

VERSE WISCONSIN

FOUNDED BY LINDA ASCHBRENNER AS FREEVERSE 1998

FEATURES

MY BAREFOOT RANK
BY DAVID GRAHAM

REVISING YOUR POEMS
BY MICHAEL KRIESEL

KARLA HUSTON INTERVIEWS
DENISE DUHAMEL

**“I think I became
funny by mistake.”**

—Denise Duhamel

**“The truth is that oblivion
is not just commonplace
for poets, but practically
the rule. To harbor
ambitions for any other
fate is almost by definition
to be deluded.”**

—David Graham

**“In my brain’s basement,
a reference librarian sits at
a gray, metal, government
desk. When I’m writing,
she hands me whatever old
image or line I need, when I
need it.”**

—Michael Kriesel

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Editors' Notes

Writing is, at heart, a solitary act. And yet, community is essential for writers in so many ways. We find a group of readers to give feedback on the early drafts. We seek out reading series and open mics, conferences and retreats. We build friendships and support networks that cross vast distances through Facebook and listservs. Recently, we asked our friends how they chose where to submit their work, and the majority of them responded that they look for venues where they feel a connection—to the editor or the other poets published. As editors, we're very aware of the fact that neither of us would take on *Verse Wisconsin* alone—and if we did, what a changed and different venture it would be. Not only do we both read and discuss every single submission we receive, we consult each other on almost every detail, right down to selecting the color for the cover of each issue.

We like to think we also work with our contributors to build relationships that are meaningful. We keep in touch, sending out news and calling for submissions by email, writing personal notes as often as possible, suggesting changes or offering encouragement as we respond to submissions, and then making sure we give our writers a chance to comment or adjust the way their poems look on the page before we go to publication.

We're also learning—and celebrating—the power of partnerships on a larger scale. This year we've partnered with **Poetry Jumps Off the Shelf**, a Madison-based program run by poet Shoshauna Shy that puts poetry in surprising places in order to reach new audiences. Poetry Jumps Off the Shelf partners with organizations around the state. You can learn more at www.poetryjumpsofftheshelf.com. *Verse Wisconsin* and PJOS ran a joint call for submissions around the theme "Luck of the Draw." Shoshauna read all the submissions (over 800) and selected 30 poems which now fill the **Verse-O-Matic** poetry vending machine, each folded into its little purple-topped capsule along with a piece of candy and—if you're lucky—maybe a free year of *Verse Wisconsin*. These Luck of the Draw poems comprise our summer online poetry issue, and we're thankful to Shoshauna for serving as guest editor. Meanwhile, the Verse-o-Matic is making its way around to various businesses and institutions in Wisconsin. It's shiny silver and red, sits happily on a table or countertop, and vends poems and candy for free (if you're interested in housing it for a while, or know someone who might be, contact us).

At *Verse Wisconsin*, we look forward to more partnerships with other organizations in the future. This fall, we'll be working with the **Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets**, editing their **Wisconsin Poets' Calendar** for 2013. Again, a selection of the calendar poems will be featured at VWOnline, in Summer 2012. More information on that project is at www.wfop.org.

To bring it back home... we partner with each of you to make *Verse Wisconsin* a meaningful project. Without writers sending us poems, book reviews, essays and more, there would be no magazine at all. Just as important, though not always stated, without readers, the magazine would be a futile waste of our energies. As it is now, we feel these issues of VW that arrive in your mailbox three times a year represent something much more meaningful than any single issue can contain: we're a community of readers and writers who engage with each other, each contributing attention, time, and an open mind to what these pages contain. The magazine, larger than any one of us, changes and evolves over time. We both feel profoundly moved by this truth, as well as—yes—lucky, to be involved.

Thanks to **Ramona Davis, Melissa Lindstrum, and Charles Rybak** for volunteer proofreading help. Lingered errors are, of course, the responsibility of VW's editors, who would like to note this mistake in VW105: Rebecca Hazelton's poems were incorrectly formatted in the print magazine, but appear as they should online at <http://versewisconsin.org/Issue105/poems105/hazelton.html>.

Contact us: editors@versewisconsin.org.

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Books Received September-December 2010

Publisher & author links available online

- Elizabeth Alexander**, *Crave Radiance, New and Selected Poems 1990-2010*, Graywolf Press, 2010
- Elizabeth Austen, Andrea Bates, Carol Stevens Kaer & Sarah Suzor**, *Sightline*, Toadlily Press, 2010
- James Babbs**, *Another Beautiful Night*, Lulu Publishing, 2010
- James Babbs**, *things that aren't important happen all the time*, Interior Noise Press, 2010
- Julie Carr**, *Sarah—Of Fragments and Lines*, Coffee House Press, 2010
- Rebecca Dunham**, *The Flight Cage*, Tupelo Press, 2010
- Thomas Sayers Ellis**, *Skin, Inc., Identity Repair Poems*, Graywolf Press, 2010
- Miriam Hall**, *Dreams of Movement*, Finishing Line Press, 2010
- Derrick Harriell**, *Cotton*, Willow Books/Aquarius Press, 2010
- Steve Healey**, *10 Mississippi*, Coffee House Press, 2010
- Tim Hunt**, *Fault Lines*, The Backwaters Press, 2010
- Deborah Jackman-Wilson**, *Walking Between Raindrops*, Xlibris, 2010
- Gary Jackson**, *Missing You, Metropolis*, Graywolf Press, 2010 [Winner of the Cave Canem Poetry Prize]
- Shane McCrae**, *In Canaan*, Rescue Press, 2010
- Ange Mlinko**, *Shoulder Season*, Coffee House Press, 2010

- Berywn Moore**, *O Body Swayed*, Cherry Grove Collections, 2010
- Ralph Murre**, *The Price of Gravity*, Auk Ward Editions, 2010
- Charles Nevsimal** (ed.), *Now Hear This: Voices of Urban Youth, Vol. Two*, Centennial Press (in cooperation with Lad Lake), 2010
- Georgia Ressemeyer**, *Today I Threw My Watch Away*, Finishing Line Press, 2010
- Liz Rhodebeck**, *What I Learned in Kansas*, Port Yonder Press, 2010
- W.R. Rodriguez**, *Concrete Pastures of the Beautiful Bronx*, zeugpress, 2008
- Lynn Shoemaker**, *A Catch in the Throat of Allah*, Parallel Press, 2010
- Robert Sonkowsky**, *Unsound Science*, Xlibris, 2010
- Sandy Stark**, *Counting on Birds*, Fireweed Press, 2010
- Alex Stolis**, *Li Po Comes to America*, Parallel Press, 2010
- David Young**, *Field of Light and Shadow, Selected and New Poems*, Alfred Knopf, 2010

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Books Received January-April 2011

Publisher & author links available online

- Sherry Chandler**, *Weaving a New Eden*, Wind Publications, 2011
- John Dubord**, *The Marvelous Mister Toad* [children's book], Toadybooks Press, 2010
- Dave Etter**, *Dandelions*, Red Dragonfly Press, 2010
- Eric Greinke**, *Traveling Music*, Presa Press, 2011
- Eric Greinke**, *The Potential of Poetry, Essays*, Presa Press, 2011
- Maggie Jaffe**, *Flick(k)s*, Red Dragonfly Press, 2010
- Daniel Khalastchi**, *Manolera*, Tupelo Press, 2011
- Noelle Kocot**, *The Bigger World*, Wave Books, 2011
- James P. Lenfestey** (ed.), *Low Down and Coming On: A Feast of Delicious and Dangerous Poems About Pigs*, Red Dragonfly Press, 2010
- Christina Lloyd**, *Territories*, Finishing Line Press, 2011
- Dimitris Lyacos**, trans. by Shorsha Sullivan, *Poena Dammi Z213: Exit*, Shoestring Press, 2010
- Caryn Mirriam-Goldbert, Marilyn L. Taylor, Denise Low, & Walter Bargaen**, (eds.), *An Endless Skyway, Poetry from the State Poets Laureate*, Ice Cube Books, 2011

- Richard W. Moyer**, *58 Collected Poems*, Infinity, 2010
- Richard W. Moyer**, *The Selected Poems*, Infinity, 2007
- Andrea Potos** (ed.), *Love and Lust, an Anthology*, Parallel Press, 2011
- Edith Rylander**, *Dance with the Darker Sister*, Red Dragonfly Press, 2010
- Nic Sebastian**, *Forever Will End On Thursday*, Lordly Dish Nanopress, 2011
- Joyce Sutphen**, *First Words*, Red Dragonfly Press, 2010
- Lester Smith** (ed.), *The Hungry Dead*, Popcorn Press, 2010
- Paul Terranova**, *This Small Breathing Coincidence*, Parallel Press, 2011
- Tony Trigilio**, *Historic Diary*, BlazeVOX [books], 2011
- Marine Robert Warden**, *Beyond the Straits*, Presa Press, 2010
- Diana Woodcock**, *In the Shade of the Sidra Tree*, Finishing Line Press, 2010
- Timothy Young**, *Herds of Bears Surround Us*, Red Dragonfly Press, 2010
- Tracy S. Youngblom**, *Driving to Heaven*, Parallel Press, 2010
- Mishka Zakharin**, *The Spleen of Fiery Dragons*, Infinity Publishing, 2010

Submission guidelines can be found at versewisconsin.org. Please send us a review copy of your recently published book or chapbook! Join us on Facebook for announcements & news.

Books Reviewed Online

- B.J. Best**, *Birds of Wisconsin*, New Rivers Press, 2011 by Amanda Brzenk
- Sue Chenette**, *Slender Human Weight*, Guernica Editions, 2009 by Lou Roach
- Karl Elder**, *The Houdini Monologues, Seems 43 - 44* / Word of Mouth Books 2010 by Michael Kriesel
- Joseph Farley**, *Looking for the Mother Tongue*, March Street Press, 2010 by Karla Huston
- Ann Fisher-Wirth**, *Carta Marina*, Wings Press, 2009 by Moira Richards
- Barbara L. Greenberg**, *Late Life Happiness*, Parallel Press, 2010 by Lou Roach
- Miriam Hall**, *Dreams of Movement*, Finishing Line Press, 2010 by Russell Gardner, Jr.
- Derrick Harriell**, *Cotton*, Willow/Aquarius Books, 2010 by Sarah Busse
- Terrance Hayes**, *Lighthouse*, 2010 by Fabu
- James P. Lenfestey** (ed.), *Low Down and Coming On: A Feast of Delicious and Dangerous Poems About Pigs*, Red Dragonfly Press, 2010 by Athena Kildegaard
- Dimitris Lyacos**, trans. by Shorsha Sullivan, *Poena Dammi Z213: Exit*, Shoestring Press, 2010
- Two Reviews: by Manos Georginis and by Judith Swann
- Shane McCrae**, *In Canaan*, Rescue Press, 2010 by Lisa Vihos
- Berwyn Moore**, *O Body Swayed*, Cherry Grove Collections, 2009 by Sherry Chandler
- Cristina M.R. Norcross**, *Unsung Love Songs*, 2009 by Kathleen Serley
- Alicia Suskin Ostriker**, *The Book of Seventy*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009 by Moira Richards
- Stephen Roger Powers**, *The Follower's Tale*, Salmon Poetry, 2009 by Russell Gardner, Jr.
- Liz Rhodebeck**, *What I Learned in Kansas*, Port Yonder Press, 2010 by Elmae Passineau
- Thomas R. Smith**, *The Foot of the Rainbow*, Red Dragonfly Press, 2010 by Ralph Murre
- Alex Stolis**, *Li Po Comes to America*, Parallel Press, 2010 by Lisa Vihos
- Joyce Sutphen**, *First Words*, Red Dragonfly Press, 2010 by Barbara Crooker
- Timothy Young**, *Herds of Bears Surround Us*, Red Dragonfly Press, 2010 by Judith Swann

& Books Noted:

Bart Galle, *Everything Is True at Once*, 2009 by Phyllis Beckman; **Kenneth P. Gurney**, *Fluid Shape of an Empty Womb*, 2009 by Phyllis Beckman; **Deborah Jackman-Wilson**, *Walking Between The Raindrops*, Xlibris, 2010 by Phyllis Beckman; **Richard Kovac**, *Untitled, Poems*, PM Books, 2008 by Zara Raab; **Mokasiya**, *The Shamans' Dream*, 2010 by Phyllis Beckman; **Georgia Ressemeyer**, *Today I Threw My Watch Away*, Finishing Line Press, 2010 by Judith Swann; **Robert Sonkowsky**, *Unsound Science*, Xlibris, 2010 by Russell Gardner, Jr.; **Diana Woodcock**, *In the Shade of the Sidra Tree*, Finishing Line Press, 2010 by Judith Swann

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What Becomes of the Deported?

I ask myself.
Do they disperse like
child-blown bubbles?
Or linger beneath saguaros and deliquesce?
Do their bones merge into the desert detritus?

I picture them as
ghost choruses crossing
undulating lines.

I doubt they huddle around
Sonoran campfires and reminisce
about butchered chickens in Iowa.

I suspect they languish in
sun-baked shanties on rations
of derision.

Or, incognito, in rank cantinas,
over warm cerveza,
do they slur stories of how cold
they were up north?

—DAVID BLACKKEY, LA CROSSE, WI

Confined

Why the white picket fence?

No bigger than
half a parking space,
within no-man's land.

What lies inside
can no longer leave.

Is it to keep out those that want in?

Which,
considering the weathered
Gentile form found within
and the grave locale
across the solitude,

would appear
to be very few,
if any at all.

