you're dealing. Yes, I like dictator poetry journals. Very little room for ambiguity of taste, though sometimes I am pleasantly surprised.

- SOMETIMES I READ a poem that knocks me for a loop from a poet I am not familiar with. I instantly Google her/him to see if they have books out and order them. That's what I like about the magazines. Discovery. I like editors who keep their minds' open and I despise cronyism, unless they are personal friends of mine, in which case I am pro crony, especially if they publish my poems.

- I HATE IT WHEN AN EDITOR writes that he is considering your work (you are a "finalist") and we will be getting back to you in say, two weeks. Months drift by and you still haven't heard. Seasons come and go. Then a form rejection arrives in the mail a

decade later. That reminds me, a girl who I had a crush on promised to dance with me a hundred years ago but the dance ended at midnight and I am still standing alone on the boys' side of the deserted gymnasium. All the balloons are deflated and the theme decorations are scattered on the floor. I'd been practicing my dance moves every night in front of the mirror. I feel bad and dejected and lonely and like a fool. Please lie to me. At least make up a believable story.

- SOMETIMES MY POEMS are rejected because they're lousy or need more work. I'm okay with that. Sometimes the editor isn't smart enough to see how wonderful they are. I believe in the cliché that there is no accounting for taste. Sometimes the editor has too much of a backlog. I'm okay with that, except, post that you're no longer accepting submissions. Duh! Why create more wasted time, expense and work for us both. Why kindle hope when no hope exists?

- SOMETIMES MY POEMS are accepted but I don't know why. It would be nice if the editor could write even a sentence about why she took my poem. Legible handwriting is nice.

- EVEN CHICKEN SCRATCH on a rejection slip makes me feel that a human being actually read the submission. Some places send the poems back neater (they actually look cleaner) than when I folded them into the envelope. The rejection slip looks as though it was untouched by human hands. Creepy. Mostly I send out poems because I like the mystery that someone I don't know might read my art and think, Yeah, this is pretty good, maybe other folks might like to read it too. And, I still hold out hope that someday my genius might be recognized. But mostly, I just like the possibility of getting good mail.



BRUCE COHEN is the Director of The Counseling Program for Intercollegiate Athletes at the University of Connecticut. His poems have appeared in various literary publications including *AGNI On-line*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Harvard Review*, *The Indiana Review*, *The Ohio Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, *Poetry East*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Rattle*, *TriQuarterly* and *Quarterly West*. A recipient of an individual artist grant from the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism, his book, *Disloyal Yo-Yo*, winner of the Orphic Poetry Prize, was recently published and second book is forthcoming, *Swerve* from Black Lawrence Press.







## THE IMPERTINENT DUET: TRANSLATING POETRY WITH ART BECK

### SPANISH DANCING ABOARD THE QUEEN ELIZABETH

by Art Beck

(in collaboration with Silvia Kofler)

#### I. A SMALL QUESTION OF HE OR IT

At this year's American Literary Translators Association conference, Silvia Kofler, an old friend and colleague, showed me a translation of Rilke's "Spanish Dancer" that she'd come across in an anthology. "Look how they translated this line! Why?" And so began a conversation. While I take full blame for the vagaries of the translation at the end of this piece, this essay is really a joint endeavor, a record of the dialogue between Silvia and myself.

Silvia is a native Austrian who emigrated to the United States in her twenties. She's a published poet in both English and German. Rilke is, of course, a poet she's known since her school days, but it's worth noting that Rilke is not, for contemporary German readers, the ubiquitously read icon he is in America. A German speaking poetry reader might delve into Rilke as often as contemporary Americans read, say, Wallace Stevens.

And as for us with Stevens, the German reader often has to slow down and mull over just what it is that Rilke is saying. But in this case, Silvia seemed emphatic.

Silvia's issue was a line in Rilke's "Spanish Dancer." *Und plötzlich ist er Flamme ganz und gar.* The line comes immediately after the first stanza and is, in fact, a stanza unto itself. "Spanish Dancer," an extended metaphor set in a Paris nightclub, is one of Rilke's least opaque poems. Most, if not all, English-speaking translators have roughly followed Herter Norton's 1938 transla-

tion. Norton's reading of the first stanza and the stand-alone line that follows is:

*Wie in der Hand ein Schwefelzündholz, weiss,  
eh es zur Flamme kommt, nach allen Seiten  
zuckende Zugen streckt -: beginnt im Kreis  
naher Beschauer hastig, hell und heiss  
ihr runder Tanz sich zuckend auszubreiten.*

*Und plötzlich ist er Flamme ganz und gar.*

*As in one's hand a sulfur match, whitely,  
before it comes aflame, to every side  
darts twitching tongues -: within the circle  
of close watchers hasty, bright and hot  
her round dance begins twitching to spread itself.*

*And suddenly it is altogether flame.*

Why, Silvia asked, did they translate *er* as *it* when it should be *he*?

