

# Crossing Over: Art and Poetry

## Borderlines: Drawing Border Lives / Fronteras: Dibujando las vidas fronterizas

poetry by Steven P. Schneider,  
drawings by Reefka Schneider

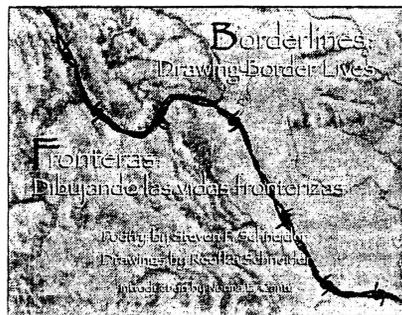
San Antonio: Wings Press, 2010.  
64 pp. \$19.95 cloth.

Reviewed by  
Octavio Quintanilla

There is a tradition of collaboration between artists and poets. Think of William Carlos Williams and the painter Charles Demuth, collaborating to capture the kinetic energy of Williams' poem, "The Great Figure." Think of poet Nick Flynn and graphic artist Josh Neufeld, who, more recently, have also collaborated to merge two artistic mediums: figure and figure of speech. In both of these cases, the poem has been the inspiration for the art. However, in the case of husband and wife, Steven and Reefka Schneider, who collaborate in *Borderlines: Drawing Border Lives*, the art is, overall, the inspiration for the poems. Composed of 25 drawings and 25 ecphrastic poems that draw on the lives of people living on the U.S.-Mexico border, the book offers a political and aesthetic view of an often marginalized area of the United States.

On opening the book, the eye tends to move toward Reefka's wonderful charcoal and conte portraits depicting six-year-old street vendors, beggars, and musicians. Then, the eye inevitably finds Steven's poems and José Antonio Rodríguez's expert Spanish translations. In the "Artists' Statement," Steven and Reefka declare that they offer this book "as a testimony to the people who work along the U.S.-Mexico border in the Rio Grande Valley." The drawings and poems are, indeed, a testament to the people who try to live with dignity in an area where cartel violence, a border wall, and considerable poverty can easily break the human spirit.

Reefka's drawings capture the beautiful, yet realistic, faces of the border. For instance, in the first drawing of the book, titled, "Six-Year-Old Street Vendor," Reefka brings to life a young girl peddling handbags in the streets of Nuevo Progreso, a Mexican border town. Though her lips are "sealed," leaving us with the impression that she is swallowing a smile, her dark eyes reveal what Steven puts into words—her poverty: "She will never learn to read and write./She leaves only traces of her footsteps/On the muddy paths beside the Rio Grande." The girl's bleak future is not only emphasized by Steven's poetic lines but also by Reefka's skilled shading of the girl's forehead and cheeks, which evoke age, hardship, and entrapment. This first drawing and



poem set up the tone and recurring themes of the book: the privations and the struggles suffered by the poor.

Throughout the pages of the book, we encounter people who struggle to survive and also work as hard as the six-year-old vendor. We find the "Garlic Man" who looks out at the world "[l]ike a man who has seen too much of it"; a "Beggar and Daughter" who are "[t]rapped in an economy/Of harsh winds and muddy streets"; a "Three-Year-Old Street Musician" who plays a song "For all the children/Who go hungry." Images and poems of this nature lead us to the final drawing, "Mass for the Disappeared," in which we see a woman holding a candle, her head covered by a shawl. The candle's smoke hauntingly transforms into a skull. Fittingly, the accompanying poem

is a memorial to people who have disappeared for political reasons: "Disappeared for speaking out./Disappeared for remaining silent./Disappeared for asking questions." The anaphora gains momentum and power as the poem progresses: "Disappeared for wearing a Star of David./Disappeared for wearing a cross./Disappeared for belonging to a union." Though Steven enlarges the poem by alluding to people who have disappeared in different parts of the world and in different times of history, the final lines are an appropriate closure, returning us to the borderlands and to the disappeared women of Ciudad Juárez: "Disappeared from maquiladoras./Disappeared from the face of the earth." As each poem completes the story begun by the drawing, and vice versa, we begin to see the emergence of a larger narrative, one in which the main characters are vulnerable and are often victimized by repressive political systems and by harsh economic conditions.

The book is intended to give us a wide range of images and poems depicting border people, which is why drawings such as the "Mariachi with a Red Violin," "Alegria," "Little Dancer," "Mariachi Femenil," and "La Bachata" depict subjects that are more celebratory of the region's culture: mariachis posing deep in concentration; a guitar player who has the "heart of happiness" hanging from a necklace; a young ballerina who will one day "dance a ribbon of steps/Across a pinkish stage flooded with lights"; a vibrant couple "smoking up the dance floor" in bachata rhythm. These people are suggestive of the beauty that can be found amidst poverty and illiteracy, and they work as a counterbalance to hopelessness.

