



**Painting Rust**  
by Jonathan Penton

Unlikely 2.0

© Jonathan Penton 1999-2006

Cover by Shari Nettles

All Rights Reserved

Seven Dollars U.S.

**Unlikely 2.0**

[www.UnlikelyStories.org](http://www.UnlikelyStories.org)

500 S. Mesa St., #389

El Paso, TX 79901

Online Edition 2009

Some of the poems in *Painting Rust* have been previously published, in some cases in a different form, in:

*BANNED in El Paso*  
*In Our Own Words: A Generation Defining Itself*  
Antipatico  
Big Bridge  
Poetry SuperHighway



*I am spitting out all the bitterness along with half of my last drink  
I am thinking of your woman who is crying in the hall  
It's like drinking gasoline to quench a thirst until there's nothing there left at all*  
—Suzanne Vega, *Knight Moves*



Regarding Your Career:

Your books are worthless.

Your perfect-bound, professionally-made, trade paperbacks from the bigger names in the small press are worthless.

Your rice-paper handcrafted signed and numbered achievements are worth less than the formaldehyde stuck to a dead poet's balls.

Your credits, your blog, your hand-stapled 'zines will be forgotten as soon as they are produced. Your friends will laugh at them at your funeral. Your hopes for immortality mean less than the knots in your noose.

Yes, I admire the tall trannies with glamorous coats in the laundromat documentary

Yes, I admire the Ocean Queen

with her marijuana fire department

Solicit their opinions on your goulash.

Let your work die with you

## In the Company of Them

So I'm sitting here in San Fran  
In another used bookstore  
On another hipster block  
In this fuzzy hipster town  
And I'm browsing through the bookstore  
And I'm looking through the comics  
There are shelves of graphic novels  
And I think they must be recent  
From the flashy well-done covers  
And the hip PoMo technique

So I grab some graphic novels  
And I'm setting on the benches  
And I'm getting up, and walk around, and find a comfy chair  
So I lean back, and I'm comfy, and I open up the comics  
Which are trendy, which are clever,  
Which have lots of lit-techniques  
There's this one with the stone giant  
Who starts out as a hero  
Who might be old King David  
or George Washington Carver  
and he bests the evil villain  
who was belittling his race  
but now he's getting bigger  
and he just keeps getting bigger  
and pretty soon he's enslaved all the creatures all around  
the metaphor was obvious  
though the subject imprecise  
He might have been Israel  
Or maybe Nashville, Tennessee  
But the book was tortured, troubled  
And so exquisitely drawn



There's a million sock-drawer poets  
Who've put down their San Fran paintbrush  
To write of what will happen  
To warn the world of what will happen  
If we let a madman rule us  
If we let the wealthy lead us  
If we sign away our neighbors for another cup of Starbucks  
And the artists are all drawing  
And the folkies are all singing  
And the poets all recite their angry lines at open mics  
But there's no one really listening  
No there's no one really listening  
And the few who clap politely never do a goddamned thing  
But the days are getting hotter  
And our lives are getting shorter  
And the Fertile Crescent won't be fertile for four billion years  
While MSN reports on Fox News  
CNN reports on Slate  
CBS reports on Sharpton  
And Al Sharpton studies Fox  
While the talking heads keep talking  
And the bloggers keep on blogging  
And the artists keep pretending there is something left to say

## Deep Throat Nihilism

Never forget that beauty is destructive  
and poetry is its most destructive form

Poets do not ask permission

When you sing *Ave Maria* in the library, sing it loud

Yet Another Leo Frank Piece

Thank you, Leo, for showing us America  
A place where the occasional child must be sacrificed  
    not to the altar  
        not to the Auto-de-Fe  
            not to the Cossacks  
but to the ADL

Waking up early to read  
    500 distribution newspapers  
        join certain mailing lists      from secret PO Boxes  
            conjugate the statistics of hate  
  
    into poetry

While Judah pretends not to notice

For us, America is the goldene Medina  
    And what we don't ask for ourselves  
    We don't sincerely seek for others

But we are Judah  
and the Pyramids were not the last thing we built!  
We raised Madison Avenue,  
    the great tomb of the AmeriCAN mind

Form over Substance:  
    the old gematria                      the new math

So Gallagher, a fine Irish, portrays you in the

## Made for TV Movie of the Week;

Mamet tells us how you **felt**

And, best of all, Alfred Uhry and Hal Prince

—lacking only the lyrics of Sondheim

put on a Broadway show!