—JIM GIESE, PLYMOUTH, WI

You Get Used To It

The hardest thing about death
is the first night.
After the first night
you get used to it
Like kids at summer camp
homesick their first night
Cry themselves to sleep
but the next day
Make new friends
and get used to it
And go swimming and canoeing
and fishing and hiking
And do beadwork and dress up
like Indians and roast
Marshmallows and wieners and sing
songs round the campfire
All the campers' and counselors' faces
illuminated
And at night the counselor
who loves the campers
Wanders the dark silent cabin
with lit candle observing
The dreamy faces
of the sleeping campers
And feels happy looking down at them
and when camp ends and it's time to go home
The youngsters don't want to go and cry
saying goodbye to new friends they love
They'll never see again
and their favorite counselor hugs them close.
You get used to being dead
the same way.
You get used to being dead forever
and don't want to go home.
Where you are is your home now forever
although there's one thing you never forget
Or you tell yourself you'll never forget
as you forget it forever—
Singing the old camp song round the campfire
your arm round your best friend under the stars.

—ANTLER, MILWAUKEE, WI

Gatekeeper of the kingdom

As the gatekeeper of the kingdom
I have always looked upon you as a giant
Views a gnat there's nothing you can do I have told
You we don't have vacancies this season try your luck
In Hades there's plenty of room for your family and friends
And it's free for the poor and needy like you free lodging free food

All you can eat

—ERUM AHMED, KARACHI, PAKISTAN

What Boys Do

curling up
inside an empty
garbage can
I rolled down
the warm
flowing hill
jeans torn
hair short
wind-blown
my gym shoes
blue and gray
thinking
this is what
boys do
they tumble
through
summer green
like babies
in the hard dark
spaces where
rubbish was

—AMY BILLONE, KNOXVILLE, TN

The Evening of the Fourth of July

You think you're immune
in this landscape: a nephew's backyard,
burgers on the grill, amused children

chasing the bubbles you fling into the air
from your wand. You're so sure of yourself,
on earth, on your feet.

Go ahead and play badminton
with the little girls you call granddaughters,
your son-in-law with his new titanium knee

popping the birdie towards you.
But please remember as you lie flat on your back,
both wrists fractured

in the attempt to break your fall
that this is what you wanted: to feel more intensely alive,
someone kneeling by your side urging you

to inhale deeply, exhale slowly.
Ice, you implore, *bring more ice*, the good earth
cushioning your body.

—CLAIRE KEYES, MARBLEHEAD, MA
visit VW Online for audio by this author

Coney Island Redux

Coney Island this drab summer day
gives us slippery oysters to eat.
We slide them down, then
spit them back up.
The ghost of The Steeple Chase hangs in the mist
with screams from gleeful riders,
jilted laughter, a ruckus of lights.

Today the Ferris Wheel is still.
A few lost people speak Russian
near the shipwrecked hotdog stand.
On washed up beaches
tufts of children build sand castles.

—SUZANNE BERGEN, MADISON, WI

Question for You

Don't, he shouted, *please don't*. The crayon made
a crazy web of violet triangles and intersecting
lines. Later I heard my mother on the telephone—
She will be severely punished. I said I didn't know
who did it—I never saw. At the roadside I pocketed
lavender flowers and shoved them into sewers.
For years, I pressed my confession into sandboxes,
erased one letter at a time—I-d-i-d-i-t. Lake Michigan's
shrinking mouth swallowed all my words—I-t-w-a-s-m-e.
Everything I wore was purple. At twenty-two, I forgot
how to speak. As soon as I got better, I admitted
to my parents—*I drew on Jason McClellan's wall*.
They had forgotten even who his family was. Now
my favorite color is crimson, darker than fresh blood.
I have no amethyst jewelry, only garnet. My clothes
have turned bright scarlet. Still, look closer.
I promise you'll find purple patterns where you
least expect them—When my mind leaps and spills,
drunken, wild; in every angle of my vision, letters
hide—Huckleberries, wine—I tap them with my
feet, dawn colored, queen colored, savage unholy
designs. I hold my breath. I jump from trees. I tie
my hair in jagged knots. Even if at first you can't
detect my secret, look closer—In the mad sea
foam, the wind-blown sand, my clean hands
and ferocious, closing teeth. Do you see it?

—AMY BILLONE, KNOXVILLE, TN

Used Book

after Elizabeth Bishop

I bought a tremendous book
and brought it home to bed,
where, the day dead,
I lay with my fingers unfolding
the frayed corners of the cover.
I will never let this book go.
The body, blemished with stickers,
wears rectangles and squares
in all the colors
of well-intentioned rainbows
bleeding into broken covenant
upon broken covenant.
There is pain in peeling the yellow “used”
from the length of spine,
another green “used” under that,
until Elizabeth Bishop appears at last,
finally free to breathe in
the beautiful oxygen.
Merchants must be pulled from the cover
with care—no rush, no tear.
Half Price Books. Book Barn.
University Books.
A last sticker from a store
I have never explored.
With a pencil I erase
the jot of a student—
these poems seeding his life
for a syllabus week,
meaning Tuesday and Thursday—
clean the title page
infested with tiny class notes.
Then the archeology
of cost, the legend of the cover price
for her complete works—
I paid fifty-five cents for what
I would bail an ocean for.
One dollar, then two dollars
on smaller stickers like those
found in grocery stores,
which you must scrape from the skin
section by tiny-pieced section.
The stakes were higher in the past.
Finally, its bandages
shorn, I hold the cover
to my cheek, mouth
close enough to whisper
“all better now,”
begin with the poem
where floating lanterns filled with flame
illuminate a pretty paradise
before setting it ablaze.

—CHUCK RYBAK, ONEIDA, WI

My Barefoot Rank

by David Graham

—to the memory of Donald Sheehan

In college I took a course or two with the Poet in Residence on our campus, who happened to be Richard Eberhart. Though I was young and determinedly unimpressed by such matters, Eberhart came into my life trailing a rather impressive list of honors. He was a winner of most accolades the poetry establishment could bestow, including The Pulitzer Prize, The National Book Award, the Bollingen Prize, and a stint as national Poet Laureate and Consultant to the Librarian of Congress. He was a founding member of the renowned Poets’ Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Scholarly books were written about his career. In his years as a professor he taught at many leading universities, including Columbia, Tufts, Brown, Swarthmore, Princeton, and finally Dartmouth. His poems appeared in every major anthology, where he was frequently featured as one of our chief poets of World War II. In fact, his poem “The Fury of Aerial Bombardment” was, even to my prematurely jaded undergraduate eyes, a pretty terrific accomplishment, along with “The Groundhog,” “The Cancer Cells,” “Cover me over, clover,” and others. In short, anyone who knew anything about the poetry scene knew and respected Eberhart.

Even better, to my way of thinking back then, Eberhart knew, or had met, *everyone*. I was not too cynical to enjoy sitting in his living room in one of his workshop sessions, where he would lean back in his chair, puff on his pipe, and recount firsthand anecdotes of everyone from Yeats and Dylan Thomas to Allen Ginsberg. We all knew, as well, that he had once been the teacher of the most famous poet of the era, Robert Lowell. Moreover, he was reputed to be the first academic, establishment poet to take the Beat poets seriously, which was a further feather in his cap from my perspective.

He lived out his extremely long life (finally dying in 2005 at age 101) about as richly honored and respected as a poet can be.

But well before his death I realized that my famous former professor was not so famous anymore. It seems increasingly obvious that, despite his accomplishments and high reputation, lasting for decades, the poet

Richard Eberhart was one whose name really was writ in water. When my generation dies, I expect he’ll turn permanently into a footnote, one of those minor figures showing up occasionally in the biographies of others, only noted in the most exhaustive critical histories of his era. Looking back, I realize that his brand of highly wrought Romantic formalism was passing out of fashion even as far back as the 1960s. A young poet today who took Eberhart as a model would be a curiosity at best. His handful of best known poems have gradually but relentlessly been vanishing from the main anthologies. He rarely appears on course syllabi or in anything but the most specialized journal articles anymore, and I can’t recall the last time I heard his name mentioned at any gathering of poets. I seriously doubt there will be any more scholarly works about him to come. A mere half decade after his death, Eberhart essentially has no fame anymore.

So what happened? The short answer is that what happened to him is what will happen to every other poet now breathing, with so few and such unpredictable exceptions that it nearly doesn’t matter. For a few decades Eberhart enjoyed an uncommon degree of renown, it’s true, but quite rapidly the natural order of things re-established itself, so he has been, by and large, forgotten. The truth is that oblivion is not just commonplace for poets, but practically the rule. To harbor ambitions for any other fate is almost by definition to be deluded, and, as the example of Eberhart nicely illustrates, honors and attention during one’s life are no guarantee of posthumous reputation.

Of course, the ambition to write a great poem is not the same thing as a desire to win the Pulitzer Prize. We all know that, or say that we do. Yet many of us devote enormous amounts of time, energy, and precious hope seeking honors, reputation, prestigious publications, and all the rest of those things that we know, or should know, will evaporate rapidly even if we are lucky enough to achieve them in our lifetimes. Much more likely we won’t even reach a fraction of the renown of an Eberhart who, even at the peak of his career, was seldom spoken of in the same breath as a Yeats or Frost. And now isn’t spoken of at all.

In 1862, an unknown and unpublished young New England poet wrote to a prominent literary figure, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, inquiring of this learned gentleman whether, as she put it, her poems were “alive.” Higginson’s baffled condescension toward the unconventional poems of Emily Dickinson has made his name a footnote of a less admirable kind. But to his credit, he did know that she was a remarkable woman, even if he had no idea her fame as a poet would one day eclipse that of every other single American poet who was considered great in 1862. He became a friend and pen pal, someone she playfully referred to as her teacher. You and I might fancy that we would not be so obtuse as to miss the true genius of an Emily Dickinson, but we’d be wrong. Smarter people than us considered her a minor oddball writer for decades, until in the twentieth century her reputation slowly grew to be what it is today.

In one of their exchanges, Higginson suggested, no doubt kindly and diplomatically, that Dickinson’s work was not ready for publication. In her letter of reply she disavowed any ambition of that outward kind, focusing entirely on the inward ambition that any serious poet must cultivate:

I smile when you suggest that I delay “to publish,” that being foreign to my thought as firmament to fin.

If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her; if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase, and the approbation of my dog would forsake me then. My barefoot rank is better.

Some critics and biographers have assumed that Dickinson was being disingenuous, seeking advice from a leading literary light while pretending not to be interested in his help toward publication. I probably thought so, too, if I gave the matter any thought when starting out as a poet. But what if she *meant* what she wrote? What if, in fact, she really was inquiring of a well-known expert his opinion of the quality of her poems, without expectation of a “career” in the art or even publication? What if she just wanted an informed evaluation, or wished to reach out to a possibly kindred soul? We know from biographical research, reinforced by everything Dickinson wrote, that she was fully capable of fiercely held and against-the-grain opinions. Why must we suspect that she was necessarily, if secretly, eager for ordinary publication? As far as we know, she never made the slightest move in this direction, and the handful of poems that appeared in print during her lifetime were submitted by friends. There is a great deal of speculation among Dickinson scholars, but to my knowledge there is not much evidence that she was ever unhappy with her barefoot ranking.

More importantly, what if she not only meant what she wrote, but what if she was *right*? Is there a sense in which a “barefoot” ranking is, actually, better than fame and a public career in the art of poetry? Well, of course it depends on what one means by “better.” What I am groping toward here, tentatively and with many patches of self-doubt and personal bewilderment, is a stance toward poetic vocation different from the more or less conventional ambitions that guided me through college, graduate school, and my early “career” as a

publishing writer. (I put the term “career” in quotation marks because I am well aware that I never have had, or will enjoy, anything close to Eberhart’s degree of reputation, despite publishing my work in a variety of places for decades now.) In a sense I suppose I am trying to convince myself that my utter obscurity as a poet—my “failure” to achieve the fame I once yearned for in my deep heart’s core—is a good thing, not just a realistic adjustment to the conditions that prevail, but ultimately a healthy way to be.

What I am groping toward here, tentatively and with many patches of self-doubt and personal bewilderment, is a stance toward poetic vocation different from the more or less conventional ambitions that guided me through college, graduate school, and my early “career” as a publishing writer.

this was as much a matter of temperament and sloth as principle, at least in the beginning. I have often felt like the world’s worst schmoozer and hustler, no doubt largely because it’s distasteful to me. If on a given day I had to choose between promoting my career and promoting poetry, I more often chose the latter. Most days I focused on the work itself, forming and sticking to a daily writing regimen—in fact, I haven’t missed a day in nineteen years and counting.

At the same time I also resolved to do more of what Dickinson had done, reaching out to like-minded souls in a variety of ways. Unlike Dickinson, I was fairly sociable about it, comfortable enough leaving my house to meet other poets. I went to writers’ conferences, became active in online discussion groups, and attended as many readings and open mics as I could. I participated in informal workshops both online and in person, wrote fan letters to poets I admired, did a bit of book reviewing and essay writing, connected with other writers on Facebook, and so forth. I met more than a few fellow poets online, and maintain a friendly correspondence with a fair number of them. Few of these were new activities for me, of course; what was different was that more and more I put the energy and time I used to devote to submitting work and promoting myself into more “barefoot” or grassroots action. I happily submitted my

I have no advice to give or answers to the big questions. But I can offer some testimony from my own experience in this strange enterprise. In my writing life, as the years passed and it gradually became obvious that the prize committees were never going to give me a call, the major critics would not be gushing about my work, and my face would never appear on the cover of *American Poetry Review*, I reacted by gradually cutting back on my attempts to gain publication, win prizes, and generally push myself forward in the maelstrom of Po-Biz. To be honest

Late in life

She saw it had been pointless
to try to direct her tricycle,
or her pet hamster,
or her skis on the expert slope,
or the varsity tackle
who saw her in such a rosy light
that she married him;
which editor would select her work,
or which of her thoughts
her best friend would finish this time. . .
and later still she eased up
striving at all.
She unbuckled, unlaced,
leaned back
and let it flow.

