

FRANK GALUSZKA

Above and Below, 2006
oil on canvas, 108 x 80 in



courtesy: the artist

RENÉE M. SCHELL

Sestina for César Chávez

The day my son wore red and black
to school, a day hot as fields
in the Central Valley where the sun
crawls across the sky and burns
off coastal fog and grief,
I read Markham's poem "The Man with the Hoe."

Millet's painting "The Man with the Hoe"
inspired Markham's words, black
with the portent of uprising, grief
already part of the picture. The fields
that yield berries and lettuce burn
to tell their story to my son.

In the painting a man in the sun
leans on his short-handled hoe.
See his crooked back. Muscles burn
from the burden of stooping to black
soil, pulling weeds from the murmuring fields.
My son learns about *Sí se puede* and grief.

That word is new to him—grief—
when it means mothers and fathers thirsty in the sun.
Children ask, teachers field
the questions: *What is a boycott? What is a hoe?*
The assembly gathers on asphalt black
as the puzzled looks of first grade. My questions burn,

too. If Markham's poem burned,
as they say, like wildfire, his grief
of 1899 etched into the black
and white of *The Chronicle, The Examiner, The Sun,*
why did we write 1975 before that hoe
was banished from the fields?

I wonder aloud to the omniscient fields.
How many piles of tools have burned?
How did that short-handled hoe
live such a long life, caked with grief?
After school I will ask my son
to tell me the story of red and black,

to tell me why the short-handled hoe rhymes with grief,
why the fields fall silent when the back of the neck burns,
why the sun, so golden, can shine black.

Renée M. Schell's poetry has appeared in *On the Dark Path: An Anthology of Fairy Tale Poetry*, *Cæsure*, *Granny Smith Magazine*, *Red Wheelbarrow* (student edition), *Perfume River Poetry Review*, the anthology *Poetry on the Move* at literarymama.com, and is forthcoming in the anthology *Song of Los Gatos*. She holds a Magister degree from the University of Bonn and a PhD in German Studies from Stanford University. She is a freelance editor and translator from the German as well as a poetry editor for the *Willow Glen Poetry Project* and for *Red Wheelbarrow* (national edition). In her free time she can be found docenting at the Edwin Markham House in History Park, San José.