*“Hey, my dad has some old anti-Semites in the garage.....”*

*“And we have a hangin’ tree out in the back 80....”*

They hung you, Leo Frank,

like more black men than will ever be counted

and the curse Judah doesn’t refuse our own children’s head

we don’t demand be lifted from others

## Atonement Fast

If you could take  
every time  
a Muslim fucked someone over during Ramadan  
every time a Jew killed someone during Pesach  
and every single St. Valentine's Day massacre  
and put them all on the page  
you'd have no more room  
for angry little poems

so i'm  
at a bar no i'm  
at a party or i'm  
walking down a downtown street and there's this man  
and he's  
my age and he is a  
some man and  
he's cry  
ing  
he is cry and  
he  
wants to talk to me  
because he  
needs some one to  
talk to  
because he  
doesn't have many friends  
and i look like  
someone he can trust

he is  
my age and  
he is  
an NCO and he just got back  
and i  
do not want to talk about this  
and i do not want  
to be here but he is here and i am here  
and i am still here and he is  
still talking  
and he

doesn't want to hurt anyone

he just wants things to be better he thought he  
could make things better but  
now he just wants to stop crying all the god damn time

i know

this is not a new thing i  
saw *Forrest Gump* which had very realistic  
wartime footage and for  
counterbalance i saw  
*Full Metal Jacket*  
which showed how sexy  
men could be

i saw a very wealthy actor portray Lee  
surrendering to Grant

and a different actor cry at the Treaty of Versailles  
and of course there was

the real violence

hatred

madness

but as bad as things got  
sooner or later

i could get away

and i always did

eventually but now i'm

in this bar at

this party and

on this downtown Texan street and

he is the first NCO home and

he is the first of many                    he is

my age but so many,

so many are still gone,

so many are so much younger than me and                    i say

Johnny, you'd better get used to this, because

    this is a big nation and

                  this is a big war and there will be

                                  many NCOs

                                  and they will have

  no place to go

  and if they

  cannot get away then

                  neither can you

## **Trembling**

It is the day after Yom Kippur

sometime in the 90s, late

You come into the office, contrite and pained  
and explain to your Camaro-driving, peroxide-kike paralegal  
why Yom Kippur is a time for tough choices

to fire your mouthy, mousy-English secretary  
to make room for the young and naturally blond

You and I, we've never believed in a Judgment Day  
You and I, still we worship different G-Ds

Hashem, Jesus, and King James's Sexy Legs

It's a crock, and you know it  
an ancient tyrant's power play  
the very oldest trick is the Book

These buried ancestors you worship  
can't keep the gentle folk at bay  
or your lovers from dying one by one

Religion gave you hope  
but long after your g-d died  
you weren't willing to throw hope away

The profane game of faith  
left you immune to despair  
and you can't kill that which is unafraid

## Ravens and Jays

Startled, I watch the blue jays from my window. They have no business here. They cluster in the branches of the huge oak, rustling, leaping, making no calls.

It is October in rural Georgia. Have they flown south? I know nothing about the migratory habits of jays. But I know that the ravens who live in that oak tree do not migrate. I know they will return. And at noon, they do.

I sit on the front porch and watch their massive bodies fly over the house. They fly like bullets, like missiles, like creatures from below. They are purpose, they are terror. They fly into the oak, into the flock of jays—

And do nothing. They take their places at the top of the oak and watch. The jays go about their rustling. No one fights. None call out.

What holy rite  
can halt this fast decay?  
What ancient herb  
could help us sleep at night?  
Is there a magic drug that can endure our pain?  
an acronym to make  
a crib death less dead?  
Some pagan festival that can make peace with the past?  
What  
sort of revolution  
could give my father back his childhood  
my mother, her husband  
or my children what they needed

Give an Indian his land  
or a slave his dignity  
Restore eleven million West Europeans  
nine million Russians  
twenty million Chinese  
nine million medieval women

What bold new painting  
can reflect this slow despair?  
And if one should  
what could it do  
for anyone?

Is there some poem  
stronger than the past  
and our present vanities?  
Stronger in its order than our instabilities?  
Can it purge me of this rage?  
Can it cleanse me of these memories?

What

gift from the divine

What

Orphean tune

could restore your touch to me?

Is there nowhere I can turn?

Is there no ancient quest

stronger than inevitability?

