The title of Philip Pardi’s stunning first collection of poems, “Meditations on Rising and Falling,” bears close reading. The work’s “meditative” quality recalls such contemporary poets as Robert Hass or Charles Wright. And yet Pardi’s particular meditation does not involve a Zen-like retreat from worldly concerns such as economics or politics, but a deeper attention to them. His eye moves gracefully from the lovers in a corner of a bar playing tic-tac-toe on a windowpane to the “bare backs” of roofers “glistening like stones.”

Pardi writes from—as well as beyond—William Wordsworth’s famous call to present “ordinary things” in an “unusual way.” And while Pardi seems as comfortable as Wordsworth naming and noticing the flowers and fauna of the natural world, Pardi also reminds us that it is not just the bird in flight that rises and falls, but economic fortunes. Wordsworth worried that news of the “great national events” of his day would produce a “thirst after outrageous stimulation,” and saw poetry as a salve against such agitation. Having worked as both a human rights activist in Central America as well as a labor organizer in upstate New York, Pardi uses his poems to present the “subtleties,” even beauty, of such events, whether they be issues of labor or immigration, politics or law.

Pardi reminds us not only of the sweetness of peaches in our “watery mouths” but of “those hands that can toss one hunch/ after another into baskets.”

Our conversation took place over two days via e-mail and telephone from his home near Woodstock, NY, and mine in Dallas, TX.
Susan Briante: The poems in your first collection remind me of Robert Hass’s work—if Hass spent his time hanging around construction sites or with field hands. Many of the poems in your book “Meditations on Rising and Falling” seem to come from personal labor experiences and your work with immigrant communities. Can you say something about the experiences that have had the greatest influence on your work? What led you to become a poet in the first place?

Philip Pardi: Before I turned my attention fully to writing poems, I spent maybe fifteen years working as an activist, partly in the field of human rights and partly in the field of labor organizing.

I spent several years in El Salvador, during the last years of the civil war, in the early 1990s, working with a group called Peace Brigades International. Our work was to accompany Salvadoran activists; we were “armed” with cameras to provide an international presence or accompaniment for them in their work, the idea being that our very presence gave them some measure of safety. The last thing the military governments wanted was for an American (or European) to be witness to any repression, because they relied heavily on foreign aid and arms.

When I returned, I was interested in working in Spanish on some issue related to organizing, and that’s when I got involved working with migrant farm workers in the Hudson Valley of New York. Looking back on those years, I find it interesting that I was writing the whole time. Writing sustained me, in many ways. But it wasn’t until later that writing became the center of my day, the primary way I chose to engage with the world and with myself. In a real sense, my heroes in the world are all political activists, people who live their lives in the service of others, fighting the good fight.

I continue to think that that kind of work is essential, sacred even. Personally, I burned out, couldn’t keep up with the need—real human need—that filled my days. Partly it was exhaustion, but it was also something else. In political work, you really need to keep things simple, keep the message clear. If you’re suing a farm owner for mistreating his workers, there isn’t much room for understanding the owner’s plight—you owe it to the workers to pursue justice on their behalf. That, at least, was my experience of it. So when I burned out and returned to writing poetry, it was partly a desire to honor the subtleties of the world. But I’m not sure I’ve quite forgiven myself for ceasing to be an activist.

SB: Do you think that there’s a kind of activism that’s present or intrinsic to the act of making poetry? Is it possible in some kinds of poetry and maybe not others? Or do you think that poets like to pretend that there is an “activism” to deal with their own guilt for writing poetry in the midst of war, injustice, etc.

PP: I think activists are the heart and soul of a free society, and by activists I mean the people who have their hands on the tools needed to keep the people in power honest. The only rule I’ve seen fulfilled pretty much everywhere is that power corrupts. I’m skeptical about political poetry in our current atmosphere. I mean if you are writing in Stalinist Russia or McCarthy America, sure, the power of speaking out—and thus the responsibility to speak out—are great. It’s not that I’m against poems that engage politically, but that I think it’s not enough. Being a political poet isn’t about writing poems against Bush and Cheney, it’s about living a political life in big and small ways—walking picket lines, boycotting Styrofoam, supporting labor struggles wherever you can, confronting racism, not letting anyone think it’s okay to mistreat the planet. Poems can be a part of that, but only a part. We need to engage.

Of course, right now there is a great poverty of compassion, so even a love poem might be worth its weight in gold. And some politically engaged poems are transformative. When I heard Naomi Shihab Nye read last month, I felt chills, we all did. I’m sure that I left the room a better person, more likely to rush into a burning building to save someone, less likely to let someone nearby mistreat another person or nature. Maybe I even felt more hopeful from the camaraderie I felt. That is Naomi’s particular genius.

