

Fall 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:  
Bruce Cohen's  
*Disloyal Yo-Yo*

Eye Contact:  
Visual Poetry with Dan Waber

The Impertinent Duet:  
Translating Poetry with Art Beck

Artwork by Dan Ruhrmanty

Issue #32 Preview

e.7

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ABOUT THIS E-ISSUE

EDITOR'S NOTE

Another e-issue, another new feature—this fall I'm happy to introduce Dan Waber, who will be helping us out with visual poetry from now on, and writing a twice-yearly column on one of its many angles or practitioners. Honestly, there's a lot I don't know much about, and despite featuring visual poetry in *Rattle #29*, this is one domain that still leaves me scratching my head from time to time. If you feel the same way, Dan's the man to help us out; in his debut column, he uses work by W. Bradford Paley to show us two scales for seeing language as a physical object.

You've seen the table of contents, you know what good stuff's crammed into this issue. But what *I* don't know is what you think about it. So after you get done reading, write to me. Next spring's new section is going to be letters to the editor—but first I need letters. Tell us what you think about this issue, about the winter issue, old essays we've published, poems you've loved, poems you've hated, what you want to see in the future. Send me a rant about the literary establishment, complain about a *Rattle* policy, mock my rejection letters—spill your guts. Do it anonymously, if you're shy, I don't care.

Maybe I'm just imagining things, but I think of *Rattle* as a little community, a quiet town in the great nation of poetry—let's make like townies and talk it up. Does this seem like a bad idea? Tell me why.

Timothy Green  
September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2009

PAINTINGS

by

Dan Ruhrmanty



ARTIST STATEMENT

“ My goal is to create something that resembles the very essence of our ever changing world. I feel that to force creativity is to go against it's basic nature and to constrain it is harmful to our individuality. Therefore creativity must be allowed to flow dreamlike ”  
expressing the tangible and intangible simultaneously. ”

BIO

DAN RUHRMANTY is an artist living and working in the south-eastern United States. Ruhrmanty's work has exhibited in New York, California and London. Notable publications featuring Ruhrmanty's artwork or literature include: *Tiferet Journal*, *Barefoot Muse*, and *Word Catalyst Magazine*.

FIRST BOOK - COHEN



# DISLOYAL YO-YO

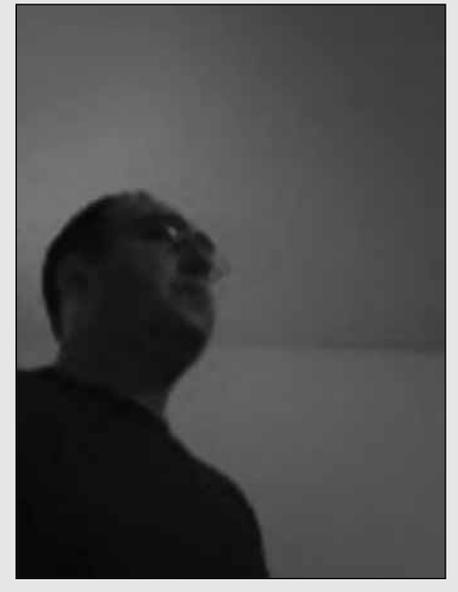
by  
Bruce Cohen

Winner of the 2007  
Orphic Poetry Book Prize

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BRUCE COHEN was born in the Bronx, New York, and earned both a B.A. and M.F.A. from the University of Arizona. Since 1990 he has been the Director of The Counseling Program for Intercollegiate Athletes at the University of Connecticut. He has two books of poetry: *Swerve* (forthcoming from Black Lawrence Press) and *Disloyal Yo-Yo* (Dream Horse Press), winner of the 2007 Orphic Prize. His poems have appeared in various literary publications including *The Georgia Review*, *The Harvard Review*, *The Indiana Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner* & *TriQuarterly*. He is a recipient of an individual artist grant from the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism.



## PRAISE FOR DISLOYAL YO-YO

If you were to splice the DNA's of Walter Mitty and Salvador Dali, or Cuisinart together the collected works of Louis Simpson and Dean Young, you might get the poems of Bruce Cohen. His suburban speakers are often cleaning the garage or steaming off wallpaper in the bedroom, but secretly they are involved in criminal adventures of the imagination, in subtle and hilarious cultural critique, in fantasies of quiet desperation. These are rampages of irony, tenderness and wit, furnished with the verbal wizardry and bravado of a quiet maniac. This is terrific work from start to finish, by a bright new poetry star in the American sky.

—Tony Hoagland

Bruce Cohen's *Disloyal Yo-Yo* is not a collection of poems so much as it is a full-blown surreal but humane visionary account of what it means to be alive in the 21st century. His imagination sweeps across his experience like the "Super Doppler" he hopes might "hover over our lives to transmit intimate newscasts." And what gets transmitted in Cohen's poems is not only the intimacy of human relationships but the strange, quirky, unpredictable transformations—"a tornado of patio furniture"—that refresh and reinvent our world.

—Michael Collier

Like the paintings of Rene Magritte, the songs of Tom Waits, and the Coen brothers' films, Bruce Cohen's poetry offers observations that are simultaneously razor-sharp recognizable and arrestingly askew. His poems are haunting and hilarious, coolly surreal and stingingly poignant. As the best literature always does, his poems knock me off-balance as they expand my understanding of the absurdities, challenges, and dividends of modern life. Cohen sits at the top of my short list of favorite contemporary poets.

—Wally Lamb, author of *The Hour I First Believed*

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

"Sober Trees" in *Quarterly West*; "Exact Life-Time" and "Domestic Surrealism II" in *Green Mountains Review*; "If Every Man Were a Robert De Niro" in *Cimarron Review*; and "Crybaby Blues" in *Slipstream*.

# FIRST BOOK INTERVIEW

## WITH BRUCE COHEN

by  
Timothy Green

*Note: The following interview was conducted by email through August of 2009.*

GREEN: When I came across *Disloyal Yo-Yo*, my first thought was, Can this really be Bruce Cohen's first book? We've published several of your poems and an essay at *Rattle*, and your work always has the consistency and depth of someone well into a poetry career. Tell me about the book's journey. Did you only recently start sending manuscripts around, or have you been shopping them for a while? What was the lag-time between first poem published, and first book published?

COHEN: That's so nice of you to say that, Tim. I can't, of course, speak for other poets, but I surmise that the notion of the "first book," for many, may be a misnomer. If anyone were foolish enough, or had bad enough taste, to publish what would have, in actuality, been my first book, I don't think you'd be tossing around words like "consistency" and "depth." I was extremely lucky to have studied at The University of Arizona in the late '70s with Steve Orlen and Jon Anderson and, although I did not entirely appreciate it at the time, I was surrounded, inspired and greatly influenced by some of the most talented poets of my generation, who happened to be friends and fellow classmates. To name-drop just a few, David Rivard, Michael Collier, Bill Olsen, Tony Hoagland and David Wojahn. It was clear to me, being realistic not humble, that I was simply not as talented as those folks,

nor was I as ambitious. Furthermore, I was a little intimidated, and not at all attracted to the prospect of scratching and clawing to get a book out in the hopes of landing a university job in Podunk.

I recognized a few things about myself—I was in love with my girlfriend, soon to be wife, and wanted to raise a family. And I intuitively suspected that if my career were dependent upon poetry, my poetry might get stale and suffer. I didn't want to publish a weak book. I liked money and comfort a little more than most poets seem to. And I worshipped poetry to the point that I didn't really feel in a rush to publish. I knew I would compose poems for my entire life; it would be a constant in my world. That knowledge calmed me, left me less anxious. I felt that I could take my time, hone my craft, and I aspired to have every poem in my book published in magazines before I would send it off, which I did. In fact, if I remember correctly, I was so un-ambitious I originally thought if I could have just one poem accepted at a really good magazine, I would be satisfied. And I was, and am, honestly. *The Ohio Review*. Wayne Dodd was kind enough to have been receptive to my poems. And, as corny as it sounds, the fact that my poems were in the same magazine that had published James Wright was gold star. The acceptance note literally brought a tear to my eye.

The books now are gravy. Stuff

occurred though, none the least of which was one son, then another, then another. I luckily landed well-paying gigs right out of graduate school as a director of academic support programs for athletes—first at The University of Arizona, then UC Berkeley, and, for the past twenty years, at The University of Connecticut. My anti-poetic career. My wife and I balanced our lives quite hectically—working different hours, getting the boys to all their sports' events, music lessons, their brief and painful stints in Boy Scouts, SAT prep classes, the whole shebang. All the while, though sometimes sporadically, I kept writing and working on poems. To answer your question, in a nutshell, *Disloyal Yo-Yo* is comprised of poems that transpired over a ten-year period, and a good deal of the subject matter is what my pal Tony called "Domestic Surrealism." Frankly, I had nothing else to write about as that was my day-to-day. Earlier poems are stashed somewhere. I always read a good deal of poetry and kept up with the new voices, and I came to the point where I said to myself—not egocentric mind you—that a good number of the first books that I was reading seemed no better than my stuff.

Only a couple of years ago did I start really thinking about sending my manuscripts out, so I read up on the contemporary process and thought, Jeez, it's a lottery now! My best hope, I thought, was poetry-nepotism. I had good connections, but unfortunately my friends are honorable and ethical. I wonder where they went wrong? I was horrified that poets had to pay money for even a chance. It seemed to prey on the weak. What a scam, I thought—we helpless, meek poets were being victimized by The Man. Frankly, I felt a little deflated. I assumed my work would not stand out and my chances were non-existent. Nevertheless, I submitted to a few of the big contests without acceptance, although I think I was like a semi-finalist or finalist in some. I assumed they told many people that they were, just teasing-carrots to entice poets enough to keep them sending in their dough. So I said the hell with it and began concentrating on

FIRST BOOK - COHEN

writing more intensely. The boys got older, driving themselves to games and such, so I started submitting poems, publishing in the magazines, and I eventually applied for a grant and was fortunate enough to get one. So I decided I'd put together a couple of manuscripts and be business-like about it. I took a chunk of the grant money and sent two manuscripts out to about fifteen places. I sort of forgot about them and all of a sudden, within the same week, I think, I got lucky, and both manuscripts were accepted. Voila.

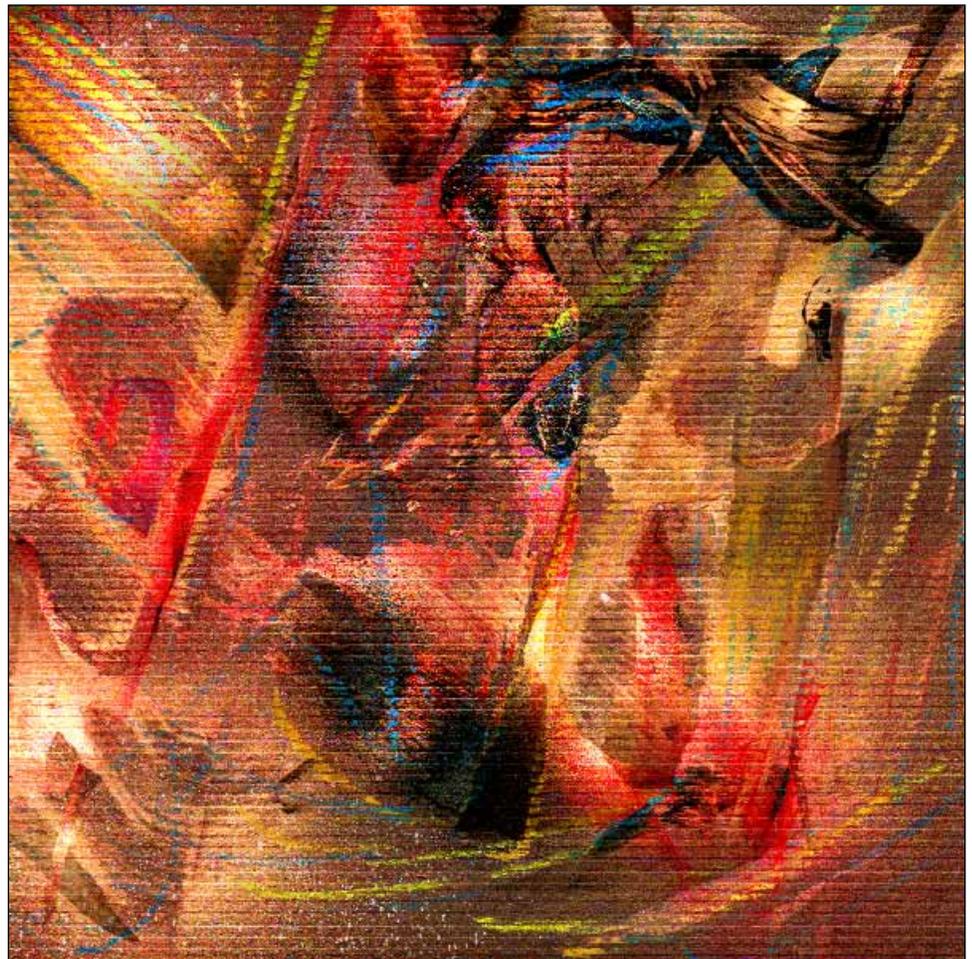
**GREEN:** It's great that you can keep poetry in perspective—few seem to do that, at least overtly. I've always felt that the writing is what matters, having that level of engagement with your own experience, and that everything else that may or may not come with it is incidental. So let's talk about the writing process. Most of the poems in the book seem to start with a premise—exact life-time, the deli line of the dead, etc.—and then you let your imagination run with it. You might say the poems themselves are the disloyal yo-yos—once you let them go, we as readers have no idea whether they'll come back to where they started, or if they'll fly off to someplace new. Freedom and surprise, not as subjects, but as aesthetics, seem central. Is that what your writing process is like? Do you ever know where you're going before you start to write, or is it always a surprise?