She asks me what she can do to help  
I tell her that any problem worth solving  
is beyond the human capacity to solve

I am wrong. She gives me love, love gives me sleep, and  
sleep gives me dreams  
Dreams give me a few hours with the dead

It's not much, but it's as much as I got while they lived

Yet Another Mary Phagan Piece

When they killed you, Mary  
were there any witnesses?  
did anyone hear as they  
    raped you  
        beat you

    did the things men like to do  
did they listen, head down, mouth shut,  
    receiving the commonplace pleasure  
    of that brush with mortality

And when they killed him, Mary  
when they hung an innocent man for the crime  
did you bear witness?  
    did you watch

    as they drug him from his cell  
    rope, torches  
    brother, father, friends  
    strangers

caught up in that racism  
    we southerners have always called righteousness

    what did you think on that day, Mary?

    tell me how it feels—

—tell me what you see today—

tell me

if you've had a chance to converse  
with the newcomers to the cemetery  
tell me if you've learned what the world has become

tell me if, lying there, you hear the nearby niggers being cut  
from the nearby trees

tell me if, surrounded by dead confederates,  
Kitty Genovese is just another yankee to you

So many murders in Marietta

So many wars on this soil

Yet the goyim leave teddy bears only on your grave

## Post-Coital Depression

Now

after the parties  
and after the Seders  
a few scant hours before the POWs come home

(and home is here, this is their home, and this is my home,  
far from my friends and family and far from their friends  
and family and the things that any of us would call home)

Now, on a quiet Saturday, I ponder art for art's sake  
and art for society's sake  
and art which by its nature could never last  
because it is too specific  
too focused in its condemnations  
and not at all metaphorical

Today I ponder the role of an artist  
at the close of a war and the dawn of an empire  
And what it means to believe in something  
anything  
in a time of blind faith in blind and stupid leaders

Today I am an artist and a businessman

so I look over my projects

what is due, what is due me, what will be due soon

what must be achieved today so that  
other artists will still consider me important

so they will come to my rallies  
and come to my readings  
and thank me for my politics  
and thank me for my energy

Today at home  
I think of the best way to relieve the burden  
of living, writing, and voting in the country  
destined to conquer the world

Today I think of stacks of burning bodies

dictatorships established in the name of democracy

and the motherless sons who will come back to America  
and do everything they can to bring it down

and what does that mean to anyone,  
anyway?

Today the POWs come home  
tortured beaten terrorized  
and I will celebrate with my city and with my country  
and I know  
that this is the last day we can call ourselves  
a Republic of Laws

today

I fear for myself

I fear for my son

I fear for the Arabs

I fear for the Israelis

I fear for the Persians

I fear for the Americans

and I fear for every artist

who makes art for art's sake

who won't speak out

at the end of our world

## Skydive

I see everything  
all the way down  
from the time when the world is a  
patchwork of fields and forests  
stretching out past the horizon  
to the time when the tops of the trees  
stare into my face

I see it all  
every pine needle                      every lost aphid  
my senses are infinitesimal  
in their precision  
and all the beauty opens up for me  
From the curve of the earth  
to the immediacy of this situation

to the fact that it is all about to end

Don't tell me  
about your unrequited love  
the one you've been pining for  
since high school—  
I've heard that shit before.

Spare me your tales of childhood rape  
father's rage  
mother's fear  
as if you were  
the only one who suffers  
I don't care  
about  
your existential tragedies

Come to me naked or avoid me altogether:  
Leave your facades for those who think in words.  
Show me the silence  
behind  
your mouth and body language

We are in a room  
too small for movement  
Dance me with your stillness  
or shut up

In 1918, Jonathan Penton fled the Red Army and sought the Black, claiming that the Bolsheviks betrayed the original ideal of the Soviets. Attracted to the personality and philosophies of Nestor Makhno, he joined the Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of the Ukraine. The Cheka caught him and hung him in 1922. You can learn less about him at his web site, [www.UnlikelyStories.org](http://www.UnlikelyStories.org). He is deeply indebted to Michael Rothenberg for his assistance with this chapbook, as well as Rofiah Breen, Terri Carrion and Julie Keller.



*Painting Rust*  
by Jonathan Penton

is available with *Blood and Salsa*, by the same author, from

**[www.UnlikelyStories.org](http://www.UnlikelyStories.org)**

500 S. Mesa St., #389

El Paso, TX 79901

for seven U.S. dollars plus \$2 shipping