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Debt by Mark Levine

William Bevis

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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 retreating. It only seemed fair". ("Poem")

In speaking of this transdowndentalism, 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 mechanisms 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 fragments 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 between self and song, or between song and itself, that is our world. And that's important.