—BARB CRANFORD, HANCOCK, WI

own work for publication when solicited, but not often otherwise. When I published something new it felt good, naturally, but it didn't feel as though I had "won" anything. This seemed a fair price for not feeling like a loser when rejected or ignored.

Interestingly enough, this laissez-faire attitude toward the outward rewards of Po-Biz has had unexpected side benefits. For one thing, I found myself being solicited more frequently than ever before, probably because of all my online visibility. I haven't published more than before, necessarily, but I certainly have been rejected less often. For another thing, I gradually widened my circle of poetry pals and acquaintances considerably, and thus found my taste and knowledge in poetry also evolving accordingly. But most of all, I grew happier and happier as both poet and person. I discovered the old demons of envy and unhealthy, unrealistic ambition becoming weaker and weaker in me year by year. I am more content with my barefoot rank than I ever was while running hard on ambition's treadmill.

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Jessica Nelson North: Recalling the Reaches of Silence & Sound

by LaMoine MacLaughlin

Among children's literature, everyone considers Sterling North's *Rascal* a classic. He also wrote other books which have delighted readers everywhere—and justly so. His hometown of Edgerton, Wisconsin annually celebrates the Sterling North Book Fair and Film Festival, gathering authors and fans from far and wide in his honor. His family home in Edgerton (the setting of *Rascal*), now open as a museum, has been restored to its 1917 setting. One of the major characters in *Rascal* is Sterling's older sister Jessica, portrayed when she was twenty-five years old. A couple of years ago I asked one of the Edgerton promoters of the Sterling North celebration about Jessica Nelson North, and the person did not know that Sterling even had a sister. Sterling's daughter Arielle, also an author, has remembered Jessica as "...my favorite aunt, enthusiastic and very bright. I can remember her reciting (by heart) reams and reams of poetry, old and new, even into her nineties. She wrote fine poetry herself, for a broad audience from small children to thoughtful adults. She was like a second mother to my dad, Sterling North, ...and he adored her. As adults, they had lively discussions about the literary world, agreeing or disagreeing about various authors and literary styles. Both were so knowledgeable and quick witted, it was fun listening to them." While Sterling North's work completely justifies his popularity, it has completely and unjustly eclipsed the achievement of his sister, Jessica Nelson North.

Jessica Nelson North, born in Madison, Wisconsin in 1891, grew up on the shore of picturesque Lake Koshkonong. Her father, David Willard North, farmed with his wife, Sarah Elizabeth (Nelson) North, near Edgerton. Sarah died while Sterling was very young, and he survived polio in his teens under the care of his sister Jessica. Lucy M. Freibert, a Women's Studies pioneer at the University of Louisville, has described Jessica Nelson North as "a precocious child (who) memorized and recited poetry from the time she could speak. By the age of five, she read the newspaper and composed rhymes...(and) in

It's not been a smooth road, I should add. Nor do I imagine I will ever achieve the perfect writerly bliss of non-ambition. As Donald Hall once noted in an essay, "nothing is learned once that does not need learning again"—nothing important, anyway, I believe. The old corrosive and envy-laden sense of ambition does appear in my soul on a regular basis, despite my best intentions. But I know what to do about it, at least. I send a poem I love to some friends. I attend an open mic and recite a poem by someone else. Every year I introduce my students to great poets of the past and cheer them in their own attempts to master the art. I swap new drafts with fellow poets. I write an essay like this one when asked, and hope in return to receive some comments, not from posterity but from you, Gentle Reader. I re-read Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman as needed, and remind myself how delicious it can feel to walk barefoot through this world.



her youth...competed successfully with other young poets, including Edna St. Vincent Millay, in the contests conducted by Mary Mapes Dodge, editor of *St. Nicholas Magazine*." Jessica received a bachelor's degree from Lawrence College in Appleton, Wisconsin and went on to graduate school at the University of Chicago, where she presided over the University of Chicago Poetry Club and edited the *Adelphean* and the *History of Alpha Delta Pi*. In 1912 she published a little children's poem entitled "Three Guests" in *St. Nicholas: An Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks*. The poem has been widely distributed, often with no attribution. ...

Why Being an Obscure Poet Isn't Such a Bad Life After All

by Charles P. Ries

I awoke at midnight in a confused sweat. Racked again by a poet's ultimate existential dilemma; no, not a new and more powerful metaphor, but is it better to be a famous poet or an obscure poet? Some would argue this is actually a distinction without a difference, but not me. It was a choice. I would make it. It would become my self-delusional, self-fulfilling prophecy.

With only the neon light of Ray's Romper Room Bar across the street to illuminate my garret, my poet's soul screamed, "What is it you want for me—fame or obscurity?" Much to my amazement a clear voice responded, "Are you nuts! Obscure baby—be obscure!" The clarity of this audio hallucination gave me pause. I pray for all kinds of things and God never replies, but now, to this simple request, I get a voice in the dimness of night. It made me wonder if God was a frustrated poet? ...

Read the complete articles at *VW Online*.

Picasso's Studio

At the daycare,
pigs with distorted faces
line the walls,
spiders appear
like black suns,

pumpkins whose grins
happen upon the face
any which way
have been taken down,

replaced with turkeys
whose legs grow
from their heads.

At the daycare,
toddler's portraits
are snapped into place
by laundry pins
on a line

as if to dry,
are circles,
a doodling
of self-examination.

Walking the halls
of this studio,
I nod at nonsense,
nod at numbers,
nod at need.

—CHRISTINE REDMAN-WALDEYER, MANASQUAN, NJ

Night Vision, 1968

That summer, back from Vietnam, Gene bossed
Our crew, part-timers still in high school. We'd
Wait in the seedy balcony—legs crossed,
Slouched deep in red plush seats—for him to end
The evening's show, turn up the lights to send
A blinking audience home, and then proceed
To point us to our putty knives and paint.
"How come you never talk?" Long afterward,
Told of his suicide, I glimpsed the ice
His eyes became, how differently the dice
Can roll. It wasn't—isn't—true: I've heard
Repeatedly his measured, soft complaint.
Last credits scrolled off-screen, the house again
Dark, bathed in night, he counts slowly to ten.

—CHARLES HUGHES, PARK RIDGE, IL

Upon Finding a Nude of My Grandmother

Thirst was something
my grandfather knew
when he took charcoal,
pressed it to paper,

forgave Gladys, himself—
left art school
to marry her,
dragged the lead

over and over,
broke the points
on his pencils
to know her on paper.

—CHRISTINE REDMAN-WALDEYER, MANASQUAN, NJ

My Mother Looked at Photographs

My mother looked at photographs.
That's how I knew Aunt Emma smiled
And Uncle Jim had been a child
Who'd take big chances just for laughs—

At ten, he posed, all nonchalance,
On the garage, umbrella raised
("To balance"—she'd remain unfazed—
"He's an accountant, it's what he wants");

How I found out life has its hells
Even for grandfathers—white hair,
Thin metal glasses, debonair
In paisley tie and wide lapels,

Mine dressed his up in "confident clothes"
(Which hadn't kept her from seeing through).
I'd search her eyes, as children do,
For signs of how deep down grief goes.

This was especially true when she'd
Hit Edythe. Then her voice would fall
For emphasis: "We had a ball."
More friends than sisters, they'd agreed,

But all those times, she didn't cry.
She talked. She touched that teenage face.
A discipline, I guess. A grace.
Some deaths are hard to satisfy.

—CHARLES HUGHES, PARK RIDGE, IL

Shelves

Today, I put in shelves and barely thought of anything but books and compact discs, of space and symmetry and all the things I hadn't read or listened to in years.

I still haven't. I like to know they're there, not just in memory, but in my hall and living room, like reunited teams posed for a photograph, in which each face

will show up elsewhere in a different snap, a part of a collection, but itself if moved or lost. Rearrangement's glib—just custody. Each story stays the same.

—QUINCY LEHR, BROOKLYN, NY

Mouras Encantadas

No man would have her was the family joke as Great Aunt Alice sat and scowled. She'd forge a smile to criticize: *The vinho d' alhos? Too strong!* When eyeballs rolled, she'd soon invoke

her chicken-less plight, how she'd been forced to kill their hens for lunch, to chop off heads and pluck and gut, and then she'd watched her father suck the bones – and ate no more. She'd lost her will

until my brother's wake. She walked the long condolence line to slap my mother's face: *Get over it,* she said, then tottered from our reach to sit. She hummed a cradlesong while pulling out her hook and tating case, then waited for the piercing that would not come.

—MARYBETH RUA-LARSEN, SOMERSET, MA

Depression

One day we were down—this is true, I am not making this up for the story's sake, or for pity's sake—to our last potato. Standing in the kitchen, my mother held that spud up, and we all looked at it like Christ might have looked at those measly loaves and fishes. How could a woman feed a family of five on one potato? We were sent out, the three of us, to forage—for dandelion greens maybe, or to beg a lettuce head or a carrot grown by Mr. Dow down the street. My brother Earl, six years old then, came running back into the house waving a five-dollar bill over his head. He'd found it on the sidewalk. My mother made us all kneel down on the kitchen floor and thank God for the miracle.

Another day my baby brother Donny came up from the basement, covered with coal dust and cobwebs, his eyes shining. He put a glass button into my mother's hand. *I found a diamond, Mama,* he said. *We don't ever have to be poor again.*

Donny's a grown man now, and rich. He still fixes his own cars, though he hates doing it. His wife says he doesn't understand that he has money. And Earl can make a dollar go farther than anyone else I know.

Me? I admit I pinch pennies. Save string. Recycle. Scrimp. Then save some more. Look every gift horse in the mouth for resale possibilities. But

also

I see miracles lying on the sidewalk, jewels in glass.

—MARIE SHEPPARD WILLIAMS, MINNEAPOLIS, MN

Memories of Cousin Stanley

My novelist cousin Stanley died of MS, contracted late in life, leaving me with regrets, for we'd had a "somewhat competitive relationship" (so Harry his friend had summed it up the time we drove, all three eighteen, out of Chicago to Canada).

The revealing bit about me and Stanley comes from this trip, not from his visit with Joan his wife to us in England, he reading at length from his first, best novel: "The lock...the lock was in my hands!"

But that time, too, is part of the story, for when he'd finished, flushed, I gave him only a nod. "Got it," I said: "The lock...the lock was in your hands."

More than "somewhat competitive."

I took him out through the rain that evening to tour the Cambridge Colleges; he had to see this stuff, I insisted. He might have preferred reading more of his novel.

Once, at a party in Cambridge, Mass., he asked how I'd liked his 5th and I said I'd wait for the paperback. Not nice. Not cousinly.

Driving Wisconsin, Harry grew tired of our bickering, proposed a contest: we'd fight it out, the first exhausted from non-stop-talking the loser. He must have figured our babble would keep him awake down the moonless highway. And so we talked, on and on, me and Stanley, miles and miles. Who knows what we said. Words. Kindly Harry declared it a tie.

Later, afflicted, Stanley labored with canes, a wheelchair, before he died. I sent a sympathy letter to Joan, but truly we'd failed to love one another as cousins should, as all of us should.

Sad. What else? When my friend Kirk had need of a name for his new punk band I suggested "Cousin Stanley," and so it was called. Stanley would have been pleased

to lend his name to a punk garage band out of Meadville, PA. And in my own writings sometimes I'd name a character "Stanley," give him a walk-on part. But mainly I wanted to tell how we yakked on that trip word after rapid meaningless word unlistening to each other down the miles of the dark Wisconsin night.

—BARRY SPACKS, SANTA BARBARA, CA

1957

Back in 1957 my major concern was my sex life while in Tulsa, Oklahoma,

they buried a time-capsule not to be opened till fifty years later, containing choice items including a new Chevy Belvedere

with gasoline supplied in case that fuel might no longer be known in our world when they dug the car up in 2007,

the Chevy having no need for fuel, destroyed by water seepage. That fall a Yankee rookie named Kubek twice

hit homers, third game of the World Series, Kubek named Rookie of the Year, and lest we forget, on Oct. 4th

the Soviets scared us by launching Sputnik, starting an overdrive of strive that continues to this very day.

Albert Camus won the Nobel Prize, Liz Taylor exchanged one marriage for another; a brave little black girl and eight of her friends

faced down bigots in Little Rock, and Mario A. Gianini died (inventor of the maraschino cherry).

I noted such matters in '57, like everyone else opined, even marched, but really my prime concern was my sex life,

should I be ashamed of that? — not Sputnik, Kubek, the Nobel prize, not Liz nor the Chevy Belvedere.

—BARRY SPACKS, SANTA BARBARA, CA

Not Kansas

Circa 1969

My 1956 Mercury was not much of a car,
Bought in Chico, California for \$75
By a 15-year-old runaway,
It took me down the coast
'Til drowsiness led me to
A closed gas station where
My sleep was interrupted by
A zealous county sheriff's deputy.
Busted on weapons charges, lying
My ass off, no one to tell them
Who I really was, or that I was
Only 15 and far from home.
My Mercury faithfully waited the 15 days
It took me to serve my sentence
For the knife, the chain, my smart mouth.
Back on the road south, always south,
To beautiful Fresno and my Jehovah
Witnessing cousins, where I hid out
Until my father, fearful I'd be converted,
Flew out and dragged me back to
Face the destiny I tried so hard to escape.
Decades later, over half my life in prison,
I still remember my 1956 Mercury and the
15 year old runaway who couldn't get away.