The answer that Rilke's myriad translators would uniformly give her is that in German, unlike English, inanimate nouns are gender specific. Either masculine or feminine. *Der Tanz* is masculine. And so in German, the pronoun for dance is "he." And *er*, in this case, refers to the dance.

It's logical. There's no "he" mentioned anywhere else in the poem. And, as I said above, I'm not aware of any English or American translator who's treated the line otherwise.

But, no, no—Silvia said. Sure that's "logical," but it's not the way a native speaker would read this poem—at least at first. This, after all, is a very erotic piece and it's as much about a man watching as a woman dancing.

Which got me thinking. Grammar has rules that seem logical, but poetry has

Rainer Maria Rilke

#### SPANISCHE TÄNZERIN

Wie in der Hand ein Schwefelzündholz, weiss,  
eh es zur Flamme kommt, nach allen Seiten  
zuckende Zugen streckt -: beginnt im Kreis  
naher Beschauer hastig, hell und heiss  
ihr runder Tanz sich zuckend auszubreiten.

Und plötzlich ist er Flamme ganz und gar.

Mit Ihren Blick entzündet sie ihr Haar  
und dreht auf einmal mit gewagter Kunst,  
ihr ganzes Kleid in diese Feursbrunst,  
aus welcher sich, wie Schlangen, die erschrecken,  
die nackte Arme wach und klappernd strecken.

Und dann: als wurde ihr das Feuer knapp,  
nimmt sie es ganz zusamm und wirft es ab  
sehr herrisch, mit hochmütiger Gebärde  
und schaut: da liegt es resend auf der Erde  
und flammt noch immer ergibt sich nicht -,  
Doch sieghaft, sicher und mit einem süssen  
grüssenden Lächeln hebt sie ihr Gesicht  
und stampft es aus mit kleinen festen Füßen.

—from *New Poems*, 1907

it's own linguistic logic. And Rilke, especially, has his own poetics. His imagery can be as musical as his metrics—often fugue-like and ambiguous with interchangeable melody and harmonic lines as it were. In this context, it may well be that another native speaker might read this line differently than Silvia has always read it. But *why* does she read (and want to read) *er* as a *he* rather than a gendered dance? *What happens when you interject a specific man into the poem?*

First, to me, the effect is reminiscent of a film director zooming in on a face in the crowd. It crystallizes and personalizes the eroticism of the dance. And second, it stops you (at least in German) because you have to ask yourself—did Rilke really mean "he"? And so that image might (for another German reader) flash and disappear if you finally settle on "it." But the image is there, at least subliminally.

And one shouldn't overlook the

THE IMPERTINENT DUET

poem's line structure. Rilke has set one stand-alone line between two five line stanzas. He's making us stop; the stand-alone line doesn't flow smoothly from the *Tanz* in the previous stanza. Read by itself, without referring to the previous stanza, *er* is just as readily *he* as *it*.

It's hard for an English speaker to connect with this, because we have so few gender specific inanimate nouns. What's happening in the German, seems to me, to be similar to what happens if you come across something like:

*The queen boarded the Queen Elizabeth  
then she promptly set out to sea.*

Is the "she" that sets out to sea the queen or the ship? You stop to think, and may say, what's the difference because both, in fact, set out to sea. But you stop to think. And the image of the queen and the Queen both come to mind.

II. BUT HOW IN THE WORLD CAN YOU TRANSLATE SOMETHING LIKE THAT?

I'm not sure, but I think it's a good example of why poems as resonant as Rilke's benefit from regular re-translation. It's a commonplace observation that Rilke has become overdone in English. There are commercial reasons for this—he's in the public domain, and most of the selections sell. Sadly, most of the selections read like workshopped versions of each other. So the only reason to do another version is to try to bring something across that hasn't been attempted. And I think that's a good enough reason here.

