

## **Ira Sadoff**

### **Bio**

Ira Sadoff was born in Brooklyn, New York, on March 7, 1945, of Russian-Jewish ancestry. He earned a B.A. in industrial and labor relations from Cornell University in 1966 and an M.F.A. from the University of Oregon in 1968. In 1975, he published his first collection of poetry, *Settling Down* (Houghton Mifflin).

Since then, Sadoff has published several poetry collections, most recently *Barter* (University of Illinois, 2003), which delves into his personal past, specifically concerning love and bereavement, as well as the historical and global past, referencing Beethoven, Vietnam, and the fall of communism. Other recent collections include *Grazing* (1998), from which poems were awarded the American Poetry Review's Leonard Shestack Prize, the Pushcart Poetry Prize, and the George Bogin Memorial Prize from the Poetry Society of America; *Emotional Traffic* (David R. Godine, 1989); *A Northern Calendar* (1982), which charts the arrival and passage of the seasons; and *Palm Reading in Winter* (Houghton Mifflin, 1978.).

About Sadoff's work, the poet Gerald Stern has said, "Nowhere else in American poetry do I come across a passion, a cunning, and a joy greater than his. And a deadly accuracy. I see him as one of the supreme poets of his generation." And on awarding Sadoff the Bogin Memorial Prize, the poet Alan Shapiro said, "Beyond the energetic syntax and the astonishing range of idiom and tone, what I so admire in these poems is the just yet always unpredictable weaving together of individual and collective life, the insightful, almost seamless integration of personal experience in all its unredemptive anguish with the heterogeneous realities of American culture."

Sadoff is also the author of three works of prose, most recently *History Matters: Contemporary Poetry on the Margins of American Culture* (University of Iowa, 2009), which, through the work of poets like Czeslaw Milosz and Frank O'Hara, argues that poets live and write within history; *An Ira Sadoff Reader* (Middlebury, 1992), a collection of stories, poems and essays about contemporary poetry; and *Uncoupling* (Houghton Mifflin, 1982), a novel.

He is the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. In 1973, he was a fellow at the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, and in 1974, he was the Alan Collins Fellow in Poetry and Prose at the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference. His poetry has been widely anthologized, most recently in *The Best American Poetry* series, in 2008.

Sadoff has served as poetry editor of *The Antioch Review*, and was co-founder of *The Seneca Review*. He has taught at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and in the M.F.A. programs of the University of Virginia and Warren Wilson College.

He currently teaches in the M.F.A. program at Drew University, and serves as the Arthur Jeremiah Roberts Professor of English at Colby College, in Maine.

## My Mother's Funeral

The rabbi doesn't say she was sly and peevish,  
fragile and voracious, disheveled, voiceless and useless,  
at the end of her very long rope. He never sat beside her  
like a statue while radio voices called to her from God.  
He doesn't say how she mamboed with her broom,  
staggered, swayed, and sighed afternoons,  
till we came from school to feed her. She never frightened him,  
or bent to kiss him, sponged him with a fever, never held his hand,  
bone-white, bolted doors and shut the blinds. She never sent  
roaches in a letter, he never saw her fall down stairs, dead sober.  
He never watched her sweep and murmur, he never saw  
spider webs she read as signs her life was over, long before  
her frightened husband left, long before  
they dropped her in a box, before her children turned  
shyly from each other, since they never learned to pray.  
If I must think of her, if I can spare her moment on the earth,  
I'll say she was one of God's small sculptures,  
polished to a glaze, one the wind blew off a shelf.

## The Soul

The shaft of narrative peers down.  
The soul's a petrified fleck of partridge this October.  
Mud-spattered, it thinks it's brush, it thinks  
it's one with the brush when God aims

just below its feathers. It's too late to raise the soul,  
some ossified conceit we use to talk about deer  
as if we were deer, to talk about the sun, as if the cold  
autumn light mirrored our lover asleep in the tub.

Nevertheless, I want to talk about it. Those scarred bodies  
on the hospital table, they're white chalk children use  
to deface the sidewalk. The deer fed in the gazebo,  
where the salt lick was barely safe from the fox.

