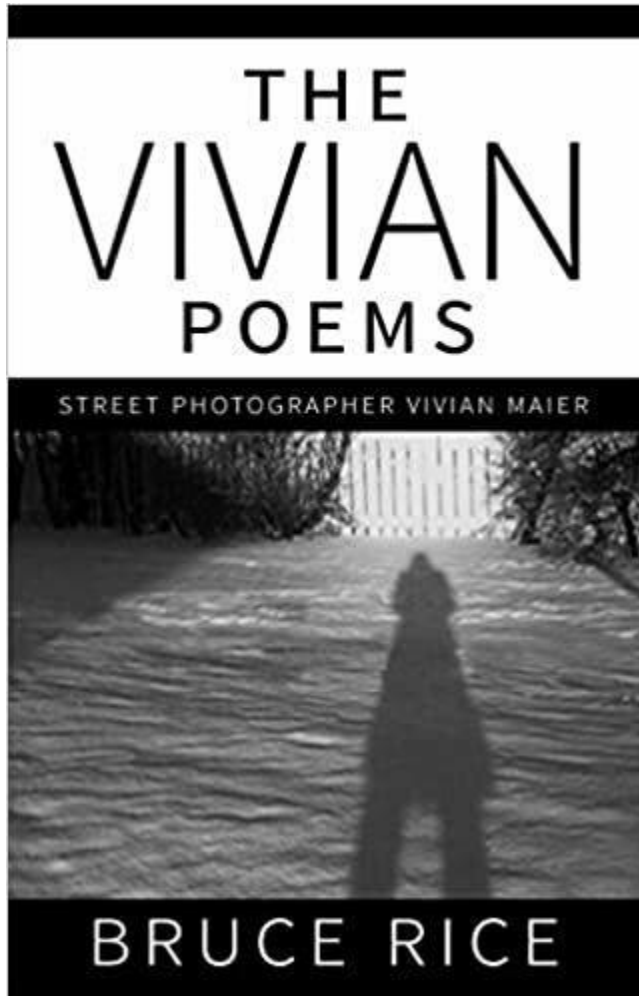


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Vivian Poems, The

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The Vivian Poems: Street Photographer Vivian Maier

by Bruce Rice

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Review by gillian harding-russell

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Through *The Vivian Poems*, Bruce Rice creates a vital portrait of the “mystery nanny” who was also a gifted New York City and Chicago street photographer between the 1950’s and 70’s (until her death in 2007). By entering into her point of view, telescoping through her eye and adopting her persona and voice, Rice lures us into her way of seeing and thinking. By turns, we see the photographer as she was

perceived by others, through her opinions as drawn from personal writings and through her street photographs which typically capture people in poses that reflect human moments of indecision. Although some of the poems may be termed ekphrastic, Rice in seeing through the artist's eyes may also be said to project himself into his own poems, and in so doing, he leaves room for self-discovery inside us all.

What better way to open the collection than with Vivian's voice to introduce herself in "Vivian Writes Her Own Prologue." In this elegantly choreographed poem, we see through the child, Vivian's eyes when she stays with her mother, a single parent, at a friend's house in France. The child's whimsical view as detailed by "the window over the stair squinting" while she makes her way downstairs alerts us to her child stature, and later when she is in bed she listens to the conversation under the door:

Mme Jeanne, Maman
their stories slip into the space
under my door, like one wave
waiting for another.

There is a naivete along with the peculiar inventiveness of the child's way of seeing to which we can all somehow to relate.

In "Human River," whose title is drawn from Rainer Maria Rilke's poem, Rice includes poems using Vivian Maier's New York Street proofs as prompts. One of the most striking poems in the sequence is titled, "a domestic," which shows us a woman cleaning an employer's window with one arm that "reaches //over the open frame" that, the poet remarks, could be "the bars of a cage" and so, obliquely he indicates the social distance between worker and employer. With wonderful self-irony, Rice remarks:

But humble or great who's to judge
what poets know
of the light in the heart of a panther
or the contents of any life but their own.

The poet modestly keeps to what he knows and reminds us that what he understands so poignantly about Vivian's experience relates to what he, himself, has experienced both as an artist and human. I use the first name "Vivian" as the poet, himself, feels drawn to that familiar footing, as he admits in the Afterword.

Perhaps the poems that reflect most closely on both Vivian, the photographer and the poet himself include the poems about the still life where no human is present. Whereas in "Pluviophile" we see in W.C William's style of the "Red Wheelbarrow" that the images in the world remain concrete and essentially themselves, in "Three Windows" a more ominous view in which nothing seems itself reflects the artist's uncertainty and foreboding near the end of her life with so much artwork that is stored lifelessly in her locker.

Here is a collection of poems that in reflecting the life and work of a female street photographer is not only feminist before its time but touches us all on a human level.

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