—HARLAN RICHARDS, GORDON, WI

Old Address

My address book is the crossed out
numbers of my life. Where my kids
have lived. Old girl friends, places
I worked where I needed to connect,
and sometimes did. My parent's birth
dates, along with others, are jotted
in the back. They moved to Chicago
in 1919. My mom with her mother
and sisters, my father alone. I call
their old telephone number and wait.
I picture an ancient, dial-up phone
on a party line, mother saying aloud,
"My, my, now who can that be?" But
the woman who answers is younger.
It's 1941 and I have just been born.
"Is this really you?" she asks, "Is this
my son?"

—JOHN LEHMAN, ROCKDALE, WI

Move backwards, through the pane of glass.
If the glass scratches or cuts you,

it will be healed on the other side.
None of this has happened yet.

The split tomato drips its life's blood.
Weeds thrive with wicked abandon.

Wrinkled-faced apples rot sweetly.
The potent herbs are dried and aged.

After you have eaten all this, step up
through the glass again.

You have no home. There is nowhere
to live except within your skin.

—LINDA BACK MCKAY, MINNEAPOLIS, MN

The Runaway

Strapped sublimely at the teat of God,
bringing it out warm and whole,
wet molecules of ecstatic precision—
I swaddled emptily, sky-naked,
beneath the shocked wood
of the barn decked out in disrepair,
where the threshing floor of my brains directed
me to abandon my family and run off.

And the course of nations lumbers where it will,
and the lives of bullet-ploughed men line up
in the press-fresh shimmer of the Brand New Testament,
slouching bland and googly-eyed toward the world—
yet none of this concerns me in the least,
who dirtied my ephemera with hay-dust,
and slung and slashed in God's shallow puddles
until a thousand mothers' voices announced warm pies
and woven blankets, for my piddled cry.

All of these were the chalkboard visions
strung across my sight, like a child's click-clack eye-toy,
grudging my view of the world of itself,
leavening the white sheet of my soul
to pound in secret on its useless board.

—DAVID LURIE, MILWAUKEE, WI

Moving Back Home

I rang New York
second. She wasn't sufficiently
enough outdoorsy, but
after California flat out
told me no I had to try.

I couldn't believe
the pinch I was in—
Florida was busy and
a flake anyway. Jersey,
well, I didn't want anyone
I couldn't tell mom about.

So I dialed her up,
despite saying I never
would, never could after
she smothered me, but
there she was.

A little older, more
stout and plain than
I remember, but there she was,
Midwest—willing to remember
when I was there, ignoring when I left.

—CASEY FRANCIS, QUINCY, IL

A Summer Evening Walk

I walk my grandpa's dog in the middle of dormant Main Street,
fluorescent lights glare out from a storefront,
a stubborn orange sky is stubbornly setting.
Two cars sit parked on the heaving brick road—client and beautician,
engulfed in the stern light, are framed by the window announcing,
Linda's Shear Impressions
402-687-2267

Wrapped in a black cape, Sandy meets
Linda's eyes in the mirror until a good piece of gossip
prompts Sandy to shift her shoulders, turn her head,
to look back and up as if the reflection hides
some portion of the story. The dog tugs west
away from the two ladies in the window, but know
(because Linda cannot say no)
we will see her late night show again this evening
with another guest sitting in the chair, sharing
from their life or their children's lives or their neighbor's.

I can only see August—rain, corn, heat.
Stars have risen by the time the dog pulls back east
under the streetlight's orange glow. The sky now black,
the First National sign flashes in red lights:
9:47 87°
then does it again
9:48 87° and
9:49 87° and
9:50 86°.

A Mercury Grand Marquis glides past with its low tires
humming on the street until it slows where
the Main Street brick ends and becomes the shoulderless
blacktop leading away from town.
The car creaks, the steering wheel whines,
then heads back up the street
to park in front of Linda's window.
A question mark emerges slowly from the car
as Linda opens the door, back straight and tall,
followed by Sandy in the cape.
The question mark navigates the curb
with the help of an exclamation point and a billowing black cloud.
All three figures wave and pause when the dog barks.
We walk up to hear the exclamation point explain
to the cloud, then louder for the question mark,
"That's Gordon's grandboy, back probably for just the summer."

—CASEY FRANCIS, QUINCY, IL

Illinois Summer

Twilight fell
and skinned its knee
and Delphi
brought it inside
to the medicine cabinet
and taped
an antiseptic gauze
on the wound
and the blood turned
the white gauze
a wonderful pink tint
with hints of blue-grey
and peach.

—KENNETH P. GURNEY, ALBUQUERQUE, NM

By the Numbers

Dear Tom,

You were already gone
when I got there,
11/14/06,
Room 114,
I sat with you till
4:11 pm CST,
Central Shiva Time.

The same numbers
pile up,
some unexplained order
from the untangling
of your life,
second by second,
thread by thread.

Your number is up,
when it's up,
1's and 4's
a chugging train,
rolling boxcars,
cat's eyes.

The roll of the dice—
One is a die
Two is a dice
Four is a life—
a fortification of family,
friends, food, fun,
a diehard delicious dance of destiny,
good odds for everything.

—RICK McMONAGLE, EUGENE, OR

Wire-To-Wire

You'd scan the text on yellow
paper, the vital wire
that a boy from Western Union
delivered. Uncle Vic
would promise a platinum Bulova
for graduation. Perhaps
there'd be a late acceptance
from the rare school
that didn't think you stupid.
You've even kept the ones
you'd rather forget: *Vic
dead STOP Come
now STOP Funeral
in Ramapo STOP*

He loved you STOP Fifty
years, and wires are rubberized.
These are the lines that bind
or dribble from breast pockets
to set the user twittering.
After your visiting son
Googles a virtual friend
you face him nose to nose,
hear his stomach gurgle.
You notice his new mole,
muss his graying hair,
inhale the onions and peppers
from his fajita lunch,
remind him to suck mints.

—RICHARD MERELMAN, MADISON, WI

Good-bye, 1935

I sit straight, eyes ahead, hands folded,
wishing I were somewhere else;
maybe out on the playground,
pushing the merry-go-round
around and around its slow circle.
Miss Groethe calls our names:
“Robert.” The boy next to me,
who has been Bobby all week,
steps to the front of the room.
We line up, march forward
as Miss Groethe leans to each child,
scans each face intently.
“Good-bye, Robert. Good-bye, John.
Good-bye, Nina. Good-bye, Barbara.
Good-bye. Good-bye.”
Her gray eyes are very bright.
For a long time the clock ticks.
Suddenly I am afraid.
I am not a child safe
in a first grade classroom,
but . . . what?
Bobby drops his pencil;
Nina sniffles. We march out.
Dimly I understand that
the world has changed.
But what have I done?

—BARB CRANFORD, HANCOCK, WI

Present Perfect

Edmund sprinkled the twenty-third psalm
on his eggs and hash browns
at the greasy spoon
whose front door resides
not ten feet from the bus stop.

He spreads Isaiah forty-thirty-one
on his toast
and knows Matthew twenty-two
thirty-seven to thirty-nine
are encapsulated in the vitamins
he swallows with his orange juice.

Edmund feels ready to face the world
now that his fortified breakfast
is completely consumed
and energizes his heart and body,
so he stands at the bus stop
newspaper under his arm,
briefcase in hand.

That night, after supper,
Edmund rereads
the Song of Solomon
in Lisa's lithe fingers
and the kisses they share.

—KENNETH P. GURNEY, ALBUQUERQUE, NM

Go Figure

The moon is cut in half. Zero stars.
My headlights cover 75% of the wide road
until I right angle onto my street
and they spill 10% into the drain gullies
on either side. My garage door takes 30%
longer to rise on cold nights. The mail box
squeaks a loud 95% protest
as it is opened and I pull out 75% ads
and 25% bills which add up to a 100%
disappointment. Dinner costs 10%
of my week's budget but there is only 25%
of the week left so I am ok. The play was not
100% perfect but it was good enough for
me to get my money's worth. So I figure I am
on the plus side for the evening.

—HELEN PADWAY, MILWAUKEE, WI

Once Upon a Dime

A new eatery called La Croissant
opened up, the owner, a tall, dark
Turk, runs the place, coffee served
in cups on saucers, every hot refill
poured as though it's his blood.

My wife took me there, a women's
hang out, elegant ambiance, gossip
floating like dust motes— where I
wanted to say to my wife—tell me,
is your old man out on bail yet?

His morning Happy Hour features
dollar-a-cup-coffee, nothing terrific
for geezers like me, who recall
when a dime bought coffee with
free refills and no added sales tax.

Forget this dollar-a-cup cookie shop,
give me Gyros West, the din of early
blue-collar crowds, where coffee mugs
are always full, where you can relax
among folks with mud on their shoes.

I miss mornings with my old writing
pal, whose critiques began by asking,
what the hell is this story about, amidst
the wiggle-jiggle of tattooed waitresses,
and clinky clatter of heavy plates,

where kitchen aromas are a mix of
bacon and eggs, biscuits 'n gravy,
wafting the air with greasy vapors,
orders shouted in Greek and Spanish,
yesterday's stains on today's aprons.

—JOHN L. CAMPBELL, BROOKFIELD, WI

A Father's Regret

While we scuba dive on a coral reef
five miles out in the Gulf of Mexico,
a jelly fish, like a gigantic, unrolled
condom, attaches itself to my son's
shaved head. Damn, I never got to do
shit like this with my dad.

—JOHN LEHMAN, ROCKDALE, WI

The Killers

The killers come and go.
The victims (the alleged victims)
blend together. Almost always
black males either in or on
the periphery of drug dealing.

I write my client's name
on the file in black marker,
read the complaint, go to the jail,
look over the police reports, try
to get him out on bail,
plea bargain, or go to trial.
At sentencing,
the victim's family crying
the same things over and over--
He is missed. He was loved. He loved.

The killers come and go.
So do the rapists,
the armed robbers, and the burglars.
But the child molesters.
I remember them all.
How they look
into my eyes out of some dark
animal terror; how the creepy
fidgeting accompanies every lie;
how the reverie of their terrible
pleasures turns a scowl
into a smile on a dime.

How the steel doors, the electric
locks, the barbed wire
hold us,
bind us.

—THOMAS J. ERICKSON, MILWAUKEE, WI

No One Ever Asked Me...

... a decorated Vietnam vet, if I killed
anyone. Not my son, my dad, my
grandkids nor my wife. My answer
is Steven Craven, an Army sergeant.

Of an almost three-hundred battalion
men, he's the one who didn't return.
I had asked for volunteers to build
a school. His rifle rested against a tree
when he was shot. But you are not
responsible for that, you might object.
And I'd look you in the eye and say,
Oh yes we are.

—JOHN LEHMAN, ROCKDALE, WI

Wondering After Carmen

Past the ball field behind Nana's, on the hill
by the airport fence, we find a mini shrine:

a rock painted *Carmen*, a photo of an old
woman holding a hairless dog. Dead dog?

Dead mom? A *Happy Mother's Day*
balloon, nearly dead, creeps us out cold

so we run like the devil is chasing us,
last one home a dead Chihuahua.

Porch safe, we wonder Carmen's death.
Foul ball? Low plane? Maybe vanished.

I imagine an empty wash of tears, that hill
a mere solid slope for grief to lean into.

Nana says we're crazy, no Carmen lives
here and that's no way to bury the dead,

yet tells us not to eat Mr. Hahn's rhubarb
since he sprinkled the patch with his Mrs.

This is how I learn the truth about faith:
Nana feeds us veggies born of compost

and crap but won't dare taste the neighbor,
believes more in a living God in heaven

than a dead Carmen in her own backyard.
Look, I say, but she won't, ever. Not even

when I threaten to dig, not when I lash out
that even Jesus unearthed himself as proof.

Instead, she says enough. It's getting dark,
and it's my turn to tend the garden.

—CATHRYN COFELL, APPLETON, WI

On the Meaning Of

This is what life does.
It wakes you in the morning before
the morning glories open and gives you
the sound of your mother's voice.
Life spreads itself across the ceiling
to make you think you are penned in,
but that is just another gift.
Life takes what you thought you couldn't
live without and gives you a heron instead.
Or a dragonfly, stitching its way through the milkweed.
Life contains all of your tears in a vessel
shaped like hands in prayer. Life is shape and touch
and sound and bone. It whispers and sings and touches
you all over and you almost never feel it. You push
your way from phase to phase. You are a horse with blinders.
You think you are pulling forward but you are being driven.
While going about your solitary life, one hoof in front
of the other, real life is turning the stars, like mirrors,
in your direction.

—LINDA BACK MCKAY, MINNEAPOLIS, MN

Finding a Poem

A cat has jumped up on my chair,
is there a verse there? I have seen this same cat everyday
for eight years, we have grown a bit older together
and all the poems residing in his night-dark fur have
been spoken. He'll have to wait today.

The other one lies sleeping
and there is nothing new about a sleeping cat, is there?
His tail curls around his body like a snake; his eyes are closed
but his ears are alert waiting for a breath of excitement

or perhaps a poem of his own, but he is probably sick of writing
about his people and how they sit for hours in front of a computer
staring at him and tapping away expectantly.

