

## RALPH JOACHIM

*Clair de Lune*, 2011  
acrylic on canvas, 138 x 30 in



courtesy: R.Blitzer gallery

## M. ALLEN CUNNINGHAM

# The Silent Generations

Iowa, 1870s

**A**lmost as soon as Benjamin Lorn stopped drawing circular rainbows early in the autumn of his seventh year, he took to making a different shape. One day he was scratching in the margins of a letter his mother had received when old Thornton came upon him.

“Mm,” said the grandfather, stooping. “Will you be a reverend?”

Benjamin didn’t look up. “A reverend?” He was pulling his mouth in concentration.

“Ya, to draw all those crosses.”

Benjamin grunted a laugh. “Not crosses, Grampa. Look.”

Thornton bent closer. The boy had hemmed the letter’s news with lines of fence. From cross to cross they ran in doubles neatly parallel. He thought the boy had drawn the posts too tall, but then he saw. “Ah. The wires, are they?”

At the copper-edged counter in Perpetua’s Wabash Depot Benjamin had stood with his father, sometimes his mother, and watched Mr. Mueller, depot man, postal clerk, and operator, tapping signals into the wire by use of a trim lever key. The key made glottal clicking sounds and Mr. Mueller’s green visor glistened as he canted his head to listen. His tapping formed no clear pattern, but a body could speak to anyone in the country—even as far as California—by that method. Or so Benjamin had learned. It seemed pure conjuration. It offered wonder even grown-ups could not foreswear. The boy could think of no other thing with such a claim, whose magic would not die no matter how aged or wise a person got.

The humming wires followed King Street along Perpetua’s town square and continued west to the track by the depot. From there they trued themselves to the railroad. Standing in his father’s store or at the depot platform, Benjamin watched them bellying pole to pole and onward to distances unreckoned. Twice, three times a day the trains thundered through that way, to vanish at the narrow place on the horizon. It always left the wires swaying overhead, droning sorcery. “Wind makes ’em hum,” his father told him, but Benjamin would not believe this. At heart he knew the sound to be the voice of a secret energy. Already he felt eternity in the wires. He knew he might walk for hours and come nowhere nearer that pinpoint where those wires and all else disappeared.