SB: You write: “We watch as if watching could save us, but we ought to fear being a witness. We ought to know what a witness must do.” (79) What should be the relationship between poetry and witness? What is that relationship in your work or the work of poets whom you admire?
PP: I suppose I think that witnessing is vital—it’s better than closing our eyes or pretending not to see what we see. But at the same time, ideally, witnessing is a first step, a seed. Witnessing can lead to understanding, to action, to compassion, to many things. It can work “against forgetting,” as [Carolyn] Forche’s anthology is titled.

Now, poetry is just one medium through which we can witness. When I read, say, [Czeslaw] Milosz, I experience not just a glimpse of what he saw but also a profound call to be human, to act humanly, in response to what he saw. He works with what he saw—otherwise, witnessing can lead to detachment, too, can’t it?

SB: Yes, I think you hit on a very important point here: witnessing is not enough. In her book, Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag really investigates the limits of witnessing. She’s particularly focused on the photographic medium and our sense that when we “see” an atrocity we are apt to react to it. Yet despite the many photographs we can conjure up as images that changed policy, she also highlights the many examples of knowledge, of witnessing, that did not change our policies.

She also works through all of the nuances of that response. For me, I think one of the most devastating lines of that book is: “As far as we feel sympathy, we are not accomplices.”

All of this, I think, goes back to what you were saying earlier about the relationship between art and activism, and the importance of realizing that they are not the same.

PP: I’m glad you mentioned Sontag, as her work and her example are important to me. There’s also a story about how some war movies—supposedly “anti-war movies,” like Apocalypse Now—are used to get US troops psyched up before going into combat in Iraq. Image isn’t enough. To me, what’s important is the call to be engaged and to be human, and to be the best that a human can be. The poems that nurture us in this way, to me, are essential. But they can’t simplify the world in the process. We can’t, for example, just be anti-war, period. We need to understand the part of us that goes off to war so easily, so compliantly. When I was in El Salvador, there were times I was so angry I wanted to pick up a gun—it sounds silly now, all these years later. But I’ve never forgotten that feeling, how there was, at that moment, no sense of “the other” within me. Poetry can do many things, and I don’t want to sound like I think poetry must do this or that, but one thing it can do is help us to understand what it means to be human.

SB: There’s an interesting element in your work in regards to the use of the lyric “I”. It is the voice of a “traditional” poet-speaker (if that term even makes sense at this moment), one that’s not unfamiliar to readers of poetry in the twentieth century. Yet it is a speaker who works to draw attention to himself as author/poet. I’m thinking here of the moment in your poem “Three Meditations” when, after describing a storm that blew the laundry from the line, you write: “No let’s not kid ourselves—// the line came first. Sitting at my desk, I thought: after a storm, stars appear. There were no socks, no wet commas.”

In other words, while the lyric “I” speaks from a central, witnessing subjectivity, he’s always reminding us of the “man behind the curtain,” highlighting the fact that the poem is an artifice. Why choose such a strategy?

PP: I’m uneasy when I think I feel or sound certain. That poem comes close to laying down some truths, it seems to me. Calling attention to the “I” behind the poem is one way of saying, you know, this is just one man’s truth—it’s a created truth. It veers toward saying “this is what I think is true” rather than toward “this is true.”

SB: You are also a translator. Tell us about that work and about the relationship between translation and poetry.

PP: I’m translating the work of two poets from Spanish into English. One is the Mexican poet Jaime Sabines, whose work has already been translated by the likes of Philip Levine and W.S. Merwin. But they pretty much ignored, or excerpted, Sabines’s longer poems, and so I am translating all of his longer poems in their entirety—I have a great fondness for long poems in general, and his in particular. Along the way I’ve translated some shorter ones, too, just for fun or to share with friends. He’s a great poetic soul.

The other poet is Claudia Lars from El Salvador, probably their most beloved poet but virtually unknown outside of El Salvador. She wrote
14 books of poems in her lifetime, plus a wonderful book of short stories about growing up in rural El Salvador. She’s a unique occurrence in that, while she was raised in the Salvadoran countryside and lived in El Salvador most of her life, she was also raised bilingual (her father was Irish American) and was reading Whitman and Dickinson before they were readily available in Spanish. Apparently, she translated some poems by Dickinson into Spanish, but I haven’t found her translations yet. Like Sabines, she was passionately engaged with the world and committed to reckoning with it in her poetry.

I agree with David Ferry when he says that translation is the closest act of reading. To translate, you have to sit with a piece of writing until you have essentially crawled inside it. You inch your way closer, sharpening one aspect of the meaning even as you feel another aspect falling out of focus. It’s a bit like learning a piece of music on the guitar—first you get one finger working in isolation, then another in isolation, and slowly you assemble the full piece by putting them all together. Translating has made me a better, closer, more respectful reader, even when I’m reading in English.