**COHEN:** Clever-clever, Tim—I never thought of the poems being disloyal yo-yos, but you are probably right. I like that notion, yes. If I recognize, or even get a whiff of, where the poem is going while I'm writing I stop writing or take a side street, walk backwards, hail a cab, something different. I'm constantly bored with myself, like most people I guess, (maybe that's why we write poems and have hobbies) so why on earth would anyone wish to write what he already knows? If you know the outcome, why bother. Watching reruns of *Law & Order* is the exception however. Most of us, it seems,

are not all that sharp—language is infinitely smarter, wiser, and funnier, than we. I've learned to trust it, see where it takes me. If I'm not writing out of language, I follow a situation that bangs my funny bone; it hurts badly, but I laugh, and likewise, follow those impulses. I'm as surprised by the direction of my poems as the reader must be. I hardly know what I'm doing till its over. I rarely have a clue.

That is applicable to most things in my life. I find the type of art that I enjoy most, whether it's music, painting, cuisine, poetry, whatever, is surprising, mysterious, familiar but unfamiliar, posing questions, euphonious, shocking to the senses. I like to be simultaneously

startled and comforted. I guess I am in a constant state of confusion and bewilderment and I'd rather not know what I think until I see how things string out, then, I want it all to have seemed inevitable. I guess I trust my subconscious, my intuition, "Leaping" as Bly suggests. In life I am afraid and often paralyzed, in poems I am fearless because nothing really is at stake at the moment of composition. I can throw poems out on their ears and try again. Nobody is watching me; it's a secret murder. I am constantly struggling to figure out my poems during composition, to recognize truths and rhetorical patterns as I go along, unravel pleasing musical and intellectual puzzles that reveal themselves to



*Enigmatic*

Oil & Acrylic on Paper, 9" x 9"  
Dan Ruhmanty



me if I'm patient and quiet. For many years, because of long work-hours and young kids—we played zone—I wrote with one foot against the door which made my poems not fully realized, rushed out of necessity. I have a stack of unfinished poems. Now that I have a little more time, as I said, as soon as I can see around the next corner of a poem I go in a different direction, but not arbitrarily though, just another choice that seems to make sense at the moment. I don't care how long a poem sits, even if it pesters and nags me.

For poetry, I live on my own time. If the poem wants to get worked on, seduce me, tell me something I don't already know. Force me to work on you. It's my job to listen, which I take seriously, but the poem has to meet me half-way. Perhaps that's why end-rhyme drifted so far out of fashion. The sound of each word restricts, limits, your word choice and ultimately handcuffs your imagination. Then again, if you listen carefully, all words rhyme, so I don't stress much about music although I love, love, a line with an abundance of accents, muscular lines, and I like imaginary handcuffs, handcuffs that I invent for myself in each poem, and I try like hell not to repeat my patterns, although I suppose we all do. The handcuffs are not kinky; I can still type with them on. I like to let my poems have their own lives; I like my poems to be sixteen-year-old inquisitive kids with a new driver's license. Not reckless, just a little wild, a little Marlon Brando in his youth, but not stupid. I hope I have given them the proper guidance; I hope I raised them right, but ultimately they have to make it in the world on their own. Emily said something wonderful in a poem about that but I can't remember what it is right now. Maybe I'll wake up at 2 a.m., remember, and not write it down, which is one of my best poetic techniques. I don't like to remember too precisely; I find it restricting. Life is surprising, shouldn't art be? I am in constant wonder. I was taught to reinvent poetry every time I sat down to write. This is an intimidating concept for many writers; who wants that responsibility? Who is so

brilliant to invent an art form? I know it's impossible, but I find it extremely liberating. I have my own personal rules of course, but they change from poem to poem, and I make an effort to engage in linguistic and imagistic venues that are unfamiliar to me, to fracture my own rules, even within the same poem. I like to find new, cool moves in others' poems and try to incorporate them into my own (I probably shouldn't admit this).

When I was a kid, I learned basketball moves from Earl "The Pearl" Monroe. After a game I'd go out to the court and fantasize that I was "The Pearl" and imitate his signature spin move. Once I mastered his moves, I'd throw in my own little wrinkle, and the personal challenge for me would be to make my new move not seem at all like Earl's. Earl in clever disguise. There are few truly original artists, no? Maybe none. Although everything I just said is truthful, it is also a lie. Does that answer your question Tim?

GREEN: Ha, yes, in about five different ways! So given this, that wild teenager behind the wheel, how do you put a coherent book together? Of all the poems you felt were good enough to be in the book, what percentage fit? How big is the B-side? And once you have that body of work that feels like a book, how do you go about ordering it? I noticed that "Domestic Surrealism II" precedes just plain "Domestic Surrealism." What's the reason to that rhyme?

COHEN: Oh, nice catch! I'm really bad at math, counting in particular, and thought nobody would read the book closely enough to notice. Actually, there was a point that I wrote a whole series of Domestic Surrealism poems, most of which I had to junk. The survivors, for whatever reasons, kept their original titles so when it was time to put the manuscript together I was concerned with the poems' content, not the titles. I thought it interesting, as well, in a small way, to emphasize that the order that poems are written is not necessarily the proper order that they should appear in a

book. I like books that have varied styles, which seem to have their own logic. I like the themes of individual poems to sort of play off one another; I like poems to be reactions to previous poems in manuscripts. I like the poems to snowball so that the book feels as though it has more substance and inertia than any of the individual poems. I'm not saying I accomplished this, but that's, at least, what I was striving for. I like record albums that have no pauses between songs. Ultimately, my favorite poems are poems that seem to be born out of necessity and some form of obsession, poems that seem as though they had to be written, that spill over into something that's life affirming, life altering, or life-repair, ideas and language that can no longer be contained in its human perception-form.

I also like loads of personality in voice, a normal human being talking to me. The poems in this collection, in my mind, are thematically connected in that way and in voice. Many are of the domestic variety, the day-to-day with raising my family, death of parents, nostalgic memories, swimming in their mildly surrealistic pools. I threw out a lot of poems that seemed to repeat and diminish strategies. I have many stalled poems, poems that run away from home and never call. I write many poems that simply never amount to much, are not pleasing to my aesthetic. So, the B-side takes up the lion's share of my poetry universe.

As corny as it may sound, the poems that I ultimately selected for *Disloyal Yo-Yo* were poems that had meaning to me. I didn't feel that this book could endure the same whimsy as some of my more recent stuff. In some ways, I think of this book as being somewhat flat, speaking directly. Order...that's a tricky question...I ordered the poems the same way I write: intuitively. But because the book was composed over a number of years I was graced with a variety of styles, within my own limitations of course, and I love books whose poems seem varied but from the same voice. They were poems, I guess, that I wanted to have an attach-

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ment to, that were attached to me, and were personal without being exclusionary. As much as I can muster, I think of the book as being sincere, heartfelt.

GREEN: Well I think you succeeded on all those goals—if “imaginative” is the first adjective that comes to mind, then “honest” is certainly the second...the domesticity of “Domestic Surrealism” — there’s a sense that your true psychological home is within these poems. Do you ever feel naked, now that the book is out in the world? It’s one thing to confess to facts about your personal history, but it’s another thing altogether to expose the inner-workings of your own mind. I’m thinking in particular about the first poem in the book, “Sober Trees,” which ends with a revelation about the emptiness that fills half a life. Do you ever worry that family, friends, co-workers in your “anti-poetic career,” will read the book and learn a little too much?

COHEN: Yes, on all accounts. When I was younger I was quite worried that family, friends, drinking buddies, anti-poetry pals, would get to know more than I wanted to share, or think something strange about me. I didn’t know how the polar aspects of my life would fit together. It took time; the components had to come together, like a brash wine. Many of my “athletic” compatriots didn’t even know I wrote poetry until the book came out. Naturally some teased me in a semi-good-natured way. I didn’t want to mix my worlds; outer space DNA doesn’t inbreed well with human blood...many movies attest to that fact.

But now that I’m older, I guess I simply don’t care. I am who I am, comfortable in my cross-breeding alien skin. My real friends accept me for my inconsistencies, contradictions, complexities and flaws. Plus, my wife says my friends from the other world simply scratch their heads ’cause they don’t read poems and won’t spend the time to figure them out anyway...and, they’re probably too embarrassed to admit their ignorance of art or laziness. Some were kind enough to come to my first reading,

bought the book and invented a compliment about one or two of the poems. I appreciated that. I guess I’m at the point in my life that I have no qualms about being myself and I hope my new poems benefit from that.

GREEN: I like that metaphor; poetry really is its own planet. Or maybe a little moon falling forever around the regular world. What do you think poetry’s place should be? What’s its purpose? You seem very grounded as a poet, happy to have it as just one aspect of a broader life. Do you feel content with our current cultural cosmology? I guess what I really want to know is, do you think your athletic friends’ disinterest in poetry is equivalent to a poet’s disinterested in, say, football? Is there any difference?

COHEN: I’m probably talking out of both sides of my mouth here, but I think poetry is elite and commonplace; most people don’t read contemporary poetry and certainly most people don’t spend the amount of intense time trying to compose it in a serious way, but if you stopped almost anyone on the street, I bet virtually everyone, at some time or another, has written a poem and certainly has read a poem. I’m a blue collar type of poet, an ordinary, regular American guy, who happens to have read a great deal of literature simply because I like it, in the same way I enjoy a number of things.

Even though I probably could, I find it pretentious and annoying to make esoteric literary allusions in poems, so I don’t. (Yeah, I get it; you’re smart and well read.) I like accessible poems, though some might argue that some of mine are not. I’m not a footnote type of guy and I’m sort of lazy and don’t want to look stuff up. Now which Greek God was that? What was his super power? But my approach to writing is not lazy; it’s blue collar, working man. I write something every day whether I feel like it or not and put my time in. I go to work sick. I’m rarely inspired and I have no patience for waiting for some sort of Muse. In fact, I don’t think I have a Muse, I just try to talk to people in my poems who I

know and want to talk to. My father got up at five every morning, went to work and never complained. I try to do that—especially with my poetry. Lunch pail stuff.

Many of the “athletic” people whom I’ve been friends with for many years are not what you might think. Many are extremely thoughtful, well-read, interesting people, open to ideas. And they work hard and laugh off failure. What I learned from them is you recruit 20 players and, if you’re lucky, you get one who is good. They move on. I have no qualms about writing twenty poems to get one decent one. It’s a sort of rain off a duck’s back approach. I’m rarely wedded to any one particular poem. If it doesn’t work out; I write another. People involved in sports still have to fracture the myth that they are only interested in physical prowess and intellectualism is not part of their lives. Athletes, by and large, respect hard work and accomplishment, in any realm. I guess I don’t see them as that different from poets I know and respect...so I guess I would respectfully disagree: I don’t think as a rule of thumb, that poets are disinterested in football or vice versa. Everyone seems different, right? After a billion gene possibilities at this point of Man’s existence, we’re all mutts anyway.

