



[book.htmlbook.html](http://www.prairiefire.mb.ca/reviews/beaulieu_klaassen_rice.html)

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Three Fine Poetry Books from the (almost) West The Illustrated Statue of Liberty

by Bruce Rice

Regina, SK: Coteau Books, 2003, ISBN 1-55050-268-9, 108 pp., \$12.95 paper.

OR

by Tonja Gunvaldsen Klaassen

London, ON: Brick Books, 2003, ISBN 1-894078-27-6, 80 pp., \$15.00 paper.

with wax

by Derek Beaulieu

Toronto, ON: Coach House Books, 2003, ISBN 1-55245-118-6, 96 pp., \$16.95 paper.

Bruce Rice, of Regina, begins in the halls of madness, the asylums he has glimpsed through his father's telling or through his own read experiences. Rice writes in "My Days with Young Christian Players": "Stories come to me now, not the whole truth, but true enough:" (5)

Starting in these other worlds Rice maintains his position at the edges and leads us through tough and telling terrain. Rice's syntax is straight ahead, but what's said is always fresh, engaging and surprising. When he starts from the place of madness, even the ordinary becomes extraordinary. We go with the speaker and his father to a psychiatric hospital in the mid-sixties: "beds so close they blocked our way like cast iron spiders--white ones found in a cave when the light falls on them. I could see through rows of rifle-slit windows in one sullen door after another" (4).

We meet odd characters: Jerry the Giant, Doug the Twirler, Jake who digs. There is sterilization, LSD, suicide-survivors, a "She" who communicates with angels and receives debilitating shock treatments. Rice explores this realm of devastation in verse and prose poem forms. The shifts are seamless and never feel self-conscious. The reader is immediately aware that Rice is a poet of potent and unexpected thought, who inhabits the level of consciousness beneath the surfaces of things.

In the section from which the book's title is taken, Rice probes the physical reality of the Statue of Liberty, Rice family ancestry, and the history of immigrants landing at Ellis Island. This is no section for rushing through; there is no simple narrative and no easy epiphany. The complexity of ideas and poetic strategies slows the reader, who must make an effort to go at least halfway to engage the work. Beginning here Rice also includes historic stereoscopic images and photographs--including one of Sitting Bull and Buffalo Bill--interesting for their

quaintness and graphic quality, but they also draw attention to the selection and framing involved in observation and depiction. Hence the photography here inspires, and also parallels poetic rendering.

Rice writes: "The heart travels blindly and mostly alone. What can we know? Truth is not history" (40). Rice is mirroring to us, while drawing our attention to his role as documentarian and interpreter. This section, in trying to capture the fleeting, deals with transience. From "Improvisation on Mr. Foster's New York Standard Guide":

Slowly your hands passed over me like rough cloth; the floor
creaked in one room, then another; all through the house the
boards were trying to remember some gesture or weight. (40)

In the third section, "Learn to Paint," and the poem of the same name, Rice writes:

I was wrong
Light will not wait.
This hour, this exhaustion
Is the space you have made for attention.
It must be pulled, dragged ahead
By what you do not know. (60)

And in this half-blind striving--an act of moving from confinement to liberty--perhaps we are reaching toward depth of understanding and sometimes transcendence. The poet is engaged in a kind of foraging. There are angels and heavens coexisting with madness, erasure (eradication), and hell; and with the in-between we inhabit.

At the end, speaking of heaven's illumination, Rice writes: "It would be thought a grace to be human, to be close to life as we are now" (98). This is the thread through this work--to be human is to be in a state of grace. The recognition of this is the problem, as Rice reminds us.

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[Back to Review Index](#)