—JACKIE LANGETIEG, VERONA, WI
visit VW Online for audio by this author

Stonecarver

He fancies himself
A brother to pirates and corsairs.
And he sits in the village tavern
Sporting a beret he bought on a drunken spree
In Madison, the week he sold his tombstone works.
Now, he sits and smokes and coughs and swears.
He says he does not know
What to make of young people like me.
All I know is that he is no advertisement for stone carving.
You don't spend years plowing stone plains with a chisel
Without getting stone farmer's lung.
Talk about beholding fear in a handful of dust.

—JOHN SIME, READSTOWN, WI

Accomplice

I'm the nondescript one in the heavy coat
and the black mood, pockets emptied
of keys and coins, water bottle confiscated.

I'm listening to the announcements, one delay
after another. It's the way we fly now, drained
and edgy, as if we hadn't slept for a week.

At security, an armed guard removes
a Makita drill from someone's duffel, waves it
like a weapon—which perhaps it is—

and scans the rest of us, all implicated.
We shrink into our suddenly insufficient skins,
avert our eyes and study our guilty hands.

I'm earbudded, buzzed with caffeine
and fluorescence, the one in the last row,
considering varieties of weather, whether
the flight will go, whether there's a code-word,
some inside information I should know.

—ANTONIA CLARK, WINOOSKI, VT
visit VW Online for audio by this author

Revising Your Poems

by Michael Kriesel

So many planets have to line up for a poet to reach full potential. Revision is one of them. Not Jupiter, but maybe Mercury. You wouldn't write poems if you didn't like playing with words. So why not develop that playfulness further...via revision?

1. *Last Line First / Best Line First*

Got a lackluster poem? Take the last line (or the best line) and throw out everything else. Start over with that one line as the opening of a whole new poem. Use the process to reboot your brain.

2. *Saving What Works*

Often more than just one line needs to be extracted and expanded on. Here's a failed Abecedarium of mine that contained an idea worth salvaging. The germ of a separate poem is in boldface.

Where Light Goes

Zombie Christ rises like a B movie.
Yet be not deceived. None return from death.
X is the true cross of man, marks the spot
where light goes, leaving images behind.
Vivid an instant. Gone but permanent.
**Understand, like light, we die. Otherwise
time would stop. We'd all still be in Egypt,
still building pyramids, still watching the
river of snakes swimming the dress of that
cute Egyptian girl dicing onions, a
paring knife in her hand. My eyes are wet
on waking, face numb from loss. Her face still
no less real than mine.** Or that pair of eyes—
magician's eyes—from fifteen years ago.
Lord of Illusions, The Great Sandini
knifed my soul, staring from a 10-foot tall
jet-black poster. An ephemera shop
in Pike Place Market. Like twin eclipses
his eyes burned through the decades between us,
glowed like fire opals. Grew white hot as road
flares. Gazed on the essential dead, bricks in
ethereal pyramids. Agnostic,
dad gets a Christian burial. Some small
comfort to mom. We drive through sloppy snow.
Below, toads hibernate. And I curse time's
architect for being right, forever.

Here's what I developed from the above:

Old Flame

I'm glad we die.

Otherwise we'd all
still be in Egypt
raising pyramids

and I'd be sitting
at that wooden table
dicing onions with
a pretty servant girl.

If not for death
I'd still be drowning
in her slender river,
clutching my bronze

paring knife with
its bone handle,
instead of waking up
with a wet pillow

half hypnotized by
yellow serpents
swimming on her
dark blue dress.

In the case of "Old Flame," revision helped me follow the vein in the marble—more of a hands-off approach, allowing the poem to develop the way it wanted to, and not according to my preconceptions. This doesn't happen often, but when it does, I end up with something I wouldn't have otherwise, something different from what I'd normally write. Sometimes that leads my writing in a new direction.

3. *Follow Through*

Sometimes I get off to a good start...and just stop. "Atheist Heaven" was originally five lines.

Atheist Heaven

There's an empty church in heaven,
a spray of stars I don't believe in.
I walk for hours staring at my feet.
Dark houses crowd the street
like echoes waiting for a sound.

More than a year later, I finally followed through on the idea.

Atheist Heaven

There's an empty church in heaven,
a spray of stars I don't believe in.
Dark houses crowd the streets

like echoes waiting for a sound.
Mutely my shoes lead me
to a lobby, then an elevator,
finally a penthouse office.

Floor-to-ceiling windows sing
with exclamation points of light!
No one's sitting at the desk
big as four pool tables.

Veins of pink and yellow
squiggle in the marble.
I see a vacancy and fill it.
The universe runs itself.
A black chrysanthemum closes
continuously, deflowering
creation at the end of time.

4. *Start A Salvage Yard*

Start a salvage yard of images, ideas, and lines saved from broken poems. Some lines of mine have taken years to find their final resting place. Here's an extreme example, composed mostly of old lines, which I've boldfaced.

Like Sunglasses You Can't Take Off

How the hand's a planchette for the soul

**and religion's like ice cream:
Peanut Butter Buddha, Key Lime Christ.**

So many beautiful lies about time
our memories sieve from our lives.

**Tint all the graveyards you want with
stained glass**

**no one comes back from the dead
except in zombie movies.**

The crow in my throat says goodbye—
black boomerang that gave me gravity.

I say *ah*, tasting smoke as it goes.

I'd rather say **zebras sport unicorn horns
orange as traffic cones**

**but halos dissolve here
like wintergreen Life Savers.**

In my brain's basement, a reference librarian sits at a gray, metal, government desk. When I'm writing, she hands me whatever old image or line I need, when I need it. It's a blessing in this line of work, to be sure. Often these phrases are years (or decades) old, but never

found a poem worthy of them.

But if memory isn't that helpful, keep these gems in a folder, a journal, or even just save all the various drafts of your poems, combing through them periodically for new ways of approaching the ideas / material. These can also be the seeds for future poems.

5. *Haiku Titles*

For years my titles sucked. Some mightily. Most often they were barely competent, content to label things: *Sailor on a Greyhound, Communion, Country Garage*. You get the picture.

Then about a year ago, I loosened up. I belonged to an online critique group, and one day I sent out a poem entitled *Phantosmia* (a term for olfactory hallucinations). But I was a little tired that day, maybe a little punchy, and in the subject line I wrote *Though I Detest Incense, Still I Smell God*.

A few of my critique group members said they liked the subject line a lot better than the title. So I used it. Since I didn't think the subject line "counted" or mattered, I had allowed myself to be more creative with it. I kept doing this...and then began incorporating a lesson I'd learned from writing haiku. In haiku you pair two images that aren't obviously connected, but that have a kind of subconscious resonance between them, like the invisible sparks between magnets. I began writing titles that didn't have a literal connection to their poems, but that somehow complemented them. Here's one example:

Like a Raspberry Seed Between My Teeth

Across the road
a white screen door slaps.
Redwing blackbirds scatter.

Cattails' slow explosions
fill the ditch.
I crack a beer and watch.

Last night at the Badger Tap
someone asked me why
I came back to Wisconsin.

Even in peacetime
ten years in the navy
was killing me.

An east-to-west airliner
slowly flies over.
Its contrail spreads.

Sometimes it's what
we're not
that matters most.

(published in *Verse Wisconsin*)

6. *Leftover Lines*

Sometimes a line you've cut from an earlier draft makes an interesting title. That's what I did in this one:

Steering from the Passenger Side

Somewhere near the county line
my piece of shit Dodge dies.
The sun melts my jeans
and black t-shirt like
biodegradable trash bags.
A mile later, my cock drops off.
A crow snags it, tumbling up
like a birthday balloon
or a shingle torn off hell's roof
in a windstorm.

No other cars.
My flat feet slap the yellow line.
Blacktop burns my soles.
I'm dangling my legs in the ditch,
staring at a thistle's ultraviolet
crown when my eyes fall out.
Two bushes sprout and I see clearly
through a hundred yellow berries,
in all directions like a fly—
the road ahead, the way back home,
the flyspeck of that crow,
my body by the road.

One of my titles was even a recycled one-line haiku (there are such things) that had been published in a leading haiku journal: *A whale of stars swallows me*.

Even my label titles got better: *Bat Boy Finds Love, Friday Night at the Haiku A Go-Go, Viral Savior, Popeye Murders Me, Superboy Robots, Dead Poets in Hell*. Loosening what I thought was acceptable as a title also allowed me to expand my range of topics, and vice versa. Some of these "looser" poems have been accepted by *Alaska Quarterly, Antioch Review, Crab Creek Review*, and *Rattle*.

7. *My Road To Revision*

Until five years ago I only wrote free verse, revising very little. Then I started working in forms, and revising more, getting the poem to flow better within the constraints of whatever form I was working in. This revision habit

carried over to my free verse and improved my poems. It tightened the writing, resulting in richer musicality.

These days half my poems are forms and half are written in free verse. I've also gone back and revised many older poems, some written several years ago.

On average I spend 10-40 hours on a poem, 2-3 hours each morning. First drafts are usually easy, flowing out in an hour or two. With the second draft, the poem's 90% done. The majority of time for me is spent fine tuning via drafts #3 on, getting that last 10% of the poem as perfect as possible.

I'll often return to a poem months later. Sometimes years go by between revisions (or versions), as with *Drinking With Your Ghost*...

Drinking With Your Ghost After The Funeral

Sitting in a pickup in the middle of a field,
the engine ticking down to nothing,
windows filled with rows
of corn stalking into shadow,
I drink until you're sitting next to me
though we both know
you're really at the cemetery,
what was left of you after the accident concealed
by oak and bronze and varnish and miraculously
healed
in everybody's memory.

Still the whiskey
lurches back and forth between us in the
muddy
light until the bottle's dry
and dark as that smoked glass
we used to watch eclipses through,
though tonight
there's just a wobbly moon
and a few raccoons
stealing corn like no one's there.
(1985)

drinking with your ghost
raccoons steal corn
like no one's there
(2010)

(published in *Modern Haiku* 42.2 Summer 2011)

Revision won't magically make a bad poem good, or a good poem great. But if there are seeds of goodness, uniqueness, or greatness currently in your work, adding revision to the equation will give your poetry a much better chance of developing its full potential.

This Book of Signal Spell and Secret Sigil
Was found in the armoire of Raz Durose,
Physician to the King and Queen of Jordan.

Its Hebrew was Englished by one Emmet Siegel,
Whose agent told him he should stick to prose.
But how it got here's hardly that important—

Only the Spirit matters, only the Spell is binding,
Only the Hidden will reward the Finding.

Only the Unseen is worth rewinding.

Sigil 1: The Double Helix

Four letters climb the winding stair,
The Tree, the Cat, the Grin, the Air;
Two strands must braid to make the ladder,
Live Wire linked to Lethal Adder;
Four letters stepwise spiral higher,
The Tomb, the Ant, the Ground, the Choir.

Draw a grid, 4 x 4.
Chant aloud: "Elsinore,
Dunsinane, Blackamoor,
Heathen rain." Then insert
These occult characters,
Cross the top, down the left,
From old Rome's alephbeth.

A	C	T	G
C	Metaphor	Rhythm	Image
T	Spider	Cicada	Scarab
G	Shakespeare	Swinburne	Pound

Commentary on the First Table, or the Table of the Deoxyribonucleotides:

From the *al-Qur'an*, and the various traditions surrounding the *Prophet Mahomet*, the true *Magus* learns that the making of images is forbidden, or *haram*. The mind that multiplies reality does so by feeding on Thought, as reflected back to it in Perception (which is reality without Thought); and by doing so feeds, as it were, upon a body without soul, as the *scarab* thrives on the corpse of *Pharaoh*. Just so the *cicada* will clack its timbrals, but the sound is out of proportion to the Insect making it. The attempt to turn language into music is to shuck words of their meaning, and hence the Original Word (as spoken of in Genesis) of its Divine Meaning; to throw away the silent kernel of Creation, and treasure the percussive husk. The supreme Weaver is the Spider, who spins out gossamer Metaphor from his belly,

AMIT MAJMUDAR

THE PRICKLYPEAR GRIMOIRE

and holds Creation still for contemplation in the Web of his connections, every line of his a high wire between precipices, traversing which would otherwise take a leap of faith. The Spider reproduces the Mind of the Maker at the time of the Act. The Magus must become a *Spider-man*, growing eight arms—and writing with them all.

Sigil 2: The x and y Axes

Two straight lines, Level and Upright,
The x and y, the Breadth and Height,
The Collarbones athwart the Spine,
Rafters of longing, pillar of pine:
Before they made the Crucifix, these
Four right angles formed two Axes;
Four nineties, when the math was squared,
Equalled one Intelligible Sphere.

When Xenophon weds Yourcenar
To music yoking the effects
Of Xylophones and Yodelers,
Then his XY and her XX
Shall yes and more and yes and yes
And with two letters spell all texts.

[*Raz Durose's Doggerel Marginalia to the Foregoing:*
Hajji Yusuf swung a U
And ended up in Xanadu
So did a serious Syrian come
To the pleasure-domes of heathendom]

Graph a grid 2 x 2,
One for me, one for you,
Abel, Cain, intertwined,
Twin intents, single Mind,
Vulpine y, death and growth,
Vervet x, love them both.

X	Y
X	Hamlet

Commentary on the Second Table, or the Table of the Variables:

The hamlet, a fish possessing both Male and Female organs of generation, knows the act of Union from both perspectives, like the Greek mage, Tiresias (though he was first male, then female, then male again, never both simultaneously). This is the rare, sexual wisdom of the androgynous Archmage (whom some call *Jesus*, and others, *Maddalena*) transcending the mere sexual *knowledge* which is the Seducer's, that is, Satan's. The true Magus, like the indecisive hamlet, opts for both, his eyes his ovaries. The fertility of self-love is infinite; it is always in the mood.