But getting back on track, I do think on some level that poems should be accessible to anyone willing to read carefully. An alien could not come to earth and watch a football game and appreciate all the idiosyncrasies and nuances or even the rules of the game, without instruction. Poetry is similar I think, except, the average person does have the linguistic skill to appreciate a poem with no training, if the poet does a good job. Why do people love Frost so much? Plain talk? There’s something to be said about the simple and direct.

There are moments in my life that something happens and a line from a poem I love pops into my brain and I have a life-insight due to that poem and conversely have a deeper understanding of the poem than I’d ever had. It’s as though I instinctively knew the poem was

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wonderful and I should remember it, but I didn't know why or when I'd have to draw on it. Then it happens, and it is. I have no idea what poetry's purpose is for anyone other than myself. It helps me digest the world so that it goes down easier. It's comforting in that I know there are others out there like me; it makes me less lonely. It makes me recognize something I didn't know I knew, or explains something that I sensed but never fully grasped.

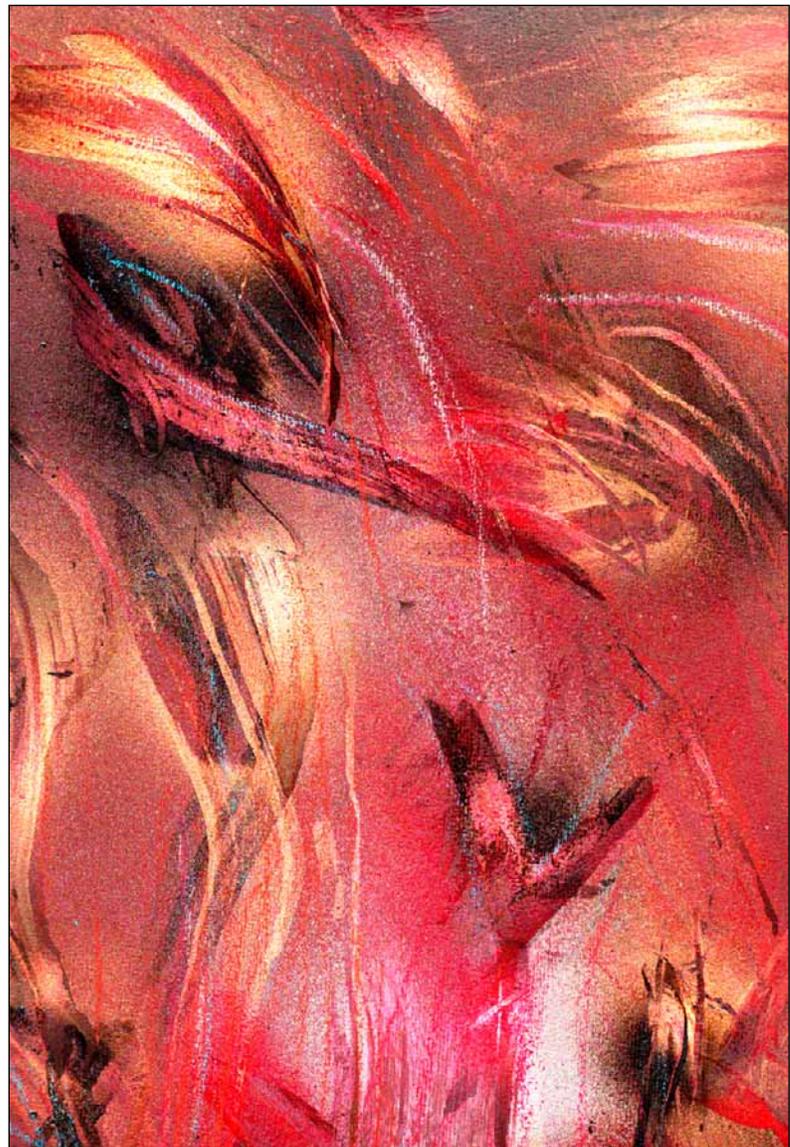
And images. I love inventive images and the music of American diction. And surprises and life-insight. I like the way interesting people talk, people who are excited or resigned to something. I get bored easily so I enjoy folks who have lots of interests, lots of passion...I don't find it inconsistent for someone to love the New York Football Giants and John Ashbery. In fact, those are the people I like best. That's how my boys were raised and they seem fairly well grounded and normal. You can bring up any topic and they seem comfortable with the conversation; all things are simultaneously important and unimportant. In fact, didn't the Ancient Greeks, (one son alluded to them as the Ancient Geeks) who were fairly smart guys, have to pass some type of intellectual test before qualifying for the Olympics? I think I remember reading that somewhere.

It's a Zen thing, too, I think: all things being of equal value, having their place. As much as I love poetry and find it useful in my everyday life, I'm not sure it's more important to me than the Giants winning the Super bowl and, clearly, I recognize that it's not important to everyone. Should we be pedaling poetry door-to-door like religious zealots? Passing out pamphlets? Poetry helps me understand what it is I am and sports help me forget, abandon myself temporarily, as do other things: gardening, TV, etc. It's a sort of ying and yang see-saw. If you think about the show *Kung Fu*, Grasshopper was quite spiritual, exploring the intricacies of the natural and human dimension, or lack thereof, with Master Po, unraveling the nature of the universe in prime time. But,

when confronted with bad guys, who often were one dimensional (clue), and who demonstrated a single obsession, he would kick their ass, in perfect slow motion. Hence, you can be a tough guy and poet. I guess those type of poets are my favorites, except Rilke. I like Rilke but he wouldn't survive in a street fight, unless Rodin had his back.

So I appreciate you saying I'm grounded. I have tried to keep things in balance, in perspective. I do the best I can at my job, raising my family, working on

poems, given my own imperfections and flaws. As I said, my wife and I made some serious sacrifices to make sure the boys got to their games and music lessons, do/did well school—and did my poetry suffer, my production, as a result? Of course, but that's who I am. And that suffering may have contributed to my development as a poet. Poetry is what I studied in college, what I have always done since I was a kid; it's been a central passion in my life; it's been a constant. When things are going badly in life it is a



*Meltdown*

Oil & Acrylic on Paper, 8" x 11"  
Dan Ruhrmanty



FIRST BOOK - COHEN

pal and mistress, when things are going well, it patiently waits on the sidelines, holding an umbrella for me, to ward off rain or the excessive sun. It has no demands and infinite demands on me. Although poetry is somewhat different, of course, from song lyrics, most everyone enjoys music, so can't we say almost everyone loves poetry? One can almost always hear the radio blasting from passing cars in summer when the windows are rolled down. We all sing along in our cars or in front of the mirror in our private teenage rooms. And the molecules of the music evaporate into the air. So maybe poetry is a kind of artistic physics, and our cultural cosmology is that real poetry can neither be created nor destroyed. Wow! How did I get here?

GREEN: Well, that's what I was trying to get at—I think there's a tendency to over-value contemporary poetry, in a way, simply because it's under-appreciated in our culture. If I had to choose between poetry and recreational sports, I'd probably choose poetry, but it wouldn't be an easy decision. They're each important in entirely different ways, and I'd never thought of it in terms of yin/yan before, but that model fits. And strangely, it's the action of sports that quiets the mind, and the inaction of poetry that disquiets.

Let's take a little breather—tell us your five favorite poems, if you can. Not your own, but no restrictions, just the first five that come to mind. I see interviewers ask about favorite poets all the time, but I think it's more interesting to be specific. Gives us something of

digestible length to run and look up.

COHEN: Oh God, Tim, that is a wicked hard question...I love so many poems, and my favorite poems are not necessarily written by my favorite poets, but maybe they are... What do my choices say about who I am as a writer? I would say, Lowell, "Memories of West Street" and "Lepke," two Larkin poems, "Reference Back" and "Talking in Bed," "Musee De Beaux Art," Auden of course, "Refusals," Jon Anderson, and Weldon Kees, one of the Robinson poems, but I can't remember which one...I'll have to look it up.

GREEN: Well that's why I asked it—three of the poems you mentioned I've never read. I'm going to run off to Google when we're done and see if I can find them. There are so many great poems in the world, sometimes the best thing poets can share is simply suggested reading.

Okay, back to you. It seems this is the year you've cashed in on your patience—this fall, your second book, *Swerve*, is coming out from Black Lawrence Press, just six months or so after your first. In an email to me, you described *Disloyal Yo-Yo* as the "older and more civilized" book. So what does the uncivilized Bruce Cohen look like? How does *Swerve* swerve? Tell us a little about the book.

COHEN: I would like it documented, in this interview, that yesterday I was at the Mets' game with two of my sons and we witnessed the first game-ending unassisted triple play since 1927!

I think in *Disloyal Yo-Yo*, mostly, I'm talking to myself, and if other people eavesdrop, so be it. In *Swerve*, the pace and voice and music are more frenetic, obsessive. I am talking to others, more publically, mostly. For lack of a better description, I think the poems are a little more zany, out there, anxious, unafraid. Stylistically, I was influenced by those poets who had a more quirky sensibility and a tone, who wrote with heavier accents and more in-your-face alliteration, internal rhymes and bluntness. Quirkier syntax. Not that I'm a very

subtle writer, but I think I pushed that envelope a little and the poems are unabashedly brash and speedy. Not seeing, or caring to see, that which is in front of me, going faster than I probably should in poems—not in real life; in real life I'm a wicked slow driver, I swerve when a little girl runs into the road following her soccer ball or a couch falls off the pick-up in front of me after a tire blows out, but I keep going, because, in life, mostly that's what we do. We close our eyes, hope for the best, and keep going. That's what we have to do to make any sort of progress in small and large ways. We all know people who are frozen in a particular time due to some horrific catastrophe or life-altering event, and it's sad. They live forever in that terrible moment. We pity them and secretly, or not so secretly, are glad it is not happening to us. Life gets thrown at you from every direction, meteorites hit the earth, and maybe the people who survive are the ones who dodge the flying objects, who are able to swerve. Those who are light on their toes without heavy suitcases.

And I want to be among them. I never wanted to be a helpless victim in art; I never wanted to be afraid to take risks in poems: I always aspired to say "the hardest thing." Even though it's possible, I never wanted my poems to sound like other people's poems. I believe the poems in *Swerve* have a little more courage and gusto than *Disloyal Yo-Yo*, more confidence, a little more of myself. In life, I'm extremely responsible. In my newer poems, not so much. I hope that you never know what I will do or say. So you have to pay attention and hold onto your wallet or you may crash or find yourself alone on a deserted street with no way of getting home, no ID. You can't even prove who you are, and you might have to start from scratch, reinvent the world, and would that be such a terrible thing? In art, of course not.

GREEN: Or football! Thanks, Bruce, this has been terrific.



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## SOBER TREES

from DISLOYAL YO-YO

*Bruce Cohen*

Days I don't drink I am aimless  
in a crowded Sears in a small Iowa.

The lights are ridiculously bright  
& frankly, I can't get used to that.