Another thing it’s taught me is patience. It takes me endless drafts to feel satisfied with a translation. It’s interesting to me that, if I spend the morning working on my own poems and engaged in writing a first draft, I can easily spend the afternoon translating. But if I spend my morning revising, I can’t translate in the afternoon. I think that’s because, in my mind at least, translation taxes the same muscles as revision—basically, you’re revising a poem where someone else did the first draft. I love revising, the endless fiddling, tweaking, scrapping, adding, abandoning, and resurrecting. So I guess it’s natural that I should love translation, too. But early on I realized that if a translation takes so many drafts, then why shouldn’t my own poems?

**SB:** I also feel that translation taught me much more than I’d ever known about English. It forces you into the language. Into the mechanics of the language in a way that nothing else does.

**PP:** Yes, and it forces you to make choices about those mechanics. In your own poem, you can always run from a difficult decision. But in translation, you have to make a choice.

**SB:** To which poets or poetics movement of the twentieth century (or even prior to) do you feel most indebted in terms of your own poetics?

**PP:** When I was a kid, my plan was to be a rock star, and I’d practice answering this question: “Who were your influences?” I think I used to answer in a British accent. I’m indebted to Blake. When I first read him in high school, and later in college, he helped me understand that poetry could be big. Here he was, redefining the very meanings of words like angel, God, soul, devil — the nerve! It was affirming to see someone wrestling with the world in his poems, and that was important ballast for me somehow.

Another important presence for me was Oppen. I grew to admire his restraint, his use of what wasn’t said in order to say what needed to be said, the ample white space around the jagged black of text. And also the way he evolved from a poet so attuned to perception to a poet attuned to consciousness itself. I learned something about how a poem accumulates meaning rather than merely saying what it means. The patient unfolding of a mind at work in the world.

**SB:** If you had to write your own poetics statement or your own manifesto, what five words do you know you would include?

**PP:** Yes, heart, breath, scythe, us

**SB:** If you had to write your own poetics statement or your own manifesto, what five words do you know you would NOT include?

**PP:** This question is harder. I feel comfortable with most words. But I would begin to feel nervous around a manifesto that felt too certain, too sure of itself. I’d be worried if someone started talking about truth, as in The Truth with a capital T, or Beauty with a capital B. I’m all for seeking them out—we should aim for our poems to be true—but as soon as someone says they have found them, as soon as someone starts legislating them one way or the other, I start looking for a window to sneak out of.

I’m probably naturally suspicious of manifestos, in as much as they
claim to have found an answer that works for all, or that there is one way to make art or write poems, like, it should be narrative, shouldn't be narrative, should be difficult, should be accessible, should be metrical, should be free. Even where I'm tempted to agree—poetry should oppose injustice—I find myself asking, "should"? Surely the house of poetry is big enough for everyone, even those I fervently disagree with. If fascists want to write fascist poems, or Republicans want to write Republican poems, let them. Then let's argue with them over ideas, let's convince them and anyone who will listen that we are capable of so much more than the dreary roles they would cast us in.

Again, I've slipped into writing about politics. You'll have to trust me when I say that I don't think all poems should be political. It's just where my mind is at these days.

SB: Actually, I do think all poems are political in the sense that there's something "political"—or perhaps "resistant" is the better word—in the act of making a poem. I mean, writing a poem is not necessarily going to gain you anything in terms of the larger market economy. And in fact it will force you to pay a kind of attention that so much in our market-driven society works against. The average commercial isn't telling you to "stop and smell the roses" but rather to "stop in and buy our roses which will make everything smell better." So I like the resistance that comes in the act of making poetry.

I also think that every poem contains a worldview or an ideology. But maybe that's not the same as being political poetry. I guess I want to stress that I think the term "political poetry" gets a kind of bad rap. I don't want to apologize because I have "political" thoughts, as if there's this "pure poetry" that exists untainted by our political opinions. It seems to me that worrying about the war or the economy and letting those realities be part of our poetry goes back to what you named as that profound call to be human.

PP: Absolutely. I think the term political poetry is used for too many different things at this point. But there is no reason why the war, the market, or anything else can't be a part of the world we excavate in our poems, and we shouldn't be on the defensive there.

You use the word "resistant," and it reminds me of another poet I admire a great deal, Hayden Carruth. He writes in one of his essays something to the effect that we resist by way of the poem, and that unlike our other ways of resisting (by acting in the world) which are essentially negative and reactive, in poetry we create, we affirm. I think he calls it a "positive resistance." And in one of his letters to Jane Kenyon, he writes that one thing they share is having put down in their poems, so much love in the midst of so much hate and killing. That seemed good enough for him, and most days it seems good enough to me, too.