Sigil 3: The Septapartite Serpent

Here is the highest Sigil, that commands
Demonic spirits like so many hands,
The Leaf that's green at the same time it's gold,
As hard to grow as it is to hold.
Temptation, figured as the S beginning
The words for Simper, Summer, Simmer, Sinning,
And then the parallels that sever it
In seven bits.

Lucky number 7 x 7,
Prime like 3, but not in heaven—
Not the holy, the high roller.
Mater dolorosa? Dollarous dollar—
The higher the priest, the whiter the collar.

S	E	R	P	E	N	T
E	Carbon	Glucose	Sweetness	Your Piece of the Pie	The Whole Pie	Someone Else's Pie, with Whipped Cream
R	Oxygen	Air	Breath	National Airspace	Strictly Enforced No-Fly Zones	Militarization of Space
P	Nickel	Dime	Savings Account	Expense Account	Golden Toilet	Golden Parachute
E	Helium	Levity	Levitation	Flight	Lunar Landing	Overpriced Lunar Real Estate
N	Lead	Lead Pipes	Lead Poisoning	Psychosis	Development of Alchemy	Gold
T	Hydrogen	Hydrocarbons	Plant Life	Crude Oil	Fusion Reaction	Bikini Atoll

Sigil 4: The Incantation

for commanding the twenty-six Succubi;
to be spoken with a Marble under the tongue.

A *Triangle on serif legs,*
B *Squat and lay a twinning Egg.*
C *Single-horseshoed, halfbreed Mare,*
D *Wag your tongue at me no more.*
E *Leave the shortest leg unnamed,*
F *Break my right, I'm still not lame.*
G *Evil is a cul-de-sac,*
H *Push the Pillars, hear them crack;*
I *One's left standing, roof and foot,*
J *Till the Stone has snaked a Root.*
K *Hedgehog on the Norman strand,*
L *Pistol in a dead man's hand,*
M *Buckle, ceiling, in the middle,*
N *Draw a slash across the riddle.*
O *Mahu's mouth is but a Hole*
P *When the Flag is on the Pole;*
Q *When the Splinter's Gouged the Ball,*
R *Recess ends, and Britain falls;*
S *For the Serpent has not lost*
T *Till the Ropes have stood the Cross;*
U *Till he fill the inkwell Grail,*
V *Hammering will crook the Nail,*
W *Icicles will tooth the gutter,*
X *Error red-pen all we utter.*
Y *Blossom, Tree, and fruit with Fig;*
Z *Zag shall be restored to Zig.*

Amit Majmudar's first book, *0°,0°* [Zero Degrees, Zero Degrees], (Northwestern University Press/TriQuarterly Books, 2009) was a finalist for the Norma Farber First Book Award. His second manuscript, *Heaven and Earth*, won the 2011 Donald Justice Award. His first novella, *Azazil*, was serialized recently in *The Kenyon Review* over three issues. His first novel, *Partitions*, was published by Henry Holt/Metropolitan in 2011. His poetry has been featured on *Poetry Daily* several times and has appeared in *Poetry Magazine* and *The Best American Poetry 2007*. He lives in Dublin, Ohio.

Three Card Monte

1. Poet as Dealer

Ménage-a-card is what I play
post-poetry – words (then hands)
will find-the-lady, leave their mark

in clever dedications. I'll mark
her book with scotch rings, stretch the play
from bar to bed. Which one? My hands

first brush black's wrist, and then my hands
run zig-zag down red's back. I play
the poems, read my queens and mark –

I mark to win, or play more hands.

2. Queen of Hearts

Devoted to his art, his hands
punch air with gestures, leave a mark
that fades, won't last beyond what's played

for laughs or tears, seductions played
to raise the stakes. He slides his hands
around my waist in jest, a mark

to make me his. He thinks this mark
is easy, weak for rhyme, that hands
this fast get everything but played,

yet played he is. My hands mark red.

3. Queen of Spades

It's poetry that leaves the mark,
not him – the words, the beat, the play
of rhyme. I want the flaming hand,

the muse divine and not the hand
he's inching toward my thigh. No mark
he makes on me takes flight. No play

that vows he'll read my work or play
the go-between will make me mark
his bed. This queen unmans the hand,

a hand in play without a mark.

—MARYBETH RUA-LARSEN, SOMERSET, MA

Selected Animal Cracker Stories

1. Congress votes on the upper class baggy pants
interviews dyed blonde during a four hundred dollar
hair cut green beans farm bill. And before you can
whistle Dixie Chicks a seeing eye dog serves in three
different wars then retires in a hula skirt.

2. A brothel riding in the back of a van spots Girl Scout
cookies on an oil rig of rocket-propelled grenades fired
into the toilet stall where a senator caught a line drive
ball playing against her sister Serena in the US tennis
shoes, airborne with the no-smoking sign on.

3. The unidentified man used only barbed wire to cut an
identity card out of crowds of young Iraqis with landmines
blooming in Baghdad. Later, the mugger runs through the
park in her car under a streetlight swatting asphyxia on
a skateboard speeding downhill in the pouring rain.

4. Or in the mind of magnolias as neighbors talk over a
fence of boundless AK-47s to capitulate. Voluptuous lips.
Phenomenal hips. This interconnection of single lawn
mowers. O swinging suburbia, with a post office in Safeway,
wearing flip-flop Jacuzzi, grows in my organic garden.

—MAURICE OLIVER, PORTLAND, OR

Shuffling Through The Evening News

Dinner time kerosene heart burn of fluids in the swine
dish curled as if it were a ram's head of sweetbread cork

opener wine glass from five and dime or a fetus-fired
napkin holder with lint in a pocket book of time based

on the hierarchy of supply line border patrols of an
incestuous nature a sisterhood of road rage stuffed in

a dumpster smells like old gym shoes now fast forward
to a truncheon interviewing the windsurfer about higher

tuition or poppy fields of the open-minded with the exception
always being drew when he sees women suckling in public.

—MAURICE OLIVER, PORTLAND, OR

Confession

I haven't been since eighth grade.
In high school once,
I followed a girl

into the girl's lavatory.
The girl's name was Caroline.
My brother once had a Golden Retriever;

I liked that dog more
than most people I know.
I never liked *The Canterbury Tales*.

I think that French fries
are a vegetable and country
is the Special Olympics

of music. I have a short
attention span. I hold grudges,
and have more regrets

than you could shake a stick at.
I repeat myself. My French
is nowhere near as fluent

as when I lived in France
27 years ago. I like to play with matches.
I'm usually the only person

in the room who thinks I'm funny.
I couldn't tell you
whether I have life insurance.

I prefer my hammock
to work or church.
I go to the movies by myself

and I love it.

—RICHARD HEDDERMAN, WAUWATOSA, WI

Her marching orders

The soft incessant hum
of the refrigerator
was playing in her head
all afternoon, until
finally she opened
the back door,
grabbing her pocketbook,
and walked out
of the kitchen,
leaving the door open;
she didn't look back
on the piles of dishes
stacked up in the sink
or that she had left
the water running,
she just turned
the corner of the house
and walked out
to the street;
the never ending
humming still ringing
in her head
down to her heart;
she walked
down the block,
waited at the bus stop,
got on the first bus
with no clear idea
of where or why
she was going;
she just knew
she had to make a move
before she went crazy,
she just knew
she wouldn't be missed
until dinner time.

—CHARLES PORTOLANO,
FOUNTAIN HILLS, AZ

Momentum

I.

On the Friday night we did not go
to San Francisco I went to a poetry
reading and you were in the hospital
because you weren't you.

You asked me to bring you back
a present so I wrote you a poem
about not going to San Francisco
while you stayed in your room
and read *Anna Karenina*.

On Saturday night, I played cribbage
at the bar with the old-timers. You
made popcorn and tried to get
the other patients to dance.

On Sunday, you washed your hair
and waited for me to come so
we could talk.

II.

The mums—the ones you got
from your dad when you were
in the hospital in April—
are opening again.

It's too late, though.
The freeze is coming tonight
and by tomorrow their yellow lids
will be permanently peeking out.

At the grass turning brown
the wilted stalks falling
the flitting of the sparrows.

—THOMAS J. ERICKSON, MILWAUKEE, WI

testing my worth weekly

wednesday
mornings
i bring the garbage
around
from the back
of the house
to the front

i sit myself down
next to two
trash-filled cans
and a blue
container
of recyclables
to see if
they would
take me
along
with the rest of it

—CASEY QUINN,
CHARLOTTE, NC

Sleep Cycle

Dark thoughts tumble.
A laundry list of niggles,
doubts and regrets.
Throw in a sneaker
to balance the load
and then it's thump
& thud all night long.

—ANTONIA CLARK, WINOOSKI, VT
visit VW Online for audio by this author

Not Sleep

The nights I scream I have no dreams.
Wake early. Tired.
The nights I dream I dread to wake
to obligations, silence.
The nights that sleep keeps vigil
with the sweaters in my dresser drawers
are nights ignored with novels.
The times that migraines knock me to the floor
are neither sleep nor waking:
I close down to darkness, open late to clumsiness
d i s s i p a t e.

They say that cells have memories. Perhaps
each cell sings its own desire -- flight, swimming, relocate?
Perhaps each cell remembers ocean: the small, wet plankton and the screaming fish. Perhaps
when cells feel safe they weep and shake,
rage against the blood-deep hate
pattern pressing on their walls,
that the body, wisely, wipes from its last nerve
to serve the greater good

and wake.

—P.R. DYJAK, STEVENS POINT, WI

The Average Couple

I no longer know what is true and what is untrue.
The lies fly back and forth. Our tongues become us.
And what do I see in the mirror but the man who said,
“As it is now it will always be.”
And you must have the same delusions.
The glass gives back what you want to believe.

But we've been at this a lifetime.
How many times did we meet by the bandstand?
A thousand, maybe ten.
And what about those walks through the park?
Even my solitary strolls include you now.
The first lie was who else would have me.
Maybe that was the first truth as well.

But isn't life built on lies.
It's the glue that holds the monotony together.
Let candor have its way
and the whole thing could collapse into hatred.
Well, indifference anyway.

And yet, we do have a lovely house.
We've been convinced since the day we bought it.
And two cars that are, according to the
advertisement, better than every other car.
There's even a kid on the way.
And wombs don't lie.

Sometimes, I need to get away from it all,
go fishing with the guys.
Surprisingly, the lies don't fester in my absence,
They ferment into a kind of wine, in fact.
You can sip it while you go about your business,
feel its warmth all the way down.
Call it love. The actors on TV do.

Love. Now that's one hell of a lie.
It's like the trout I caught the last time,
a giant in the telling but, in reality,
had it been any tinier
I'd have had to throw it back.
And yet, how good it tasted.
At least, we said it did.

—JOHN GREY, JOHNSTON, RI

Arabella's Birthday

At the piano, scrunching her pecan toes
in their little boats of shoes,
she presses the compliant pedal, allowing the vibrations
to linger longer in the wood and in the air—
the case of mahogany, the soundboard
of tight-grained spruce.

Lately, it is the scent of cedar and the resonance
of brass-wound strings
that lift her spirit, grant momentary wings
vanishing as the scent dissipates or sound dies.

In the rocking chair, she sharpens pencils
with a little sharpener made of brass.
The cedar shavings that curl on her fingers
she saves in a muslin sack.

For her birthday, there was a frosted, candled cake,
a little choir of flames on spiraling stalks,
her name in florid, sugar-ice script,
frosting flowers frozen forever on the verge.

They sang, she wished, she blew,
extinguishing the flickering motes of mystery.

They ate the wedges of cake, dismembering it
slice by slice,
the angle of emptiness left by the vanishing cake
widening like clock hands flying farther apart.

People walked wineglasses around the house,
sat on the back deck where torches spewed
citronella smoke,
spoke about work, the weather, and what
they'd one day do.

Arabella slides into her shoes—little canvas canoes—
and glides along the hall.
She sits on the bottom stair, curls her cashew toes,
scratches her walnut nose,
her body an assemblage of things that might one day
sprout into trees.

She leaves the house, walks up the hill,
sits beneath the ginkgo tree—
its scimitar leaves hanging like earrings
or axe heads
along the upswept branches.

She thinks of the cake and sees a clock—
the cake a clock, the clock a face—
faces pierced in seven places to allow the air,
the light, sounds, scent, and food
to reach us in our lonely house of bone.

—TIMOTHY WALSH, MADISON, WI

What One Has

I'm having lunch with a friend
she says and I hear the pleasure
in her voice. It's her birthday after
all and my best wish is for her to be
happy, perhaps having a glass of
fine wine in a small bistro in Chelsea
with someone new and interesting
who may be more than a friend
or not, the moment is the essence
of this transaction in my head. Today
I had lunch with three friends as I do
on most days, but today we didn't talk
of the vagaries of dark rooms as we
call corporate amerika. We talked
of travel and sports and may have
touched on a book or two but mostly
it was about anything except the day
to day that tends to consume
all of us and turn our winning smiles
into those parenthetic frowns popular
on twitter these days. My daughter
is 24. It seems like only yesterday
she was born between two blizzards
on Cape Cod, snow so high, wind
so strong, I spent her first night with
her and her mother in a hospital bed
cramped but safe and dry; the energy
and love I felt from those tiny fingers
clutching the blanket and finally
my fingers was more than a weak
hearted man could ever endure.