I am mesmerized with the escalators  
& not just the oblivious ups & downs

but by the illusion of not getting any-  
where & continuously. I drink strategic-

-ally half the time to be unsure of my natural  
state of consciousness. It's a pillow over

the face this sober thing. In its parking  
lot, the vulture tow trucks look for souls

who left their headlights burning & charge  
exorbitantly for a jump. I admit sympathy

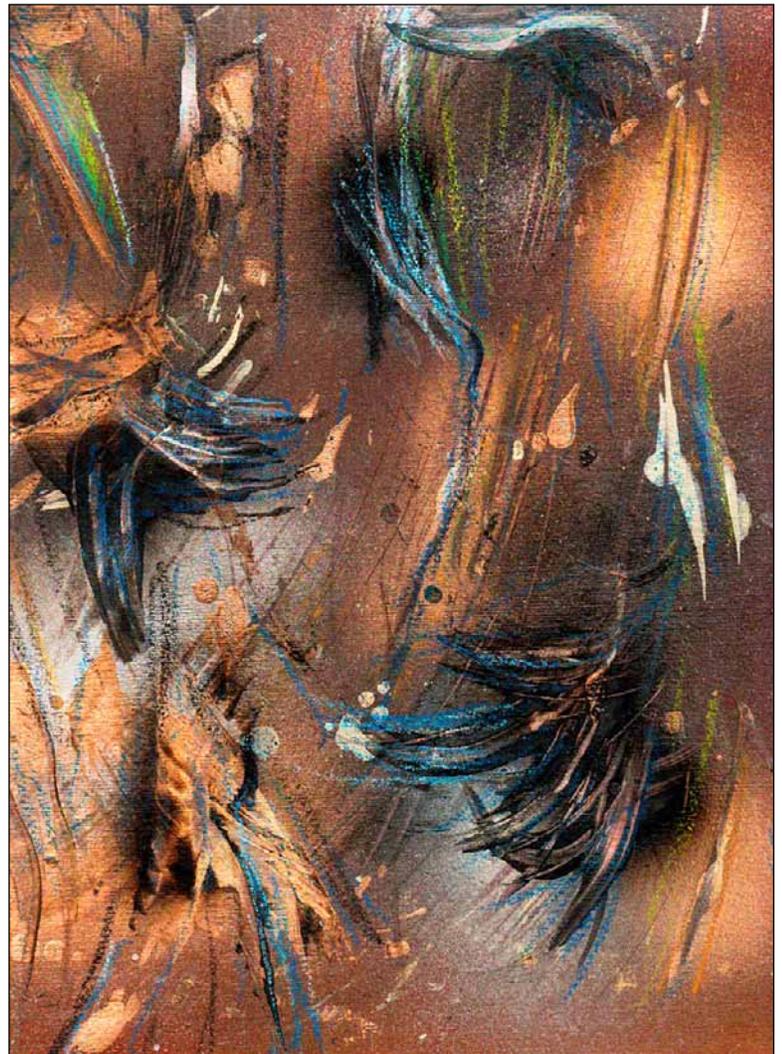
for teen-age girls dropped off by their nervous  
dads with baby sitting moola crammed in their

tiny pocketbooks. When I drink the stars appear  
very impersonal so I know my twin exists

elsewhere & one of us knows the truth & has  
conned the other into some sad isolation that

acts like a very disloyal yo-yo. If I think about it,  
the leaves cover trees less than half the year

but I think of the natural, sober state  
of a tree as having leaves, not being bare.



*Fragile*

Oil & Acrylic on Paper, 9" x 12"  
Dan Ruhrmanty

from DISLOYAL YO-YO

Bruce Cohen

EXACT LIFE-TIME:

It'd be a very difficult world indeed if everyone had  
a clock imbedded in his forehead: t-minus-x  
till the afterlife, the public privy to precisely how much life  
he has left on this pear-shaped planet, everyone but him!

Oh you should never ever tell anyone the truth, but he'd know.  
By the treatment. Petty annoyances rarely worth bickering about,  
he'd be likely to take unfathomable sexual risks with strangers.  
He might not shave daily or watch his cholesterol but dance

beautifully on ripe bananas of futility. More on the bright  
side: there'd be more sympathy fucks, & his embedded clock  
could reflect personal style, antique numbers shaped like  
avocados or prickly pear, or whatever he'd like, whatever

he'd like. Small things would seem silly as they are. You might be  
on the subway & bump into a passenger & know that by Friday  
he'll be dead. That would affect you for a stop or two, wouldn't it?  
Oh, you think it better these embedded clocks are presently invisible,

but all men could wear derbies over their eyes like Surrealists.  
Women could wear veils. Men are forbidden to see their wives  
faces & have to invent complicated signals only the two of them know  
so they can recognize each other in the afterlife. That's real love.

You've seen old war movies. G.I.'s the night before they ship off  
set their clocks ahead to convince their high school darlings to do it.  
Problem is, once the clock's advanced, it can't be set back.  
Young folks often make this mistake. Exact life-time could

make you so much more yourself, more apt to tell people what  
you actually think. But think of the worst sadness: holding your new  
born & seeing she'll not live to her seventh birthday. You might  
devote every waking second to her pure happiness & would this be

so terrible? But it's already terrible. You plan a trip to the Amusement  
Park the week before the funeral, staying each night till the park closes,  
till your feet are sore, till everyone is cranky from exhaustion,  
& she has more stuffed animals than she can hold, her face a spider

web of cotton candy, & you hold your wife when your baby isn't  
looking to hush her sobs or say how lucky you are that you know,  
or how you wish you didn't, how the world was better in its absolute  
uncertainty, or whatever you'd like, whatever you'd like.

DOMESTIC SURREALISM II

Every vacation drive smells like your arm hairs  
singd from over dousing the briquettes

with aromatic lighter fluid, & lobbying for radio  
control, & the kids cranky & spilling in the back seat—

Because so little is delectably dangerous anymore,  
because women don't fold small notes into our hands,

we transparent men, hypnotized by too much  
America, tailgate & honk at the slightest mistake.

Sometimes a random insult sucks you in, & you snap,  
zapping off the radio. The guy who you cut off

shakes his fist & invites you & your pathetic  
fallacy to pull over. Your wife inquires in her calm

if you are crazy, if you're aware he might have a gun,  
which perks the kids up. *That jerk has a gun*, one says.

No you confess to your wife, you cannot articulate  
the nature of your troubles, as though anyone could.

The guy pulls you out of the car by your shirt.  
Some people are addicted to their own solipsistic

adrenaline so are habitually late. Others, when life  
goes well, invent problems just to have a little focus.

It's hard to pinpoint precisely what ticks another human  
off, & when the chaos of the fight swirls like cartoon  
tweeties

around your stupid head, what words can you retrieve which  
might allow you to retain your dignity, the ability to tuck

your shirt back in, gracefully get back into the car?  
After, you signal politely to inform the other motorists

of your noble intention to blend back into the traffic flow,  
& you wave your swollen hand in thanks, invent a smile.



## IF EVERY MAN WERE A ROBERT DENIRO

I worship as my Lord the confused & convoluted  
contusions of late afternoon light—  
the guy who at dawn builds a pyramid  
of champagne glasses & sips from each one—  
the construction worker who hurls his plate  
of meat loaf & ketchuppy spuds against a wall.

I'm the only breathing guy at this weekday matinee.  
Popcorn's not even warm.  
The usher doesn't bother to tear my stub.  
A drunk in the Ladies Room dolls up by painting  
a lipstick smile beyond the borders of her lips.  
Makes her clowny, the lavatory light.

Gangs keep time with spray-painted graffiti  
that's simply a clock whose numbers are shadows  
so show times are always & never.  
I see someone's lost wallet on the velvet seat  
I'm about to sit in so change rows.  
The drunk, now sober on theater darkness,

which I worship as my Lord, sits in the balcony.  
My desire travels the illegal borders of lipstick,  
like "Coyotes" smuggling migrant grape pickers  
over the desert at dusk,  
like a womanless man buying lipstick at a drug store,  
like the one kiss that propels you through this life.

On the way home, meander at a magazine rack  
thumbing what I'd never buy. I know the days & hours  
only by particular TV shows. You think I'm pathetic?  
You ask how the days defeat their own purposes?  
Here's my motto: Praise the quick glance.  
Life's desire. You know what I mean. Maybe you don't.

Let's start from this lonely dot. I'm walking home  
from a movie about the way two strangers sip  
the coffee of each other's alien sensibilities  
& wind up in the sack. You pace yourself a step  
behind & I smell the warm bakery rolls  
with poppy seeds you're carrying in a brown paper bag.

I can't name your perfume (or any) but there's  
a hint of citrus. I can tell by the sound  
of your steps you're not used to walking  
in high heels. I could be some loony who whips  
out one of those pugnose revolvers. But I turn  
& say I can't decide if you or the rolls smell better.

from DISLOYAL YO-YO

Bruce Cohen

You pretend to ignore me & I feel like a cardboard  
DeNiro, TV left blasting in my studio apartment,  
lights off. Sometimes I phone myself to see if  
I'm home. The traffic signal says DON'T WALK  
but you trot the way women do in high heels,  
women who have someone improbable to get to.

## CRYBABY BLUES

I woke up this morning & my teen-age son strums  
His electric Fender with a Crybaby wah-wah pedal.  
He's into feedback, Pretty Mama, & not the kind  
For self-improvement. My kids are growing facial hair  
& quick flipping the channels when I walk into the room.  
I woke up this morning & the hound dog wind

Blew the trash can top down the street & I was  
Rolling & tumbling after it in my boxers. Raccoons  
Got into our garbage & ripped up the plastic bag  
Leaving lamb bones & a used tampon on the lawn.  
My car needs a jump. My heart needs a jump.  
I woke up this morning & the shower was like ice.

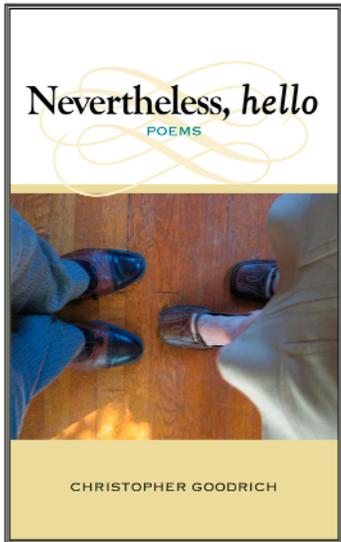
There are no buttons on my coat, pretty baby, & my socks  
Have holes & the mailman uses a battering ram to shove  
The bills into my mailbox. I woke up this morning  
My baby was gone. I think she must have gone on her jog.  
I smelled bacon frying & coffee percolating & I was  
Sweating in my bathroom mirror, my razor hand shaking

& everybody late for something & blaming each other.  
I woke up this morning & gave my children an evil eye.  
I opened the drawer & took out their voodoo dolls  
& rusty pins & put a hoodoo in their lunch boxes.  
My heart needs a jump. My heart needs a jump.  
Don't be a baby, baby, & let the baby have his bottle.

# NEVERTHELESS, HELLO

by  
Christopher Goodrich

CHRISTOPHER GOODRICH teaches in Montgomery County, Maryland. He has also taught at Frostburg University and New York University. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Margie*, *The Worcester Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *Natural Bridge*, *Sam*, *The Sycamore Review*, *The Cimarron Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, and *Rattle* among others. A chapbook, *By Reaching* is available from Finishing Line Press. He is a Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Prize recipient and poetry editor of *The Dirty Napkin*. ([dirtynapkin.com](http://dirtynapkin.com))



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## PRAISE FOR NEVERTHELESS, HELLO

If you want to laugh out loud while simultaneously weeping silently, read Chris Goodrich. If you want to meet a young poet with far more than his rightful share of wisdom and tenderness laced with iodine, Goodrich is your man. Talk about love and marriage, in poetry that's inventive, playful, and right on target about just how needy we all are? Read this book for pure pleasure.

—Alicia Ostriker

“Speak softly and carry a big stick” only begins to describe Christopher Goodrich’s deceptively soft spoken and plain style poems as they delve ordinary musings to a broad depth of human interaction and understanding. At times funny and light on the one level while pulling no punches on another, these carefully crafted poems always hammer home a poetic whammy of emotions with which the reader will readily identify and resonate.

—Raymond Hammond, editor, *The New York Quarterly*

Let me welcome a new poet who writes bravely from what he calls the earth in one of the most tender voices I have heard for years. One who understands, as he forgives.

—Gerald Stern

Like the strange and marvelous love child of James Tate and Mahatma Gandhi, Chris Goodrich writes poems that list and bleat and pierce the tattered canopy. The awe and awfulness of the human condition is at the core of this collection, what’s “wretched and regal and...desperately true” about us as we struggle to love each other and ourselves against impossible odds. The world will ruin us, these poems say. We will ruin each other beautifully: Nevertheless, hello.

—Paula McLain

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

“You, Me, My Mom, My Dad” in *New York Quarterly*; “Forgiving the Bastard Who Keyed My Car” in *Kestrel*; “Instructions to a Lifelong Friend” in *The Kit Cat Review*. “First to Wake” and “She Asks if We Can Still Be Friends” first appeared in the book.

## YOU, ME, MY MOM, MY DAD

I'm told I'm looking for mother and father combined,  
which means you will be bald and co-dependent.

I will blame you for their shortcomings, applaud  
you for their success (a thing you will measure

by how often the children come home). Praise  
the rice pudding you'll know how to make,

and god love you for the \$50 on my birthday  
with notes that read *Dearest Christopher,*

*We love you over and over, Mom and Dad.*  
I make love to the half that brought surprise snicker bars

home when I was four. And afterwards,  
I hold the half that tucked me in at night,

the half that made me a sister. In your four eyes,  
I am already reliving myself even as I try living

up to you, which is absurd. You hold my car keys in your hand,  
scold me for coming in past curfew, out with an older girl.