And when the wind didn't drag my scent to her,  
I sat listless, half-awake, and watched her hunger  
surpass her timidity. I should have been changed.  
I should have been startled into submission

by a very white light, I should have shed my misgivings  
as her tongue made that sticky sound on the lick  
and two startled animals stared into what St. Francis  
called a mystery. I should bring her back, the woman too,

the woman who what why words fail me here.  
I should sanctify the hospital gown as it slides down  
the tunnel of the catscan, to see where  
the nodules have spread into the thin, pliable tissues

we call the innards in animals, because they dwell  
in scenery, they're setting for the poem, they provide  
a respite from the subject who's been probed and lacerated,  
who's been skinned and eaten away by the story

when I'm beguiled by the music the hooves made  
on the pine floor. I can bring her back, can't I,  
I'm bringing him back, the hero who was close enough  
so I could watch what was inside his face hover and scatter.

## February

A mist appalls the windshield.  
So I still see trees as moral lessons,  
as I pass under them, shadowy and astute.

The glazed aspen branches hover.  
Ice heats up and cracks, road tar steams  
like some animal where the blush

of cheek is chilled by annunciation.  
I cannot say her face was trauma driven.  
I'm still saturated with her, taking in

her etched-in countenance, otherworldly,  
enveloping, frightening, the face you can't see,  
pressed against it. So how can you imagine

what it feels like? Their gravity suffices,  
the sealed and straining torsos  
of aspens, an affront to our high-pitched moans,

feverish with disarray. Our expressions  
have too much God in them, too much cloud, too much  
blood on nail, too much arrow, too much quiver.

## On the Day of Nixon's Funeral

It's time to put the aside the old resentments; lies,  
machinations, the paranoia, bugs in telephones,  
the body bags, secret bombings, his sweaty upper lip,  
my cousin Arnie, too dumb to go to school,

too virtuous to confess he'd give blow jobs  
for nothing at the Paramount, so he lost a leg  
in Da Nang. Now it's time for amnesiacs to play  
Beethoven's Eroica by Nixon's casket.

To applaud his loyalty, to grant a few mistakes,  
to honor his diplomacy, him and his pal Kissinger  
who bombed the lush green paddies of Cambodia.  
And now for a few lyric moments as I wait patiently

for my fiftieth birthday. Wood ducks decorate the pond  
near this farmhouse, and in the marsh I've spied  
a meadow lark, a fox, a white-tailed hawk who soars  
above the Western Mountain peaks. Oh, I'm in love

with the country all right. So I can forget my friend  
Sweeney, who shot Congressman Lowenstein  
because the radio in his tooth insisted on it.  
I remember the march on the Pentagon in purple,

a proud member of the Vegetarian Brigade. I was drugged,  
as many of us were drugged, as my parents  
were drugged by a few major networks, by a ranch house  
and an Oldsmobile. I once spit on Hubert Humphrey,

threw a brick through Dow Chemical's plate-glass door.  
I wrote insane letters to Senators, burying them  
in moral rectitude: I got a response from one:  
Senator Kennedy — the dead one — whose office wrongly

argued for slow withdrawal instead of Instant Victory.  
I remember Tricky Dick in Nineteen Fifty-three:  
I'm eight years-old, frightened and ignorant,  
lying down before my parents' first TV: my aunts

and uncles sitting in a circle, biting their nails,  
whispering names of relatives awaiting trial, who,  
thanks to Nixon, lost their sorry jobs. You can see why  
I'd want to bury this man whose blood would not circulate,

whose face was paralyzed, who should have died  
in shame and solitude, without benefit of eulogy or twenty-one  
gun salutes. I want to bury him in Southern California  
with the Birchers and the Libertarians. I want to look out

my window and cheer the remaining cedars  
that require swampy habitats to survive. To be done  
with shame and rage this April afternoon, where embryonic  
fiddleheads, fuzzy and curled and pale as wings,

have risen to meet me. After all, they say he was a scrappy man,  
wily and sage, who served as Lucifer, scapegoat, scoundrel,  
a receptacle for acrimony and rage — one human being  
whose life I have no reverence for, which is why I'm singing now.