—MARC SWAN, PORTLAND, ME

bound

each word in this poem is stolen
from the books that sit surrounding me

i'm not ashamed to say i'm drunk on irish whiskey
or my lover lies waiting in a bed steps away
near the window where
snowflakes now fall
pelting out metaphors

piling, piling

up to our spines

—JESSE MANSER, MILWAUKEE, WI
visit VW Online for audio by this author

crap it's almost christmas

kmart layaway commercials

are on the tv

one year when we were poor
my mom bought me luke Skywalker
on layaway

but he was on backorder
and Christmas day came and went

my friend graham got han solo
and I felt bad for han
having to take on the dark side all on his own

graham let me know when han
was about to go on a mission
and I'd go over to his place

come to think of it
graham let me know about
every mission that winter

graham also knew I kept that page
from the JC Penney catalogue
with Luke's picture
in my pocket

—JESSE MANSER, MILWAUKEE, WI
visit VW Online for audio by this author

Heart come(s) closer. Years of vertigo
expose an inner tide: Cannot stay put—
inhale sends torso forward, exhale, back.
Underneath, heartbeat pushes to and fro—
Catch shadow on wall, moving.

Lose a breast and heart's right there, right
under palm, its steady muscle pushing against rib
and intercostal muscles to muscles of hand—
Feel pulse from heart as well as pulse
in palm, from blood thrust against skin.

—SARA GREENSLIT, MADISON, WI

Ailings

Sore - Uncle Dom dropping in, a little short this month.
Abscess - Dom back, still as charming. Just a little more, Mary?
Blood poisoning - Dom skippey-do; your wallet's twenties too.

Ache – your husband, lounge chair lumpen specimen,
setting new records for TV catatonia.
Throb - Melanie, next cubicle over, everyone's therapist
phone drone. I'm here for you. Blah, blah, blah.
Spasm - your sister, family reunion, 80 decibels:
You hate me, you always did!

Ulcer - the town's only factory gone, its sludge pool
a tourist attraction.

Amputation - Main Street stores lopped away, one by one.
Paralysis – your job gone, your house in foreclosure;
you, its pillar, in its shadowed center.

—RICHARD SWANSON, MADISON, WI

Waiting

"I wouldn't call it a time bomb," he says.
I would.
I kick him in the foot.
The cancer on my kidney, my only kidney, is inside me, not him.
This young surgeon looks 18, must be 30, 35.
He has the power to decide.
I have to wait.
Four months, since June.

I'm not a whiner. I don't have panic attacks or headaches.
At least I didn't used to.
Now I shake
In the middle of the night, or when I'm sitting at the dinner table.
My husband holds me and we wait.
Now we parry and thrust with this doctor, asking our questions.

I ask for one more test.
"All right," he says, and I get a new scan, right then.
After an interval he calls me back into his office.
"This is good," he says. "I see it better now.
I can take that off."

I get on the surgery schedule for December.

—ESTER PRUDLO, MONTGOMERY, AL & FITCHBURG, WI

American Idol

Other echoes
inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?
—Eliot, "Burnt Norton"

Far from the icy air of Plato's forms
they float like lesser gods, fluid,
ephemeral through this, our world
of vistaed screens,
each celebrity du jour
voted in then voted off—

—*As if it's a show, reality*, The Swan, Hell's Kitchen,
Project Runway, another stab at the *mappa mundi, expansion*
westward, atomic trail—

Here's the passkey I need to get
connected, the tunes loaded, the hours to go. This is how
I know I'm American, no dizzy drive
through minefields; no hot pursuit
by angered kings—

Here's trying to keep my image up,
stylist at work while I track a hundred channels.
Here's Posh & Becks, our latest
immigrants. No live-in help since
they like to wander naked, lounge
in stylish dishabille.

With a knockout figure like mine, the stylist says,
angling for a better tip, I, too, could sport
a posh bob, I could go that blonde.

—JANE SATTERFIELD, BALTIMORE, MD

Partners

My surgeon ran over me with a robot,
Starting at my belly button, punched six holes for cameras and
probes.
He drives that thing like a racecar,
Enjoys driving his robot, zapping tumors.
I admire his skill.
We are confederates he and I.
We share a laugh together two days later in my hospital room.
I have six holes in my gut,
But the cancer is all gone.

—ESTER PRUDLO, MONTGOMERY, AL & FITCHBURG, WI

Formula One Indianapolis

This is road racing where they
changed the Indy 500 oval—
not just muscle cars roaring round
and round, but made into this tricky
track, curvy chicanery.

The announcer over rock 'n roll
at this "citadel of speed"
pumps the crowd, some waving
25-ounce Foster's cans, concession
stands and giant signs everywhere.

Fans wave Ferrari flags.
On the tightest curves camera buffs
crowd the woven fence.
Beer and brats, lucky cool May day.
Giant screens at strategic spots
preview the drivers the cars
from Spain, Germany, Italy,
India, Canada, none American yet

but plenty of Yanks in the stands,
nations united for speed!
and here they come nineteen
thousand five hundred rpm
million dollar engines' mosquito
whine and million dollar tires.
When drivers let up on the gas
backfiring like wartime you can't
hear yourself think or even
feel yourself tingling just the cars!

The crowd ecstatic at last
for this they flew oceans fought
snarls of traffic walked miles
to this tightly controlled and safe
violence, such innocence, nations
united in the mystique of speed
and skill 220 miles an hour where
are we speeding the earth 67,068
miles an hour around the sun
the sun 44,712 miles an hour
around the galaxy the further
the galaxies are the faster
they move apart the farthest

quasar 15 billion light-years away
any galaxy with a redshift greater
than 1.4 is moving away from us
faster than the speed of light
where is it going where are we going
on this lucky cool June day?
Slowly after every race they vacuum
the old brickyard blacktopped now.

—R. VIRGIL ELLIS, CAMBRIDGE, WI

Something

When he said *asparagus* he meant *perpendicular*. When he said *chair* he meant *singular*. When he went crazy he took no one with him. When he came back from wherever he was he wasn't happy with whomever it was he returned with. Not that he didn't recognize who it was more he wasn't in the mood. For *mood* he meant *something else* and for *something else* he meant to say *Can you give me directions to the nearest grocery store?* When he said *grocery store* he meant *The Statue of Liberty*. When he said *statue* he meant whomever.

Whenever he said *tree* he meant *tree* and whenever he said *water* he meant *water*. When he said *spring* he meant *almost here*. When he said *sky* he did not know what he meant so he stood there for hours in the side yard confusing the roof of his garage with the neighbor's chimney nearby. When he thought *nearby* he wanted to mean *sky* but really it didn't. Instead it meant *now*.

Once in the middle of the night in the middle of a dream while he slept in the middle of the bed he remembered the word *morning*. When he woke he said *morning* but really he meant *tomorrow*. And when tomorrow came he said *nothing*. Of course he meant *something* but nothing very specific.

—CX DILLHUNT, MADISON, WI

Lake View

We often hear of the shimmering diamonds strewn across the surface of a grand body of water while the sharp white peaks of sailboats cut through the air.

Usually overlooked is the intrusive angling of the breakwater, dark and corroded by years of overuse, the tug and the barge trailing thick trains of smoke.

We are familiar with the young lovers watching clouds floating by in each other's eyes, a half empty bottle of wine and a wicker picnic basket holding down the corners of a windblown blanket.

Forgotten is the specter standing at water's edge, hands neatly clasped behind his back as he searches the dusk-colored vastness for a memory.

—CHRISTOPHER AUSTIN, MILWAUKEE, WI

My Fault

The sun was hot, the wind calm. I wanted a few minutes of quiet conversation with the friends who had joined us on the sailboat while our kids explored the island of Poros. We knew about the *meltemme*, how the wind whips up most summer afternoons in the Aegean, but it hadn't happened to us. So I left the dock lines on deck to be coiled later, after we had rested awhile. Suddenly, the foresail filled and split. In our rush to get it down, someone kicked a line overboard. The stiff main would not go up. The propeller gagged on the line. There we were in the midst of a fullblown *meltemme* with no power, headed straight to a rocky shore. Never used a sea anchor but soon learned to mount it and steer the boat before the wind at a headlong pace into the harbor we had left. Anchor- stopped in thirty feet. Over the side to cut the line. The prop worked, thank the gods, and we motored sheepishly to shore. That evening, taking turns with a heavy needle to mend the sail, we talked in hushed tones. The image we never fail to see as we tell this story is the look on the face of our least-experienced sailor as she said while we were struggling with the sails, *What do you mean, keep it into the wind?*

—ESTELLA LAUTER, FISH CREEK, WI

Writing with My Left Hand

I'm writing this with my left hand
concentrating on every word, every letter
there is no flow here—no grace to these words
I am writing this with my left hand

as my right hand twitches with anxiety
the muscle use is different, the thoughts unfamiliar
am I the person still writing or is this the
voice of shadow-shell of self

I used to be this person, spinning the world on
a separate axis; my right hand needs to hold
the page down, to stop the world from spinning
away and falling off the desk
I'm writing this with my left hand and it's tiresome

my left hand is stronger and has more scars
the arthritis hurts more, the fingers more crooked
for some reason my teeth are clenched
as I'm writing this with my left hand

my right hand is laughing at me—not so godly after all
this is starting to cramp but I have more to say
maybe it is the right hand who writes in shadow
maybe this is who I was meant to be:
graceless, unrefined, sincere. It is difficult to write this way.

—JAMES REITTER, SHEBOYGAN, WI

They Lower San Biagio Blessing Children into My Arms

La chiesa di San Biagio, Gerfalco, Toscana, Italia

The small wooden church pew has been turned around below the high, single back window looking out onto the castle as boards lean into the gap between the seat and the back pointing upward along the massive entrance doors, wood clamps holding this ready-made saintly slide, the ropes attached above his shoulders where Massimo our Maestro Vetratista has carefully removed two pieces of glass (one on the right and one on the left from the top corners of the middle section) where Césare our blacksmith today agrees his iron frame is strong enough and I am told if anything goes wrong get out of the way save yourself after all Biagio is huge and heavy and mostly glass and we can fix him put him back together, make a new one and if we are lucky he will mostly stay together even though some of his pieces are bulging, his lead is weak, and chunks of his glass have already fallen with the old cement during his careful five-hour removal from the hole in the wall above.

When the blacksmith and the master window maker ask if I am ready, I can feel the sun pouring through into the early afternoon, still-cold church, San Biagio hanging there waiting, and standing firm above them all, holding one of the ropes, is The Father of the Priest, who introduced himself that way, smiling.

I look up. Shield my eyes. Say, Yes, yes, I am.

—CX DILLHUNT, MADISON, WI

Skyscape

Prague is called the city of a hundred towers,
noted for the many spires and basilicas which
dot a picture postcard perfect horizon.

Ancient streets
golden enchantments
Old World lure

Still—the capital of the crossroads of
Europe, residence of mad monarchs, visited
by musical geniuses, ma vlast to many more
has nothing on his local terrain.

No alchemy
here: tourists crowd
medieval sites

To the north, St. Louis' minaret steeple on
the left and St. Patrick's dome on the right
form the vertical arms of a massive goalpost
that frames the moment, waits on a hasty Hail
Mary play.
Midtown the Ramada shoots eight stories towards
the stars, its plush burgundy carpet interior
and matching awnings outside anchor the seat
of misplaced Midwestern wealth.
On the southern outskirts, St. Peter's posits
a squat, square turret like a solid, righteous
thumb, architectural embodiment of Luther's
hymn, a might fortress indeed...

Look upward angel,
home seen from
the ground floor

—G. A. SCHEINOH, EDEN, WI

Aftermath

1.
This memory begins at the unlocked door
with my anxious call.
I glance at your cat sleeping in the next room
then my eyes rest on a lifesize doll
in a beautiful orange caftan.
You hang suspended
in the dining area of your kitchen.
I don't know how long.
The sound of my sustained howl is shocking
as I run upstairs to the phone in your study
where I can barely speak. In the minutes
before help arrives, I stumble sobbing
to your bedroom, where you have not slept,
see the notes you laid out on the bed.
I hear the coroner say your organs
can still be used. Your friend is sure
you wanted to be found when I describe
how your arms were crossed, hands on
the shoulders, fingers under the taut cord.

2.
That was May.
Everyone told me not to drive
until my autopilot returned.
But of course I did
and found myself backing over curbs
getting lost in intersections.

3.
Suddenly your life was more important
than my own. I called your friends
from elsewhere, everyone for whom
I found a number, and slowly
pieced together a history
I hadn't even begun to imagine.
A troubled brother's early advances.
A family's refusal to see.
Three attempts at suicide.
A father whose depression was so deep
he lay in a hospital unable to speak.
A decision never to pass on those genes.

4.
Friends offered shelter.
My son came home from his lab.
I called my husband back from Russia
My doctor said *go to the woods
for the summer and do nothing*.
No travel. Nothing dangerous.
No decisions. A life on hold.
For the next year, I could not pass

the turnoff to your street without
seeing a brightly-colored doll.

5.
A secret festered, destroyed one life
threatened others.
The afternoon before you left us,
I saw you framed at the end of our office hall.
You sat so still, like sculpted stone.
When your friends called that night
you put us off, would not let us
pass through that door.

—ESTELLA LAUTER, FISH CREEK, WI

Do-It-Yourself Home Improvements

ON is not always on.
HOT is not hot.
Often hot is not cold either,
instead a low-rising steam, a gargle,
an unsteady belch of empty.