III. SO HERE'S THE ATTEMPT

Some tricks just can't be duplicated. I can't think of a masculine English noun remotely equivalent to "dance." My first thought was to just choose "he"—as Silvia seems to have done. Say something like *and suddenly he's utterly on fire*.

That's consistent, it adds a close-up of a face in the crowd that instantly

focuses the poem, makes the dance as much a dialogue as a performance. I can understand why Silvia was so incensed at losing this aspect in the translation she read.

But then, is that too one-dimensional? Does it lose the resonance implicit in choosing between images? You could also dodge the issue entirely and say: *and suddenly, completely, helplessly: -fire*. Leaving out both "he" or "it."

If you took that approach, you could stretch *Beschauer*—spectators, watchers—into something more gender specific and overtly erotic, like *voyeurs*.

But then you lose that wonderful effect of a close-up, zoom in.

And—as Silvia pointed out to me as our dialogue progressed—there's another subtlety in the way *Beschauer* is used. This is another masculine noun, but also one that in German normally takes its singular or plural form from whether it's prefaced by the masculine *der* (singular) or the feminine article *die*. In this case, it's not prefaced by a definite article, because the plural is inferred from *Kreis*—the circle of spectators.

Even so, Silvia observed—the lack of the usual definite article might subtly nudge the German reader into the ambiguity of *er* in the standalone line.

Most of this isn't possible in English. So finally, the best approach may be to try to find the tangled resonance of "*he/it*" elsewhere in the poem. And just overtly go with what seems Rilke's intent.



Rainer Maria Rilke

—tr. Art Beck

SPANISH DANCER

The way a sulfur match, cupped in the hand, whitens before it flames, licks out in every direction: - within the intent ring of watching eyes, the quick, bright heat of her circling feet shivers until it flares.

And suddenly he and the dance are altogether fire.

With a blink, she ignites her hair, then instantly with seductive mastery, whirls her entire dress into the bonfire from which her naked arms rear up like startled rattlesnakes.

As the fire finally clings to her like a slip, she strips it off completely, aristocratically tosses it aside with a haughty shrug. And watches: There it lies, smoldering on the ground, still burning and unwilling to surrender. And with a smile on her face and a sweet "hello," she stamps it out with small, sure steps.

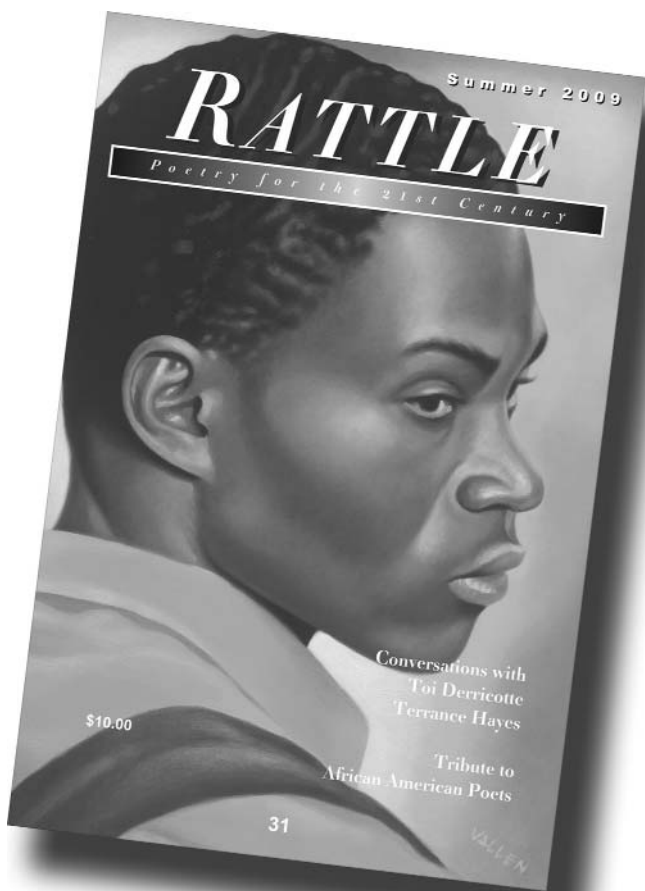
Paris, 1906



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

SILVIA KOFLER teaches at Rockhurst University and is editor/publisher of the poetry magazine, *Thorny Locust*. Her latest poetry collection, *Radioactive Musings*, was included in the Kansas City Star's Top 100 books of 2007 by local authors.