I know I should have called. I apologize for not doing so.  
Tomorrow, let me stay home with the kids so the two of you

can see a movie or dine finally alone. You don't have to like her,  
but I will tell you this: her name is Rachel. I'm going to marry her

as many times as I can.

*from* NEVERTHELESS, HELLO  
*Christopher Goodrich*

## FIRST TO WAKE

If you are first to wake,  
do me a favor and turn off the alarm,  
let the dog out to pee.

I would, but I'm far away now,  
standing on a bridge that hovers  
above a living riverbed,

speaking Latin to someone  
who speaks it back. I am turning the pages  
of guilty pleasure, strolling the gardens

of invincible men, kissing as many girls  
as I can before interrupted by traffic.  
If you are still looking for something to do

after watering the lawn,  
there are breakfast sausages in the fridge,  
they need cooking or they'll turn on us.

You could prepare them with eggs or oatmeal,  
thinking all the while of the conversation we'll have  
as I make my way from the bedroom,

our comforter wrapped around my shoulders,  
my stomach rumbling from the emptiness  
of waking up alone. And if you haven't already

left me for someone who wakes with you,  
if you haven't run off with one of the street men  
who keep their eyes on you,

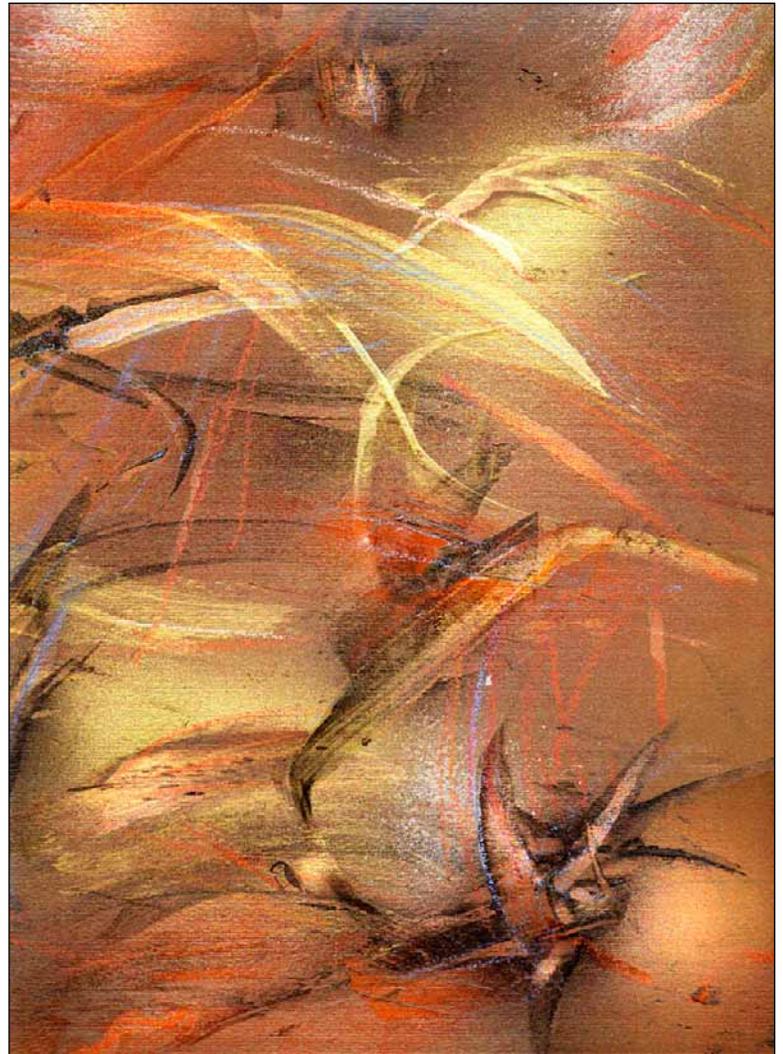
you might take a moment to turn the radio on,  
something classical, or in any case,  
something to soothe me back to sleep

in the event I am startled awake  
by the clanging of pots, the slamming of doors.

FORGIVING THE BASTARD  
WHO KEYED MY CAR

from NEVERTHELESS, HELLO  
Christopher Goodrich

I must imagine the child waking up with a mouth  
packed with cankers, her pale hair fallen  
to her feet, her feet missing toes.  
I must imagine her stomach  
having recently lost its lining,  
her widowed father crying himself awake  
every twenty minutes or so.  
I must imagine him in a torn apron—  
what he uses for a winter coat—  
running with blackened slippers through hail  
to the doctor's office, collapsing from exhaustion,  
the doctor running to catch him.  
I must imagine the doctor as overweight and concerned,  
demanding a warm cloth, steamed milk,  
seeing the father's face, already knowing his story,  
what must be done to save the little girl.  
I must imagine the father protesting at first  
when he reads the prescription,  
and then, seeing the doctor nodding slowly,  
nodding slowly himself.  
I must imagine the brittle unforgiving night  
with him in it, scraping the left side  
of my red '95 Chevy Blazer,  
following doctor's orders,  
obtaining the precious General Motors metal,  
the needed iron, catching it in a wooden bowl, weeping—  
I can't forgive if he is not weeping—  
and I must imagine the sick girl  
in a second story window,  
a frail hairless liver-spotted arm  
outstretched in his direction,  
yelling as loudly as one can yell  
with one vocal cord,  
Don't do it Father! I'd rather die,  
I'd rather die.



*Twilight*

Oil & Acrylic on Paper, 9" x 12"  
Dan Ruhrmanty

from NEVERTHELESS, HELLO  
Christopher Goodrich

SHE ASKS IF WE CAN STILL BE FRIENDS

A woman, alone, rows a boat.  
She is nothing  
save muscle and wood.

Is thirsty. Has spent the last  
year rowing.  
Has only what she needs

to survive: seven mangoes,  
exceptional intelligence,  
unusual courage, fear.

She craves sand and shade.  
Needs meat  
and sleep. She sees something

in the distance, is it, yes,  
an island.  
She wants on. Steps

out of the boat exhausted.  
There is a house.  
There is a door. He sits

at a desk, alone. His back  
to her. He may  
be wearing a fedora, sandals.

Anyway, he is bearded. He turns.  
She sits. He stands.  
The door is still open.

It is a beautiful day  
He sees a boat.  
He takes only what he needs

to survive.

INSTRUCTIONS TO A LIFELONG FRIEND

Relax. You watered the chrysanthemums.  
You turned the oven off. Breathe. Breathe again.  
Spend more than you should for tea. Use what's left  
to buy a postcard. Mail to Christopher  
Goodrich. Let him know you are still standing.  
Still a witness to beauty. Waking up  
at 7am and leaving traces. Your mother  
would like two poached eggs and an orange slice.  
And your father, he loved you.  
He did not die without telling you so. Feel your feet.  
Your powerful arms. Well-appointed aren't they?  
Breathe. Relax. Eat a salad. Use cucumbers  
this time. You are made of hard work.  
And good work. Concentrate on those you need.  
Take them to a movie. Love forever.  
And prove that you can again and again.  
Don't move so much. You turned the oven off.  
The chrysanthemums, watered. Relax.  
The moon is rising—it could be otherwise.  
You don't smoke. Isn't that something?  
You live so simply. Driven by the most  
acute affection. You should lose something.  
And read Beckett and pay rent for four years.  
Buy that girl a dress. Then take it off her.  
Love her too much, while you have the opportunity.  
Kiss something. Kiss something.  
If the reason you wake is to give  
and take, please kiss something.





# EYE CONTACT:

## A LOOK AT VISUAL POETRY WITH DAN WABER

### #1: W. Bradford Paley

The easy definition of visual poetry is “poetry that must be seen to be fully experienced.” That’s not a bad definition. It isn’t very helpful, either. Definitions are slippery things. The more precise they are, the more limited their use is. The more general they are, the more limited their use is. I mint and refine and discard definitions of visual poetry on an ongoing basis. If I believe in anything it’s that the most useful defini-

tion is not a single definition but is, rather, the aggregation of every attempt at definition, warts and all.

These two pieces by W. Bradford Paley are visual poetry, to my eye. They do not occupy that sweetspot right at the convergence of all the factors that constitute the defining characteristics of visual poetry. This is not why I wanted you to see them. These two pieces, taken together, place outermost marking stakes

in the ground along one axis—the axis runs from the micro to the macro along the line of an awareness of the material nature of language. These are visual poems that notice language at work and invite us to look at what letters and words are doing. One invites us to take a very close look, and the other invites us to take a step back.

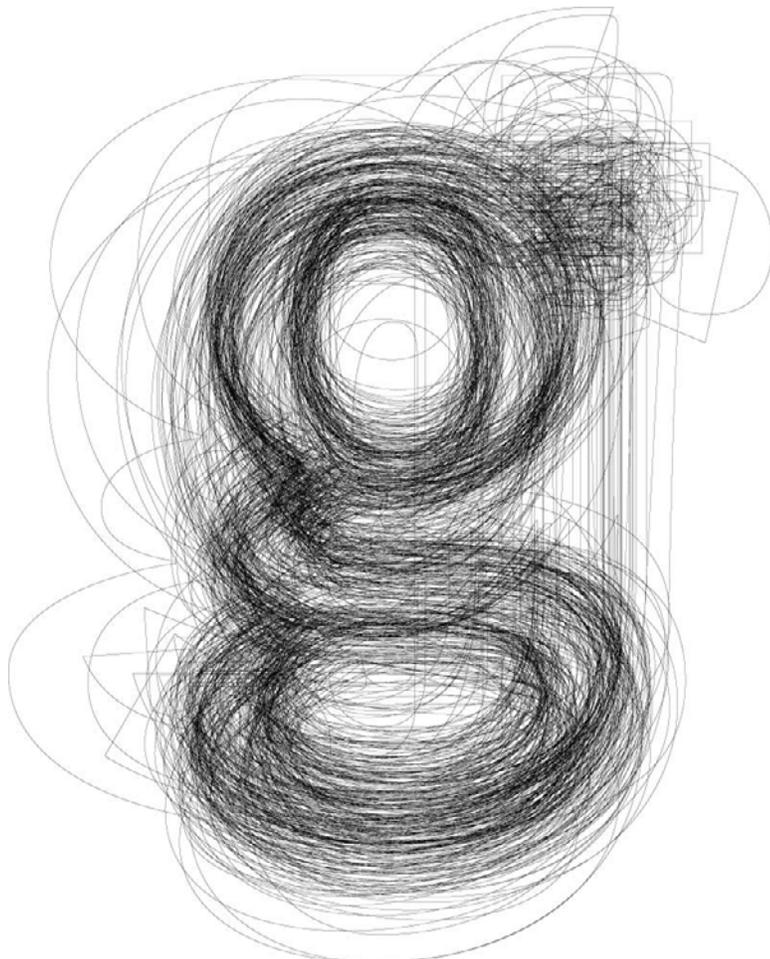
The “g” is one from a complete series which places the outlines of 166 different font faces on top of one another. This gets us thinking about the g-ness of g, what constitutes the identifiable and defining characteristics of g, what it means not just to perceive g but what it means to be g. It is ur-g, quasi-g, meta-g, Platonic g, über-g, and immediately identifiable as g at the inspection of single lines and in the gestalt of aggregate impression.

“Alice” is a screen capture from an interactive visualization of the full concordance of a text, in this case Alice in Wonderland. Tag clouds are the closest contemporary concept, but, they’re a paltry comparison to what textarc has been doing for nearly a decade. The text is analyzed and displayed with an eye (and an ear) towards showing the intersections of frequency of words with relative location within the text and with the connections between them (if you want to play with it yourself, it’s running at [textarc.org](http://textarc.org)).

W. Bradford Paley is an interaction designer who sometimes teaches at Columbia University and always works to bring perceptually rationalized interface ideas to Wall Street (where most of his clients are), and the design and art worlds.



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)



Face Variations: g

W. Bradford Paley





THE IMPERTINENT DUET



THE IMPERTINENT DUET:

TRANSLATING POETRY WITH ART BECK

#2: Odi et Amo - Hate and Love and the Poet's Soup

I.