Overall, once we read the stories in *Borderlines*, once we look at the faces that call on us to see them, we begin to understand why so many people from south of the border, as well as from other countries, risk their lives

Two stories deserve special mention: "The Theater Spectacular," which incorporates magical realism to reduce all creatures, even people, to elaborate puppets; and "Diorama Alley." This second piece describes unsophisticated displays whose

naked edges are readily exposed...asking us to consider that the most any of us are actually capable of is reproduction, and mediocre reproduction at that.

The profundity lies in our ability to recall that surface has no substance as we dwell on the two-dimensionality that pervades all things, on the lack of both foundation and permanence, and on an immanent death that neither lurks nor is cajoled, but is simply intrinsic to human production.

Kasper returns to this theme in the final story, "Incremental Dissolution":

We were meant never to notice it, but in our dissolution of meaningful work and the ensuing monotony, we discovered the essence of what had been put in place. It was so devious a device as to be imperceptible, and...intended to keep us lulled into moderately paranoid subservience, or at least impotent and listless until the days of our own deaths.

Catherine Kasper is also a poet, and her two collections reflect her interest in science and natural history. Such curiosity and range indicate an impressive intellect and certain critical approval. ✧

---

**Nan Cuba** is the co-editor of *Art at Our Doorstep: San Antonio Writers and Artists* (Trinity University Press, 2008) and has published work in such places as *Quarterly West*, *Columbia*, and *Harvard Review*. She is the founder and executive director emeritus of the nonprofit literary center, Gemini Ink, and is now an assistant professor of English at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio.

to come to the U.S. In this book, Steven and Reefka accomplish what Norma E. Cantú, in her introduction, says they do: Offer "faces to the often unnamed and unknown characters who people the very real geophysical space that is our borderland." This is a book that transcends contemporary issues and leaves us with lessons, the most important being that none of us wants to be ignored, that none of us wants to be silenced, that all of us want to be more than mere footsteps along the pathways of any border. ✧

---

**Octavio Quintanilla** teaches English at South Texas College and has poems forthcoming in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *American Poetry Journal*, and others.

of candor in the controlled cadences of carefully wrought verse.

A runner-up for both the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, Hudgins need not be questioned as a worthy poet. His abilities now extend to seven independent volumes of verse, all of which are sampled here in selections reprinted to flesh out the bulk of this book. It is not appropriate to comment on those in a critical sense, as they have already been published and reviewed; suffice it to say, though, that many poems of equal or greater quality from those volumes were omitted.

In the 25 new poems, Hudgins provide a vanguard for the previously published verses and once again proves that form may not follow function, but it does indeed complement it. It is in the control and composition dictated by formal verse that poetry finds its greatest power. ✧

---

Novelist and literary critic **Clay Reynolds** is professor of arts and humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas.

verity that no matter how civilized and refined one feels, an uncomfortable proximity to one's biological instincts and darker nature remains.

The final section of the compilation features some of Ruffin's more recent work, such as "Why Amelia Went Down," a poem that provides a "credible" explanation for the disappearance and ultimate demise of Amelia Earhart and her navigator. A brief prelude explains that the story that inspired the poem must be true, "since it was reported in the *Weekly World News*, a highly reputable source in these days of relaxed journalism." Although poems such as this, and others, "Larry the Lawn Chair Man," "Eagle Girl," and "When the Mummy Became a Mommy," to name a few, serve as humorous entertainment on a literal level, there is much deeper social commentary at play. Armed with "thunder beans" and other bizarre, often bawdy, figurative devices, Ruffin impels the reader into the 21st century, exposing society for all of its incongruity.

*Paul Ruffin: New and Selected Poems* offers a poetic overview of one of America's best contemporary writers; in the collection, one witnesses a poet who successfully merges a profound respect for lyrical and imagistic traditions with figurative and thematic innovation. It is well-crafted verse that adeptly reacts to the topically universal. For those unfamiliar with the work of Ruffin, this book is a good place to start. For those who have read Ruffin, it serves as an interesting display of how the poet has simultaneously changed and stayed the same over the years, fighting, word by word, to uphold essential poetic traditions. ✧

---

**Joseph D. Haske** is a writer and critic whose recent and forthcoming work appears in publications such as *Boulevard*, *American Book Review*, and *Dark Sky Magazine*. He currently serves as the English Department chair at South Texas College in McAllen, Texas.