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TRIBUTE TO AFRICAN  
 AMERICAN POETS

Releasing in June, 2009, issue #31 celebrates the work of 30 African American poets. The very act of compiling an issue like this raises a number of difficult questions: What does it mean to be an African American poet? Do African American poets have to write about their racial experiences? Is there any justification for grouping poets together by race in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Should white editors and scholars be free to participate in black literature? Does an issue like this do more harm than good?

In *Rattle #31* we can't answer any of these questions, but we can enter into a dialogue on the intersection between race and poetry. The course is introspective, and our guides are provocative essays by Meta DuEwa Jones and Susan B.A. Somers-Willett, intimate conversations with Toi Derricotte and Terrance Hayes, expressive photography by Rachel Eliza Griffiths, and a wealth of poetry in a wide range of styles and subjects. The result, for us, has been a transformative experience, and we're grateful for the opportunity to share it with a wider audience.

As always, the Tribute is the focus of the issue, but not the totality of it. *Rattle #31's* open section features the work of 55 poets, whose proclivities are as varied as their backgrounds. And in the back pages, our first-person contributor notes are almost as fun to read as the poems themselves.

TRIBUTE TO AFRICAN  
 AMERICAN POETS

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ARTWORK

Rachel Eliza Griffiths  
 Mark Vallen

CONVERSATIONS

Toi Derricotte  
 Terrance Hayes





from *RATTLE* #31, SUMMER 2009

Poetry

*Heather Bell*

LOVE

The truth about Klimt is: when he painted “The Kiss,” he was also beating his beautiful wife. He beat her with one hand and painted with the other. He got two sad blisters on his right palm from this. His wife sometimes slowly pulled up the roots to his favorite willows and cut them, delicately, and then buried them again. He jokes, “that’s what I get for marrying

a woman from a sanitarium!” but she was from Vienna, they met in the street, he stopped her and she believed his eyes said, “I do not want to die, do not let me die,” so she touched his face, there, in the street, as a person touches a comma on a page after they have returned home from a place that has no commas. On their wedding night, she

ran him a lukewarm bath and his testicles looked like overripe plums. He raped her until a low moan seemed to come from the walls, as if wolves were angry and coming and Klimt went to bed forcefully and his wife went to bed with dirty blood around her nostrils and mouth. It goes on like this for years,

just as it goes on for years for everyone who marries someone they can not love. You step, body over body, into the kitchen to kiss your sweat and rot good morning. “Let me tell you something,” she says on the day that he paints “The Kiss” and he hits her in the head before she can remember the something. She thinks it might have been important. It might have been something. When he shows

the painting to his friends, they say he must be the most romantic man in the world and she nods. And the man in the painting pushes the woman down further, flows into her, gold and angry, and her eyes are shut and they do not look clenched and this is puzzling, but no one else seems to notice.

*Wendy Videlock*

DEAR UNIVERSE,

In all this calm,  
in all this mist,  
these vague shaped

continents

begin to drift.  
A finger lifts,

falls again.  
A foghorn sounds,

passionless.  
Do you wonder

what we are  
in all this calm,  
in all this mist.

Wolf prints.

Red clay.

A slender wrist.

Murder. Magic.

Ballet.



*Janice N. Harrington*

### ODE TO THE BEDPAN

Consider the arching hips, the buttocks squeezed, thrust upward and then pressed to that metal lip, almost sexually. Consider the bedpan—shit bucket, hat—its adaptable demeanor: triangular, oval, saddled, slipper-shaped, sloped, enameled, plastic, antique porcelain, disposable, yellow to match the pitcher and the plastic glass, spoon-colored or blue, the faithful servant who bears away the human ordure, its stench and its dye-free tissues. Feel its patience. A bedpan waits more placidly than a woman curbing her dog. Washed out, it is used again. How many buttocks and thighs has a bedpan cradled? How many beds has it sat upon? The warmth of a bedpan forgotten beneath a sleeping rump. The floor-jarring percussion of a bedpan dropped

from RATTLE #31, SUMMER 2009

*African American Poets*

on the night shift. Consider its calm, its kindness, really, that a bedpan accepts these urges, spillings, the bowel's complaining, and the voweled protest. It does the job assigned to it. Thigh, buttock, hip, the hand that takes it away, embarrassment—it is all the same. Shame—yes—but that too is easily sluiced, nothing that anyone should keep or have to sleep with. Bedpans do not judge us. They are a measure of humility, a scoop, a shovel, a gutter, a necessary plumbing, the celebrant of hierarchy and the social order, pleased to be lifted by darker hands paid the minimum wage.