For those who'd rather avoid reading a treatise on the Latin classics—relax. That's not where this is going, at least not where I intend it to go. This is going to be an exploration of echoes, rather than antiquity. But that said, let's start with Catullus. And with a two-line poem of Catullus that, as much as it's poetry, could as well be graffiti on an ancient wall. His "carmen (song) 85" written in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.

*Odi et amo. Quare id faciam, fortasse  
requiris?  
Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.*

This is a much translated poem, but also a "much adapted" piece, both in poetry and music, as it resonates down the years. It's a love poem of sorts, but also a poem that sticks in the throat of Catullus' love poems. The two lines combine complex emotions with a simplicity of expression—and that very simplicity, I think, makes it more difficult to directly translate its poetry out of the Latin. Because of this, *odi et amo* tends to migrate into as many adaptations and variations as translations.

Before even approaching a translation of this poem, maybe it's helpful to talk a little about Catullus. Saint Jerome, compiling his chronological tables some 400 years later, notes Catullus' birth in 87 BC and later, notes that "Catullus died in Rome at the age of thirty" in 57 BC. (And why does it seem more than ironic that the name of the great ascetic scholar should be forever linked to Catullus this way?)

Modern scholarship tends to use the

dates 84 BC to 54 BC. Still making Catullus thirty at his death. He traveled in high Roman circles, was acquainted with Julius Caesar, and was a friend of Cicero. Readers of this piece are probably either going to already know an awful lot about him, or not enough. I don't have the qualifications to say much that's meaningful to the former, and there's not enough space in this article to address the latter. So, for the sake of moving forward, let me just generalize that Catullus wrote some of the most bittersweet love poetry of his, or any other, epoch.

According to legend—and I'm of the mind that research at this distance isn't much more than legend—his inamorata was a married woman some ten years his senior, named Clodia. She was the sister of a notorious libertine, Clodius Pulcher. Sexually notorious in her own right, she was rumored to have poisoned her husband, Metellus, who died in 59 BC—either two or four years before Catullus's death.

But by that time, Catullus had been supplanted as her lover. Catullus may have been the romantic poet every sentimental woman wants. And Clodia, the goddess slut every romantic poet craves. But she had priorities beyond poetry. Clodia was accused of many things, but never sentimentality.

No one knows how long Catullus' affair with Clodia lasted, but it was intense. Evoking Sappho, he called her "Lesbia"; wrote famous poems to her sparrow. And other poems whose translated lines are common currency still. One of the most read is song #5:

*Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus,  
rumoresque senum severiorum  
omnes unius aestimemus assis.*

Let's live, my Lesbia—and love:  
the stern opinions of the old  
aren't worth a cent to us.

*Soles occidere et redire possunt:  
nobis, cum semel occidit brevis lux,  
nox est perpetua una dormienda...*

Suns set and rise again: For  
us, once our brief light sets,  
there's only night and an endless sleep.

From there the poem goes on to talk about a thousand kisses, then a hundred, and another thousand, alternating between hundreds and thousands into the unquantifiable.

Catullus' thousand desperate kisses continue to multiply. The poem has exploded into translations and imitations from the Renaissance to today. The first stanza was beautifully translated by Sir Walter Raleigh. And there's Andrew Marvell's *To a Coy Mistress*. A poem that seems hugely indebted to Catullus V. Except Marvell's "the grave's a fine and private place/ But none, I think, do there embrace" seems coldly cerebral next to Catullus' *nox est perpetua una dormienda*. And *embrace*, a tepid substitute for a thousand kisses.

A present day poet, Joseph Campana (in his *Book of Faces*, a volume whose poems revolve around Audrey Hepburn) also bends Catullus V to his purpose:

Let us live, let us love—Audrey!  
The old men talk but they're  
not a copper to your gold (this  
I know) you're gold rising  
and falling you are daytime.  
You're brevity and light and  
I am the sleeping darkness...

And let's not forget Raymond Chandler, who's said to have adapted his title, *The Big Sleep* from Catullus V.

II. THAT'S THE SWEET, BUT NOW FOR THE BITTER

A friend recently observed that when it



## THE IMPERTINENT DUET

comes down to it, sweet love poems really aren't that interesting. "When I go to readings," she said, "to open mics... It's when they start shouting about their exes, that p...., or that c.... That's when you hear the applause." A good many of Catullus' poems are nasty epigrams, some as prurient as Martial's. In fact, Martial, that consummate bad boy of Roman poetry, writing a few generations later, cites Catullus as a mentor.

Catullus could rant as well as—well actually, much better than—any open mic poet. But sometimes the rancor of his great love turning sour is a quiet scalpel that slices deeper than any rant. And that helpless wound comes down to us, almost clinically, in *Odi et Amo*.

Here's the Loeb Classical Library prose rendering. A simple statement:

"I hate and love. Why I do so, perhaps you ask? I know not, but I feel it, and I am in torment."

But too simple? Too prosaic. Sounding out the original, even if you can't read Latin, the words seem resonant, charged, vital.

*Odi et amo. Quare id faciam, fortasse  
requiris?  
Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.*

The first sentence seems to offer only one translation choice—I hate and love. But *hate* may not be the most productive translation choice. *Hate* in English tends to have an active component of anger. *Odi* is often used more passively, the way you'd hate the taste of headcheese. Not especially the way you'd hate a mortal enemy. When Horace says: *Persicos odi, puer, apparatus*—"I hate Persian trappings, boy"—he's not talking about going to war against Persia. Rather, a sense of aesthetic distaste. Softened to something more reactive than active, Catullus' *odi* takes on more nuance, less self certainty.

And in choosing just how to interpret *odi*, I think you also have to consider the word order—in which *odi* comes before *amo*. Latin is an inflected language and word order is often flexible. But in this case you have one verb preceding the

other, one image preceding the other. If *odi* is intended to be an active, aggressive emotion you'd think it would, more often, be preceded by love troubles—rather than precede love.

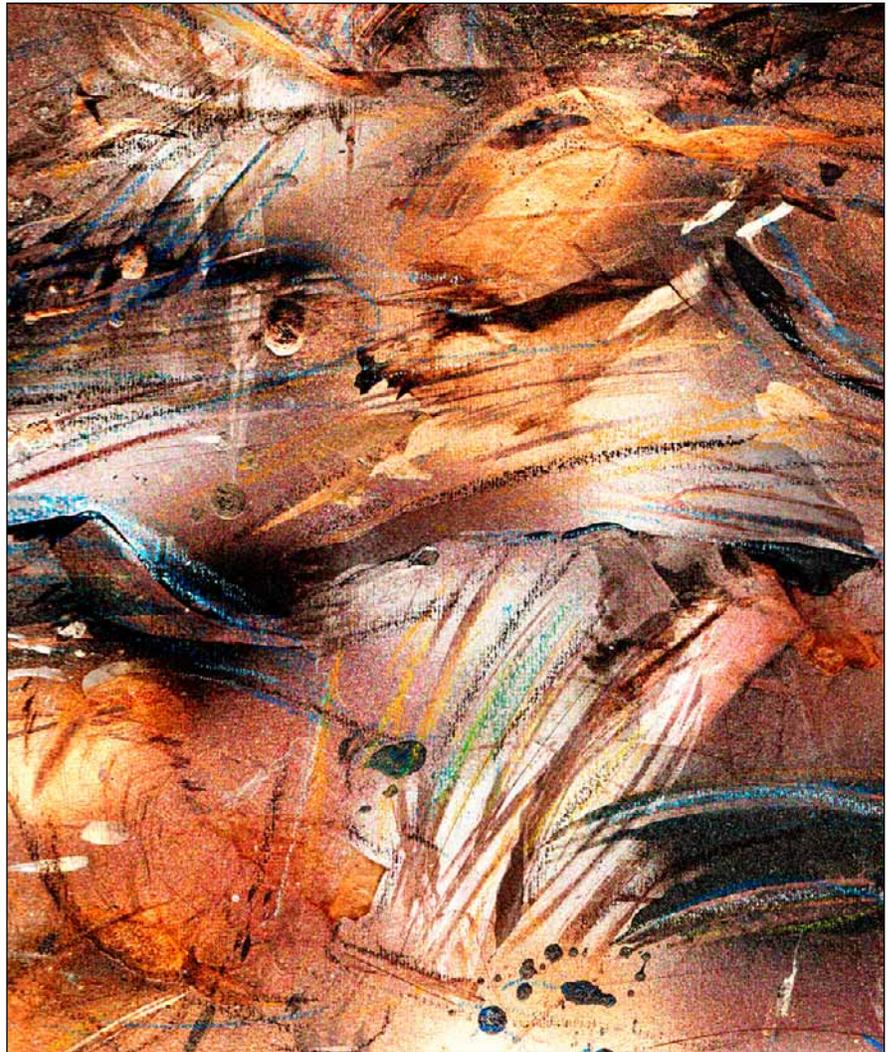
Trying to think of examples where aggression becomes love, you can come up with some dark, extreme images. A sated sadist fondling her prey. Maria Goretti's assailant turned suddenly remorseful. Othello's too late epiphany.

On the other hand, if *odi* is interpreted as something more passive, an instinctive dislike or aversion—then the helplessness of *amo* in this poem seems underscored. One falls in love, the way

we always fall in love, despite ourselves. Stumbling into an unwanted, yet deeply wanted wound.

Or as another friend once observed: Lovers, meeting for the first time, often feel initially annoyed with each other. And that annoyance is just the heart's immune system struggling to avoid the pain to come.

But in any case, one of the reasons these two lines of poetic graffiti have endured is that they resonate in every direction like a stone dropped in a pool. There's no one right way of reading the poem. It speaks to the dark extreme fringe as well as to the myriad varieties of



*Below*

Oil & Acrylic on Paper, 8" x 10"  
Dan Ruhrmanty

## THE IMPERTINENT DUET

commonplace heartbreak. Catullus' *odi* and *amo* co-exist like yin and yang, constantly circling and constantly nourishing each other.

Going forward into the line, the identity of the "you" in the second sentence also offers some possibilities if you imagine a real rather than rhetorical "you" who's asking "why?". Maybe the speaker's lover? Maybe Catullus is really talking to Clodia, not the reader? Maybe he's even being nagged to explain himself. Cast this way, the first line could validly be interpreted as: *I'm repelled and I love. Why that's so, maybe you do need to know.*

### III. THE ROSY CRUCIFIXION?

The second line opens unequivocally enough. *Nescio*—"I don't know"—*sed fieri sentio*—"but I feel it happening"—*et excrucior*

And with *et excrucior* we get into the question of "false friends" in translation. Words that strongly resemble words in another language, but in fact mean something else. *Crucio* in Latin, and *crucifigo* derive from the same root, but *crucio* means to torture, and *crucifigo* to crucify. A subtle distinction, but one doesn't necessarily kill you—the other does.

So the speaker in *Odi et Amo* is tortured not crucified. Probably the better equivalent would be "racked."

The Nobel winning Greek poet, and sometimes translator, George Seferis remarked in one his journals that it's impossible for us to read Homer except through the experience and patina of intervening history. So that the great classic works take on shades of meaning that were only potentially there in the original.

I couldn't agree more. The best poems (especially in translation) acquire a life of their own beyond their original intent and mutate in their dialogue with succeeding generations of readers. They speak to us through a phone line interwoven with the fiber optics of our past and their future.

For us, some 2,100 years after

Catullus, *crucifixion* (false friend or not) can never escape the weight of the sacramental—an energy of life as well as death. This was hardly the case when Catullus wrote. But that historic/cultural patina seems to—*not add to—but actually draw* weight out of Catullus' poem. It's where the poem wants to go now.

I don't know exactly what inspired the title of Henry Miller's *The Rosy Crucifixion*. My guess is it had more to do with the Rosicrucians than Catullus. But *Odi et Amo* would make a perfect epigraph for the relationships in those novels. And, for me, it's almost impossible to not read *crucifixion* into *excrucior*. And to not finally translate the poem as something like:

*I'm repelled and I love. Maybe you do have to know why.  
I don't know, but I feel it happening and I'm crucified.*

### IV. ECHOES

As with song # 5, Catullus #85 has echoed down the centuries. When I queried an American Literary Translators chat group for examples, one person responded: "I thought of Racine's *Andromaque*, the sentence that used to be taught in all the *lycees classiques* in France: *Ah! Ne puis-je savoir si j'aime ou si je hais?* Alas, am I incapable to know whether I love, whether I hate?"

