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## ***Debt* by Mark Levine**

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Let's begin with Levine's openings:

The caption of this photograph is "Man hit by falling  
ice."

In the chapters that follow, the theory of the cosmic  
second hand unfolds in layman's terms, with reference  
to the sand dollar and DNA.

Is dinner ready yet?

—"Seconds"

Time and again, in these poems, we are in the instant  
coming and going: "Friday night. / Dad's in for his valves./  
Advance notice reveals that/"Isadora Duncan Is Among  
Us"/is the name of tomorrow's poem. Today's name is  
"Bev." ("Requiem")

In these magic moments—Hi, I'll be your poem for  
today—things are not going as well as they did for, say,  
Emerson: "The soldiers torched the crops while retreat-  
ing. It only seemed fair". ("Poem")

In speaking of this transdownmentalism, old terms are  
not much use (we have taken the "avant-garde" out back  
and shot it, and "surreal" now means MTV), and the new  
term, "postmodern," as polyglot as the others, also would  
mislead. There is an antilyric in Levine, yet in using  
language, he loves it; in using his mind he respects it;  
through caring for his audience, he plays with us, not  
against us. The Buddhist would call this compassion, and  
in Levine's poetry it coexists with the devices and mecha-  
nisms of postmodernism that often spell only distance.  
Levine comes close through voices that cross over from  
curs to killers to poet to audience (we are in this together)  
and through his technique, that includes us, as in the old  
lyric tradition, in sufficient meaning to make the frag-  
ments hurt.

Sometimes, as in "Poem" or "Capitalism," these poems  
shade towards a broken voice, sometimes towards many  
voices, sometimes towards language turning back on itself,  
tearing itself up—"ragged," as the old jazzmen said.  
Always we find in Levine's poems not antilyric, which  
suggests a toggle on/off relation of language to expression,  
but a difficulty in singing, a tightness in the throat be-  
tween self and song, or between song and itself, that is our  
world. And that's important.