*Obama at James Baldwin's Grave*

New York, 2009  
Rachel Eliza Griffiths

*Mary McLaughlin Slechta*

THE HOUR OF OUR BELIEF

I want to know who cried for the toy I found out back this afternoon.  
Was it the same child who ate a sandwich made from the bread  
out of the plastic bag I found last week? So difficult to date plastic.  
The toy gas pump promises five cents a gallon.  
That would make a dollar's worth about a tank.  
Maybe 1960. Maybe a politician now. Small world.  
Someone who keeps voting for war to save our way of life.  
The Onondagas want the land returned to their stewardship.  
They want the lake cleaned properly.  
They want everything back the way it was  
before that odious Simon LeMoyné grabbed all the salt  
for his three-minute egg. Before his flock fouled the water.  
I want everything put back. The toy put back in the boy's pocket  
and the boy's father back on a ship beside his parents.  
I want the ship setting a reverse course for the shores of Europe.  
Before they arrive I want Hitler back in his mother's womb  
and the reset stone in her garden wall  
back in the path of her thin-soled slipper.  
The passengers will insist on sandwiches, I suppose,  
lovely little sandwiches wrapped in paper.  
If they trim the bread, let them leave the crusts behind  
to feed the birds a lavish supper. Then let the birds go back  
to eating whatever it is they did before McDonald's.  
I'll go back too, a circuitous route by wagon first,  
returning my skillet to the forge, my rolling pin to the forest,  
discharging my nose and hair like a Halloween mask,  
my skin like a suit of mail: a withered champion,  
at last, more onion and potato than flesh and bone,  
ascending the bow of a ship from the cool dry cellar of my soul.  
Oh, amazing grace! To cross the dangerous shoals  
where the bones sing home all the ships at sea.  
Let the women swallow back air they churned to storm.  
Let them refill the lungs of children  
they pull from waves and wrest their husbands  
from the teeth of sharks. In the restored calm,  
let memory whet my tongue  
for the anchor of my mother's food.  
On shore, my father waits.  
His hands are empty with missing me.  
Let the glint at his feet in the sand  
be only the sun, chasing the tail  
of a golden worm.

from *RATTLE* #31, SUMMER 2009

*African American Poets*

*Patricia Smith*

52

Baffled by stark ache and symptom, I get in my bed  
beside the bearded charmer who is yet in my bed.

As graying denies and dims me, I vaguely recall  
the line of whimpering whiners I've let in my bed—

every one of them goofy with love, dazzled by curve  
and color, until I screeched, "Oh, just *get* in my bed!"

The could-be queens, pimpled wordsmiths, thugs and  
mama's boys,  
porcine professors, all casting their nets in my bed.

Valiantly, they strained to woo with verse, acrobatics.  
One fool dared a pirouette, on a bet, in my bed!

(We dated for months.) But like the rest, he finally  
did things I would much rather forget. In my bed!

So, all that leads to this. Me, a slow, half-century  
woman, turning toward he who conjures sweat in my bed.

"Patricia," he whispers, stroking me young, unname  
the men. Then my husband turns the world wet in my bed.

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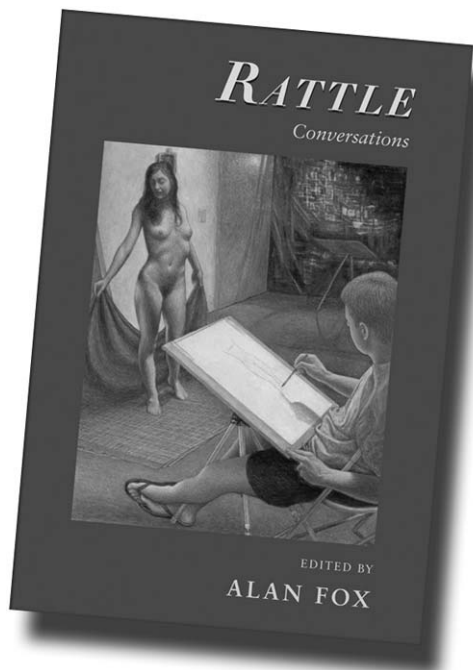
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