The speaker, in this case, is a woman, Hermione, but the emotion is universal, certainly not just male.

And *Odi et Amo* has always for some reason brought to mind some lines from Paul Schmidt's very loose, very lyrical translation of Rimbaud's *Drunken Morning*:

*It began with a certain disgust, and it ended—  
Since we could not immediately seize upon eternity—  
It ended in a scattering of perfumes.*

A not particularly torturous ending. But in my memory those lines are always mixed up with lines that occur a little

later in the translated poem:

*It began in utter boorishness, and now it ends  
In angels of fire and ice.*

Not explicitly Catullus, but lines Catullus would certainly understand. And Henry Miller as well, since he adapted the poem's last line—*Voici le temps des Assassins*—as the title for his study of Rimbaud, *The Time of the Assassins*.

In the early twentieth century, Louis Zukofsky did a homophonic "translation" of *Odi et Amo* that makes "sound" if not imagistic sense. Not everyone's cup of tea. But still an echo:

*O th'hate I move love. Quarry it fact I am,  
for that's so re queries.  
Nescience, say th' fiery scent I owe  
whets crookeder.*

Jospeh Campana also uses an adaptation of *Odi et Amo* in his Audrey Hepburn-centric *Book of Faces*:

*I hate, I love (Audrey....  
...  
I know nothing,  
I feel it happening:  
the torment (mine).*

But two of the most interesting and lyrical contemporary adaptations come from Frank Bidart. In both cases, he begins with a simple "I hate and love." And he omits the second line of the original, managing to compress a compressed Latin poem even more. The last line in his first version, from his volume *The Sacrifice* reads: "Ignorant fish who even wants the fly while writhing."

The second variant of that last line appears in his later collection, *Desire*, with the Bidart poem now entitled "Catullus Excrucior": "The sleepless body hammering a nail nails/ itself hanging crucified."

With Bidart, you get the sense that it's not the lover, *but love itself that's odious. Love, itself that you can't live with, or without.* Then you realize the original Catullus can also be read this



## THE IMPERTINENT DUET

way. Realize just how protean the deceptively simple Latin is.

## V. CATULLUS AND OLD HELMUT SOIK

Catullus was a young poet, and he's still a poet for the young. There's a sense of trespass when the old read Catullus that Yeats famously caught in his poem "The Scholars":

Bald heads forgetful of their sins,  
Old learned, respectable bald heads  
Edit and annotate the lines  
That young men tossing on their beds  
Rhymed out in love's despair  
To flatter beauty's ignorant ear

All shuffle there; all cough in ink;  
...  
Lord what would they say  
Did their Catullus walk their way?

I'm no longer young and I'm going to sidetrack here to someone even older: Helmut Soik, a poet who for some reason has been on my mind lately. We'll wander a bit, but soon be back to Catullus. In fact, re-reading Soik was one of the catalysts that started me re-reading Catullus and it seems appropriate to give Helmut the last word.

Indulge me, if you will, as I backtrack to somewhere around 1978. That was when Soik, a German poet my father's age came to visit. We were both enjoying a pretty good year. I'd just published a book length poem based on Casanova's memoirs that had gotten some nice buzz. And Helmut's first (bilingual) volume of poems in English translation was recently out. We shared the same small, but hot at the time, California publisher.

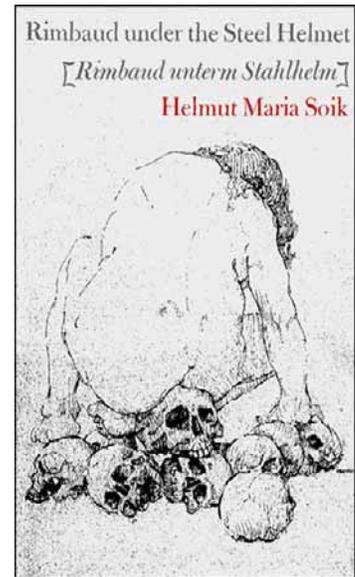
Helmut came to San Francisco to read, and we spent a few great days together. We wandered the neighborhoods—North Beach, the Castro, the old and new Chinatowns, and pondered the tombstones at Mission Dolores. His conversational English was only a little better than my stumbling German, but his fluent half sister Tanya accompanied us and our dialogue moved along as easily as a movie with subtitles.

And Helmut's life could have made a movie. Born in 1914, he belonged to what, for Germans, was definitely not their "greatest generation." In his youth he was a prodigy, publishing his first volume of poetry at 16. And his second, five years later, along with critical studies of Rimbaud and others. He was a pacifist, active in avant-garde circles and had little interest in anything but literature and the arts. The sort of life the young Catullus may have led. And he had a sweetheart, the young love of his life.

But then, of course, he was drafted. And ended up at the Eastern Front. War stories are notoriously unreliable. But the way Helmut told it, he was exhumed unconscious from under a pile of corpses after the battle of Stalingrad by a band of Russians. He was a cherub, then, he said. Despite being nearly thirty. A lost kid, through and through, and some angel must have touched his captors. Rather than shoot him or send him off with the other POWs, they adopted him as sort of a mascot and just put him to camp work. He looked back with genuine nostalgia at that interval. I'm not sure how long it lasted, because somehow the dates seem as out of whack as the concept. Although it all seemed quite logical when he was telling it.

Then, as the story goes, when the war was finally over the Russians just shook hands and sent Helmut walking home. This is what I don't understand. Were they the Red Army or a band of irregulars? Or just a disillusioned unit improvising their own rules. Helmut was never really clear about anything except how fond he was of those Russians. In any event, he somehow made his way across shattered East Europe to what he thought was a German town.

But war had redrawn the borders and he found himself in newly Soviet Poland, conscripted to hard labor in the salt mines. He was finally repatriated in 1950. And spent the rest of his aesthetic (and personal) life practicing a sort of discipline of alienation. His mature poems dissect both the Hitler years and the postwar "German miracle" with a deeply humane cynicism. He settled,



miraculously back into life with his old sweetheart, but avoided any non-menial pursuit except poetry—content to be "useless" to society. You come away from reading Soik with the sense that Nazism isn't just an era that ran from 1933 to 1945, but rather a nasty strain woven into humanity from which Helmut had taken permanent leave. The title of his American volume, *Rimbaud under the Steel Helmet*<sup>1</sup> is apt.

But the poems are wide ranging, and Soik's volume begins with poems in honor of other poets: Tu Fu, Lorca, Rimbaud, Belli, and, yes... Catullus.

*Von Catull las ich in der stunde der  
dämmerung  
daß er in seinem dreißigsten jahr starb  
in der todesstunde alleingelassen  
in einem dreckigen hinterhaus  
der großstadt Rom.  
Die sexbombe Claudia Pulcher mied sein  
bett von toten küssen und schweigen....*

I read about Catullus in the twilight hour,  
the way he died in his thirtieth year,  
left alone at the hour of his death  
in a filthy back alley tenement  
in the metropolis of Rome.  
Sexpot Claudia Pulcher wanted nothing  
to do with his bed of dead kisses and silence...

Later in the poem:

## THE IMPERTINENT DUET

...Was nützte es ihm  
daß der pontifex maximus  
seinetwegen staatstrauer trug  
daß die zehntausend luxusnutten  
in den heiligen straßen  
schluchzten  
die jeunesse doree absichtlich schmutzige  
anzüge trug...

...What use was it to him  
that the Pontifex Maximus declared  
official mourning on his behalf,  
that ten thousand exquisite whores  
sobbed  
in the sacred streets, that  
the gilded young all changed into  
soiled robes...

But at the end, Helmut's question and his  
old man's answer:

Und trotzdem  
was blieb erspart ihm?  
Schon sein früher tod  
trug zur geniebildung bei.  
Die demonstrierung weiblichen verfalls  
an seiner angebeteten geliebten  
vielleicht fünfzehn jahre später  
blieb erspart ihm  
Und das heißt doch wirklich  
corriger la fortune!

And for all that  
what, if anything, was he spared?  
His early death, for one thing, solidified  
his image as a genius. And it spared  
him as well from watching his heartthrob's  
menopausal decay some fifteen years  
later. You could say dying was really  
the ace up his sleeve!

Helmut died a few years back. The  
story may be embellished a bit, passed  
from his sister to our mutual editor. But  
as I heard it, he was hiking up a not too  
strenuous mountain trail in a popular  
resort. And happened to be trudging  
behind a woman who caught his prac-  
ticed eye. "What a nice ass you have," he  
said.

She stopped, turned, looked him  
over, smiled and said: "Coming from an  
old goat like you, even a compliment is  
an insult."

A couple of days later, peacefully  
watching television in his cabin, he died.

Helmut wasn't spared much in his long  
life. But if the account of his last days is  
to be believed—even at eighty-some-  
thing, that ache still glowed.

## VI: THE POET'S SOUP

Catullus died famous and young—Soik,  
old and obscure. Googling *Helmut Maria  
Soik*, the only recent references I could  
find were to the bilingual collection I  
mentioned above and a German volume  
of poems published in 1980 whose title  
translates to *Ramblings about the Possible  
Existence of Hell*.

His obscurity wouldn't surprise  
Helmut who, in a long, somewhat  
Brechtian, poem titled "Night and  
Nothing" (*Die Nacht und das Nichts*)<sup>2</sup>  
said:

A man went to bed  
with a bundle of poems,  
wrote on his knees  
despite the cold in the room.  
He knew:  
for industrial society  
for competitive society  
he was useless.

Later in that poem he asks the big ques-  
tion:

Teach me comrade!  
Teach me in my ignorance!  
Give me the answer!  
Who gives the poet  
his soup?

*Wer gibt dem dichter die süppe?* Who  
nourishes a poet? In one sense, it's our  
poetic ancestors. Soik was nourished by  
Catullus, as Catullus was nourished by  
Sappho. But this can only go so far,  
provide only part of the calories a poet  
needs.

*Süppe* is the daily ration of the  
humble and misfortunate, of mendicants,  
internees, conscripts, and labor camps.  
From the threads running through  
Helmut's work, I've always felt his  
poetry was nourished forever after by his  
captor-saviors in the Russian forest.  
Whatever the real story, I've come to

imagine them as a band of survivors  
whose priorities had probably come  
down to avoiding the twin grinding jaws  
of Hitler and Stalin.

And would Catullus' insistent songs  
still be nourishing us if Catullus hadn't  
been nourished by Clodia? Not  
Lesbia/Clodia—the eternal muse, the  
eternal ideal. But Clodia the woman who  
lived, aged, grew, faltered and plotted to  
survive. Who bemused and captured and  
spooned out the stony, prisoner's soup of  
poetry to Catullus.

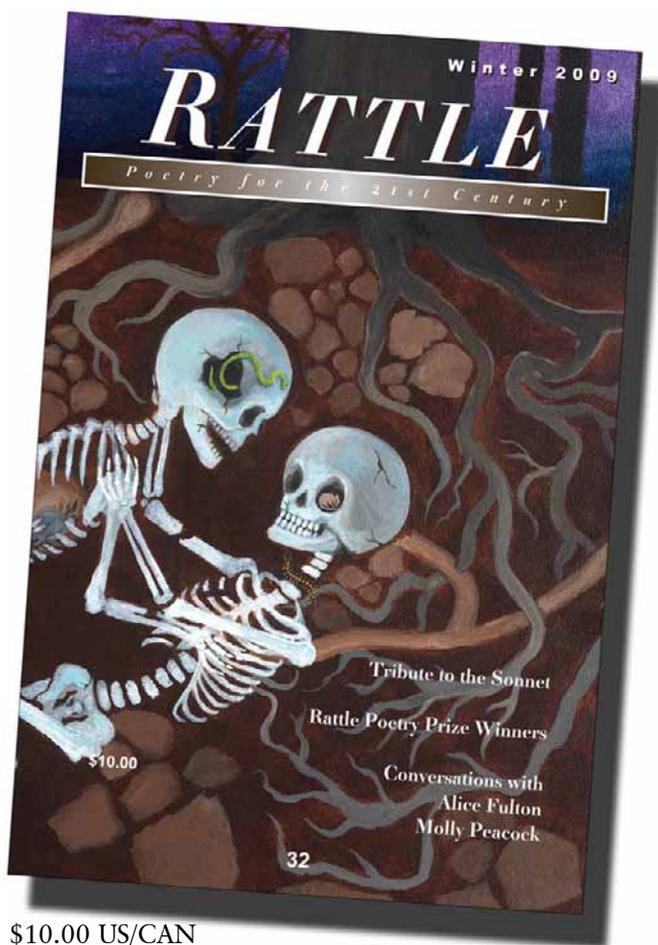
## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup>*Rimbaud under the Steel Helmet* is still in  
stock at SPD books. [www.spdbooks.org](http://www.spdbooks.org)

<sup>2</sup>The excerpts from Soik's *Die Nacht und das  
nichts* are as translated by Georg Gugelberger  
and Lydia Perera in the original 1976 Red Hill  
Press edition. The excerpts from his Catullus  
poem were retranslated for this article by Art  
Beck.



