

SCHOOL
of the
AMERICAS

poems

DAVID RIGSBEE



Black Lawrence Press
New York

for Jill and Makaiya

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

1.

Shum / 15

Canoe / 18

In Passing / 20

North State / 23

The Stegosaurus / 25

Charlotte Mew / 27

The Hook / 29

Field Service Report / 31

Gil's Sentence / 33

Redcaps / 36

Roy Orbison, New Orleans, 1984 / 38

2.

Get It Down / 42

Flow / 44

Mink / 46

Talking Points / 48

The Message / 50

Russians / 51

I Am Nobody / 52

The Assassination of Sadat / 53

At the Grave of Jesse Helms / 55

Masha / 57

Sodomites / 59

Elsewhere / 61

The Attic / 62

3.

Ode to Wilbur Mills / 67

Treehouse / 69

After All / 70

Magic Marker / 73

School of the Americas / 74

Song for Tom / 76

Bald Man with Poodles / 79

Heresies of Self-Love / 80

The Slug / 84

The Courage of Unspeakable Acts / 86

The Translator / 88

Yes Way / 90

Dalman Flowers / 92

About the Author

Acknowledgments

AGNI

Artful Dodge

Ce Low Press

Great River Review

Kaimana

The Brooklyn Rail

Café Solo

Poetry Hickory

Poetry Northwest

Pushcart Prize XXXVI

The Raleigh Review

1.

SHUM

I went with my teacher to a lecture once
in an ornate hall: long windows and Empire chairs.
The diminutive scholar was legendary:
he had been a confidante of Mayakovsky
and friend of the then-still-living Lilia Brik.
He had made formalism all the rage and so
blended nicely at Harvard when Stalin yanked
the choke-chain, and poets vanished in
binges of murder, imprisonment, and suicide.
We were late, and only a few unoccupied seats
were scattered about the hall. So down
the aisle we strode past more professors
than I had ever seen in one place.
Bearded, severe, they followed our entrance
with all the disapproval a Ph.D. can muster.
My teacher, a fierce blonde and former model,
countered with the aplomb of two well-received books
and parked herself on the front row, me next to her.
This distinguished professor announced that he
would recite a poem by Velimir Khlebnikov
by way of warming to his subject,
which was “sound verse,” in Russian—*shum*.
Then he began to present what Khlebnikov
had claimed was a new poetry to counter

the tyranny of significance. Stepping gingerly before the august audience, he started to emit clicking sounds and to gesture like an old-school Thespian. A silence went up from the audience, unsure if it was being played, or if it was just collectively missing the boat altogether. At that point my teacher reached into her purse and extracted a compact and brush. She opened the compact and gazed at her own countenance for what seemed a full minute, then began to brush her hair with long strokes, pausing every few to extract the captive hairs and drop them on the university carpet. The scholar pretended there was nothing amiss and soldiered on with his rendering of the poet's cricket impression, nonetheless aware of the Amazonian woman not four feet from him, so tall that in merely sitting she easily matched his standing height. When she had done, she put the brush away, checked herself one last time, then snapped the compact shut. With hands in lap she sighed once and turned to the poetry reading at last, letting her gray eyes come to rest

on the important little man and his recitation.
To this day, I don't know which was the better
performance. But each taught me something invaluable
about poetry, that art where I stood eager
to begin my work, that small country,
that Switzerland of decorum and peace
that lies between nonsense and vanity.

CANOE

Well into September the gardenias
were squeezing out their heavy smell
deep from the sugar of rot and pre-rot.
It was like Canoe, the cheap cologne
boys used to slap on their cheeks
before they went forth to meet the girls
who would pick over them (on this account)
and leave many in the emotional disarray
of having been passed over. But for some,
it was the smell of victory and reward,
and those grew sweet and strong, even
mythic, in the belief that nature,
or at any rate, their lives, possessed
a coherence that they could access
with their smooth skin, muscles,
and good teeth. No one suspected
any collusion with death, and only those
whom Giuseppe Belli called the “dog faces”
caught the faint decay that streamed after
the chosen swirled by, and even these
failed to draw any but a fair conclusion
because the moon was like that,
shining over the lawn, and the music,
although the words were inane,

pierced lovers and failures alike
with its silver needle moving in and out
of a fabric they don't make anymore.

IN PASSING

The artist I once compared to Ulysses
who learned to chisel frowns from quarried stone,
who painted ugliness like an angel
when the art world turned from the god-hunters,
high on infinity, in favor of the urban cool
of joke and technique, died an artist's death
on the throne, midday, disappearing from
the nurse's eye into the silence of marble.

Our last visit, he emerged, gloved and rubber-
aproned, pushing his jeweler's visor bought
to disarm glaucoma, up over still-thick hair,
pausing only to point the walker more narrowly
down the ramp to his sitting room.
From there, he commenced the last lesson:
space, contour, line, stepping forth into it.
He had lost none of the manic zeal with which

years earlier he cajoled Matta into buying
a used helicopter and brought from Italy
a Roman beauty, formerly a model, making her
dream self-creation so deep she slashed
canvas after canvas, until he showed her
how to find the ledge where space took off

and craft fell backward like a discarded barrel,
the space of the painting, I mean.

You're better than Schnabel! he thundered
at my wife, who, like a soul in Dante,
saw already the dead memory overlaid
on the old man sitting at her elbow.
She had come with her portfolio,
the student now grown powerful herself.
He urged her to study *The Last Judgment*
that ultimate in large-scale organization.

Look at Kline, he said, though he doesn't
go far enough. Always the plane: how
many dimensions to the plane? He hurried
to answer his own question. Depth is not
optical, he said, and empty depth is not
space. When things are nebulous you have
to affirm the negative with clear images.
The deeper it goes the flatter it gets.

The negative decides the contour. Hours
of this. Weeks later, I wonder how all
the cicadas draw down their racket,
then send it spinning back through the trees,
leaving dusk to sound, night to insight

because the negative space has to be positive.
And because it is evening back at the stone,
a small plane passing joins the mower.