ART BECK is a San Francisco poet and  
translator who's published two translation  
volumes: *Simply to See: Poems of Lurorius*  
(Poltrou Press, Berkeley, 1990) and a  
selection *Rilke* (Elysian Press, New York,  
1983). His recent articles on Horace and  
Rilke in John Traintor's magazine Jacket  
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## TRIBUTE TO THE SONNET

Releasing in December, 2009, issue #32 celebrates the “little song,” poetry’s most enduring traditional form. Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets, a backwards sonnet, free verse sonnets, blank verse sonnets, clean sonnets, dirty sonnets, invented sonnets, sonnets that praise sonnets, sonnets that mock sonnets, a sonnet that uses only one rhyme-word fourteen times...all capped off with a full heroic crown of fifteen sonnets by Patricia Smith. The variations are limitless—there’s nothing more liberating than a little restriction. T. S. Davis introduces the special section with a personal essay on his journey into form.

Also in the issue, Alan Fox interviews Alice Fulton and Molly Peacock. Along with 60 pages of open poetry, we share the 11 winning poems from the 2009 Rattle Poetry Prize, culled from over 6,000 candidates.

### TRIBUTE TO THE SONNET

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 Howard Price • Patricia Smith  
 Alison Townsend • Emily Kagan Trenchard*



*Christine Dresch*

## NUTS

The last few months, my grandfather  
 answered only to the name  
 General Anthony Clement McAuliffe,  
 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division commander  
 during the Battle of the Bulge.  
 Nazis were endlessly besieging the nursing home.  
 He haunted the front lobby,  
 ducking the muzzle flash of passing chrome,  
 rallying brigades to repel visiting doctors,  
 telling the nurses they could stick  
 their Kraut applesauce up their Kraut asses.

General McAuliffe was real enough,  
 and widely remembered for replying “Nuts!”  
 to German demands for surrender.  
 So we guessed he might have  
 met the general, over there.  
 Maybe he’d fought in Belgium—  
 the massacre at Malmedy, the Wereth 11—  
 an awful lot had been going on.  
 We questioned old friends,  
 but we never found out for sure.  
 He rarely mentioned the war;  
 all he’d ever kept he black-bagged  
 in the attic, immaculately pressed,  
 looking hardly worn.

I suppose it’s never too early  
 to begin talking myself into  
 whatever person will confront  
 what I’ll no longer be capable of fending off.  
 Sometimes I lean towards Oprah,  
 reinforced by whooping housewives,  
 or Annie Oakley,  
 blowing holes in buffalo nickels.  
 Other times I think  
 I’d like to be Mae West,  
 embarrassing the attendants  
 rolling me to BINGO  
 with suggestive jests.

*from RATTLE #32, WINTER 2009**Poetry*

But on days when distant  
 seems to have crept a bit closer  
 since last I looked, I think it might  
 be wisest to end up Amelia Earhart  
 who, long after her final takeoff,  
 could still be glimpsed via a fiery, jeweled trail  
 arcing the vanishing point of sea and sky,  
 leaving no wreckage behind.

*Colette Inez*

## THE TUNER

*for E.C.*

Choose how the forest  
 was deprived of a tree.  
 Blight, wind, fire?  
 I once lost a cantankerous man,  
 who tuned pianos.  
 Tall, an oak to me,  
 he goaded music from the keys.  
 I almost see him biting on his pipe,  
 tamping down the London Dock.  
 Blown back leaves, birds, moths,  
 the gestures here.  
 Pendulum, tool box auctioned off.  
 Summer roars another blast of green.  
 “I like to see a piano perspire,”  
 he’d say to me, slamming the lid  
 of the Baldwin.

*Matthew Gavin Frank*

AFTER SENZA TITOLO, 1964

*painting by Corrado Cagli*

I promised him I would not say  
grasshopper, or superman. So

Fortune is this fish and this  
flower, and neither are the body—

not some smart flat  
of a knife. Not some

wondering about the stars.  
The coming into the world

insectile, or some dumb gang  
of coral, smacked with its first air—

I can't look at a fish without thinking  
how lucky they are to have

the ocean. How can they watch  
the stars? It's beautiful

what must be substitute,  
their words for night,

the different way they  
hold their fins.

How we come into  
this thin tissue with a stroke

of fingertip over gill, the words  
we have to explain, dumb

as the coral—wing to bird, fin  
to fish, leaf to tree—is that

the best we can do?  
Our heartbreak is last year's

nest, the frozen lake, the yard  
we forgot to rake. The lie

*from RATTLE #32, WINTER 2009*

*Poetry*

is that we'll miss our families most.  
Instead: the silver batteries

agitating the surface of the water,  
the things we aren't—some wild

mating we can only read about,  
all strange biology and our hearts

that are a part of it, kept from us,  
something else we're not. We're

made up of servants  
without a lord, working to push us

toward cold water and  
it's beautiful, we're science

and there is no substitute  
for the stars. Not mother

or husband or daughter, but fish,  
but finch, but fir.

from *RATTLE* #32, WINTER 2009

Poetry

*Arthur Vogelsang*

---

ENVIRONMENTAL

Unfortunately rather than grass there was white paste  
Or rather than an orange tiger lily there was white white out,  
And a lime tree or an outfield? No instead there was white medicine  
In a normal tube which over and over had to refill  
Itself to cover the whole major league outfield  
And on nice brown and black checked sheets with brown pillowcases  
There were without mercy each night snow and white glue mixed  
With snow in my spot in the bed.  
In the morning, we fully awake, the glue was fifty percent  
Of the snow that was shoveled from the walk. Each day such snow  
Was waiting outside and of each day the first five hours  
I shoveled. Tell me yours.

OK. The pets whose names you know well were dead, all fourteen,  
The ones who are six years old and the ones who are fifty-two,  
Or they were all lost, we could not find out *which it was*. The people  
We know, or knew (and that's the hard part)  
Were also hopefully lost rather than decayed  
With no consciousness, and we searched for the creatures and humans  
Every waking minute in the endless cities then went to sleep  
And as we slept we hoped they were hopelessly lost not dead.

*Mike White*

---

NASCAR

Not rolling in liquid fire  
or pulled apart by physics.  
Not between commercials.

But the way an old dog  
half-blind  
noses around and around

some quiet  
apple-scented  
chosen ground.

from *RATTLE* #32, WINTER 2009

*Tribute to the Sonnet*

*Ron Offen*

---

AUBADE FOR ONE DISMAYED

Half-Alice in her milky, silky sheets  
almost awake to the ache of another day  
rebounding from her beaming ceiling,  
grieved leaving the comforts of the night—  
the snuggled pillow and the shy bedfellow  
a fuzzy dream had borne and then withdrawn  
at the intrusion of the hooligan light.

She closed her eyes once more to place the face,  
so familiar and, yes, similar  
to that of someone she had always known.  
Perhaps she'd find a name if once again  
she slipped into the deep warm sea of sleep.  
And then a voice called Alice and she saw  
a woman waving, craving her return.

*Elizabeth Klise von Zerneck*

---

FREEDOM

*Haight Street*

The realtor claimed the flat was lived in once  
by Janis Joplin, a quite common claim,

we later learned. The tactic worked on us.  
We learned to overlook—that hint of fame!—

the smell of gas, an awkward floor plan, soot  
that never scoured. We dwelled not there but on

our plum address and, when fall came, we bought  
dark Goodwill coats, the nights much colder than

we had foreseen. Through that long year, we read  
Jacques Derrida, and smoked, and grew fresh thyme

on the one sill with light. We baked wheat bread—  
well, one loaf anyway—and drank red wine,

and each day died a bit—twenty, confused—  
two other words for nothing left to lose.

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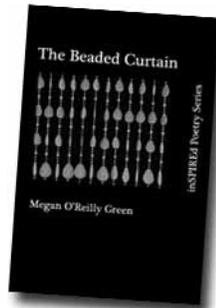
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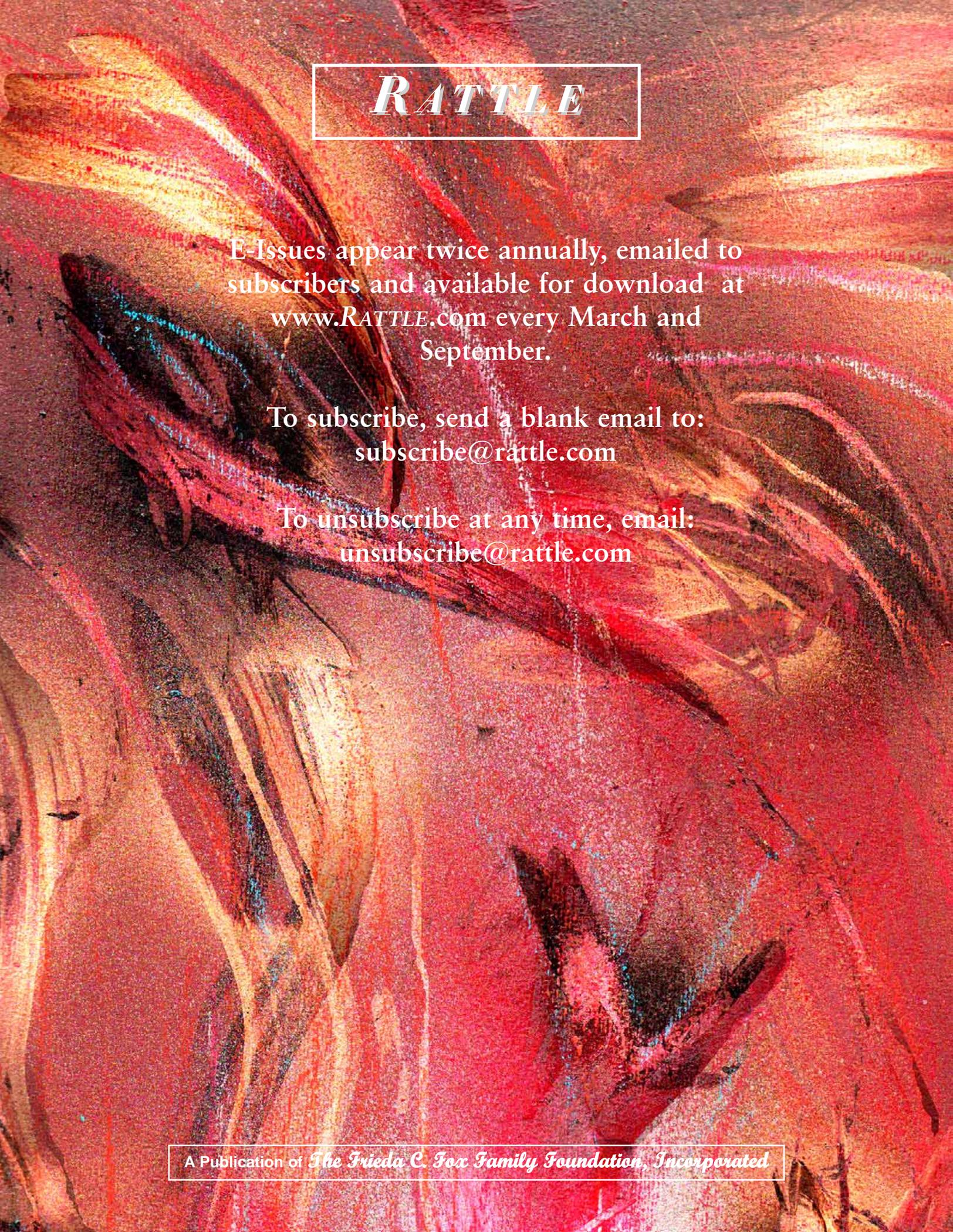
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