Tool belts perpetually loaded.
A hammer needed here,
a screw loose there,
duct tape in stacks where
framed photos should be.

This was our house. A structure that always hoped for more,
that knew money could buy love but wasn't a price we'd pay.

So torn apart at times
we'd have to stay away.
With a friend or at the Ramada,
those neatly wrapped soap marvels,
sheer order and tuck.

Back at that house,
months with planks
for floors, holes where
beds should be, possessions
in heaps, rooms dark.

As if someone was supposed to stay but wasn't sure they should,
as if someone else was trying to leave and not come back.

—CATHRYN COFELL, APPLETON, WI

Always Inside This House

Always inside this house another house
longs to be built, gorgeously reconstructed
from the raw island ruins of accidental fire
and flawed faraway lives, its near-naked
rooms exposing sheet rock & nails, sooty sails
of wallpaper adrift over bunk beds,

windows painted shut to loving beds
of bulb lilies in the shore-yard, this house
a reminder that all architecture is a sail
unfurling the past, a deconstruction
under fog, flammable and stark naked
form anyone's predawn drowsy fire

might spark and catch hold of, the word "Fire"
a smoldered headline flaring up to bed
down with us while we navigate nakedness
together in this doused summerhouse
rising daily out of its own reconstructed
driftwood and ashy seascape, *For Sale*

signs dotting the cove, ospreys sailing
across The Narrows where sapphire
tides carry Friendship Sloops and construct
heavenly views as we swim in the bedding
of our current well-being, vacant as any house
boarded up at each season's close, nakedly

posed against pointed firs and half-naked
ledges, huddled here, a scarred sailor's
shelter one winter, till smoke unhoused
him, a kettle left on the stove flame, firing
him from the haze of his drunken bed,
transients ourselves trying to reconstruct

his frostbitten story, a construct
of nightmare, hearsay, and buck naked
confession, our usual rumples bed-
sheets moonlit tonight, taut as sails
rigged toward the future, our fiery
visitor vanished from the house,

the word "house" a mere construction,
a blaze of letters like "naked" and "fire"
for the one who sailed asleep in our bed.

—KATE SONTAG, RIPON, WI

—MARILYN WINDAU, SHEBOYGAN FALLS, WI

Dog Bite

I thought there would be warning signs
(like the hiss from my cat or the whine of a hinge).

I thought that moving furniture
was a good way to be useful, to belong.

I even thought that choices all
belonged to me including

the one we never talk about—
who gets to die, who lives forever.

I didn't think a small white dog
could catch me unaware, and yet

the real surprise was that,
when his furious teeth found my hand,

he would not let go.
And my own barnacled hold

on that great red chair
did nothing to dissuade him. That's

what I'll remember most—
though his teeth sank to the knuckle,

The Land of Oz

Someone throw a brick at my head.
Be brave. Aim.
Pitch it with vigor.
Then, please, have a heart.
Kneel down to my prostrate body
there in the road
leaking red on the gold,
spreading life fluid
on the weeds between
the cracks of shiny.
Take me home
emerald country road,
where ruby shoes are nailed
to the kitchen floor
and Aunt Em,
though careworn,
turns not away
the encyclopedia salesman,
who shows her volume 19,
page 287: Utopia,
as Toto bites his leg,
courageous dog that he is.

though the pain grew wild as fire,
though my free hand waited in the wings

to hide and thus diminish
the results.

It's none of those
I'll be taking to the future—

just that sturdy bond
between us as he bit and held,

when letting go no longer
was an option.

—MARY MERCIER, MADISON, WI
visit VW Online for audio by this author

Set Wing to Wind

A butterfly with a broken wing
clung silently to the lattice gate
like a flower on a broken stem
twirling in the summer wind.

It fanned the air as if satisfied
to leave seeds of life waiting, hidden
safely in the growth below among
blossoms in the fading summer sun.

—GERALD BERTSCH, SHEBOYGAN, WI

Without You

I'd sit in half a world, the rooms
beige instead of red, aqua, gold.
There'd be no music-track of dogs
howling or incessant vacuuming.
I'd re-read books, watch TV, drive
myself crazy. I'd miss your smile,
the song of your voice, the warmth
of your body next to mine, the way
you care for kids, dogs and cats.
Like searching for my missing
glasses, without you I wouldn't see
what I need in order to see.

—JOHN LEHMAN, ROCKDALE, WI

Then and Now

For forty years he left his shoes in the dining room,
thought empty milk cartons went in the fridge,
would not read Mailer or Updike,
put Mahler on the turntable—loud,
and didn't respond to poetry.

These days she shovels snow, cleans the chimney,
despairs over a new knock in the engine,
shoots predatory woodchucks herself,
and shivers under many blankets
night after chilly night.

—BARB CRANFORD, HANCOCK, WI

The Big Black Bird

in the green maple tree
sings a doleful tune,
sitting in the shade
on a sunny day.

—RICHARD MOYER, BERWYN, PA

The Blue Time

Twilight is the worst time.
Though you are gone ten years now,
the blue time still brings to mind
your favorite phrase, a child's misspeak
that took your fancy 50 years ago
and became your mantra—
murmured to me with goodbyes, or
from the driver's seat; on getting up
or presenting a gift; when you broke a cup
or interrupted my poem-making.
How I yearn to hear it now:
you, handing me a glass of sherry
while we settle to watch
the shadows gather
in this place you made for us—
I, hearing again, at this blue time,
you murmur "Whom loves you."

—BARB CRANFORD, HANCOCK, WI

I Danced with Rose

Her kitchen is like an herb garden.
It smells of cut oregano and basil.
A small aged man sits at her table
eating fresh baked Italian bread.
She stands at the old white stove.

Her simple dress is apron wrapped.
Lightly her hand moves a long spoon
stirring thick red tomato sauce.
I touch her gently on the shoulder.
She smiles at me, and takes my hand.
I say, "Dance with me, Rose."

We dance in her delicious kitchen.
I breathe in the richness of her spices
as we glide around the wooden table.
The old man looks up at us smiling,
Rose softly hums a little tune.

—NANCY PETULLA, MERRILL, WI

Dance Me Down

I just don't know
what to do
So dance me down
the avenue
Be soft and
be sweet
And be light
on your feet
Be kind and
take care
And remember
I'm there

—CLINT JENSEN, TOMAH, WI

Attune

The tuner deftly tapped—
The clear, translucent tone for me to form.
Then pressed against you, deep, and warm...

A quarter, no a half key round,
The sure and skillful task
To make us, once,
One pure, perfected sound.

—HENK JOUBERT, WHITEFISH BAY, WI

Grandma Shoes

My great grandma had one pair
of shoes, black leather.
Chunky heels, black laces. Serviceable,
the catalog labeled them.
They lasted forever
and her feet hurt.

The style was basically
unchanged for my grandma.
Black, serviceable,
go-with-everything shoes.
Her feet hurt.

My mother's generation
caught a break.
Hundreds of styles, colors,
shapes. Leather softened
a bit, styled for comfort
and good looks.
But her feet hurt.

Now it's my turn.
Age-appropriate shoes,
cushioned insides over thick
rubber soles, designed
for walking.
I can stand
a little longer, work
a little longer,
... did I ask for that?
I'm tired, and my feet hurt.

—JUDITH SEPSEY, NEW BERLIN, WI

Karla Huston Interviews

Denise Duhamel

Denise Duhamel's most recent books of poetry include *Ka-ching!*, *Two and Two* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009 and 2005), *Mille et Un Sentiments*, a limited edition chapbook (Firewheel Editions, 2005), *Queen for a Day* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001) and *The Star Spangled Banner* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1999). *Saints of Hysteria: A Half-Century of Collaborative Poetry* (an anthology which Duhamel edited with Maureen Seaton and David Trinidad) from Soft Skull Press was published in 2006.

Born in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, and educated at Emerson College (BFA) and Sarah Lawrence College (MFA), Duhamel has read on National Public Radio's All Things Considered and Bill Moyer's PBS television special *Fooling with Words*. She has been awarded writing residency fellowships both in the United States and Europe. Her poems have been anthologized in *Best American Poetry* in 1998, 1994, and 1993. A winner of a 2001 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Poetry, she is a professor at Florida International University in Miami.

Friendships can begin in strange and wonderful ways. One good way to connect is by taking a class. I've done this often, traveling as far as Vermont or as close as Iowa. In fact the Iowa Summer Writing Festival is a good choice for Wisconsinites because it's close; and the Iowa program offers weekend workshops, a boon for those who don't want to commit an entire week.

Commit an entire week, I did, in 2000 when, with Cathryn Cofell, I took a class with Denise Duhamel. We'd registered for an advanced poetry class entitled, "Writing Beyond Taboo." This seemed like the perfect fit for two wild Appleton women who wanted to push the limit, press more than a few buttons. We were ready. We'd brought our Rollerblades to get back and forth to class. We'd brought laptops and a printer, plenty of red wine. We'd even considered a visit to the tattoo parlor. And wasn't this the time when Omar and Oscar, two agri-business students at UA, hit on us in the Deadwood Tavern, where we'd gone to copy the graffiti off the bathroom walls for "found poetry"? Unfortunately, the stalls had been repainted, so our plans for collaboration with the likes of Elvis and Margo from Fargo who seemed to do everyone were dashed.

At our first class meeting, introductions were made. Give a bit of personal background

and our expectations, Denise suggested. As the preambles began, I had a creepy feeling that I was somehow in the wrong room. First there was the woman, a twin, who admitted she suffered from bulimia and was ritually abused by her grandparents. The next woman confessed to being schizophrenic but on medication; and the next, a man named Bob, said he liked writing poems about women's body parts and proved it, often referring to alabaster orbs and the golden, netted curtain. Another was a young woman who'd never written a poem before (wasn't this an advanced class?). Then, there was Penny from Australia, who walked barefoot everywhere, her long, Gypsy skirts swirling. She said she was lesbian, a social worker, daughter of an unnamed famous Australian psychiatrist, and into sadomasochism.

When the table-talk came round to us, Cathryn confessed to being Catholic. But I had no such terrifying admission. I was Lutheran with no encroaching guilt issues, and like Mary Poppins, a life that was "practically perfect" in every way. We were both there, we'd confessed, to learn to write good poems. Over the course of the week, we got to know each other. Bob tried to seduce us after his third martini at the banquet. The Australian invited us to visit but warned that someone had a "hit" out on her, so she'd be hard to find. Sadly, the bulimic was often heard retching in the bathroom across the hall after lunch.

Duhamel, however, was gracious and patient and encouraging, providing enough good prompts to keep Cathryn and me busy typing most mornings. I wrote more new work that week than any class before or since. And since, Denise and I have remained friends; she contributed significantly to my MA thesis: www.margiereview.com/CHAUTAUQUAS/huston.html. As well, she and I have done two interviews which were published in print and online: http://www.smartishpace.com/interviews/denise_duhamel/.

If you missed her at the fall (2009) Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets' conference, you missed a special experience indeed. In not one, but two presentations, Duhamel spoke about collaboration and using humor in poetry. She is an expert on both. In fact, after listening to a presentation at that same Iowa conference, Cathryn and I began writing collaboratively, too.

Proposal

I became a reverend online so that I could marry my niece and her fiancé who didn't want a traditional wedding I became a reverend shortly after my divorce as the Universal Life Church doesn't care about a cleric's marital status and neither did my niece

when I told her I was afraid to bring her bad luck she would have none of that and besides who better to officiate than someone who knew the pitfalls of relationships and I could keep an eye on the new couple and they could come to me and I'd know the warning signs I'd missed in my own home and my niece believed in marriage and me regardless of my failures and her fiancé nodded

and I told all this to my friend Bruce who was getting divorced himself I was at the beginning of one marriage (as a reverend) and at the end of another (as a spouse) perfectly poised to let him know it was all going to be OK when he said *I bet you can't wait to marry someone now that you can* I said *you must be kidding I'll never get married again* and he said *what I mean is I bet you can't wait to marry another couple.*

—Denise Duhamel, Hollywood, FL

From my 2004 interview, Duhamel's poetry has been described as "stunning, suggestive, and startling. Her poems speak with a wild irreverence. Not afraid of critics and naysayers, Duhamel experiments with form and subject, creating poetry that challenges the reader's notion of what poetry should be. She presents what poetry could be as she fully engages pop culture, the joys and horrors of it, while maintaining the ability to poke fun at our foibles—and make us think."

To experience a Duhamel poem is to take a wild or sometimes harrowing ride. Maybe she's gotten a bit crazy about money (*Ka-ching!*), or more than terrifying as she recounts the moments of September 11, 2001, or her own parents' horrifying fall down an escalator in Atlantic City. Duhamel has something to say.

I had the chance to ask her a few questions via email recently.

Karla Huston: One of your books, *The Woman with Two Vaginas* (Salmon Run Press, 1995), a poetic retelling of Inuit myths, has been banned in Canada for years. I'm guessing you don't believe in censorship. As a writer, how does this make you feel?

Denise Duhamel: *The Woman with Two Vaginas* is out of print, so I guess it's a moot point as to whether or not it is still banned.

Fourth Grade Boyfriend

Then, in fourth grade, the fattest boy in class wrote me a love letter that read, Welcome to this new school. (I had just moved.) You are very pretty. I want to be your boyfriend. I didn't like his plaid shirt or his big melon head, so I crumpled up the note and ignored him. Soon though I realized how hard it was to be the new girl when the other girls had sleepovers to which I wasn't invited and the other boys were mean and spit in the water fountain. A few days later I wrote the boy back, Sorry it's taken me so long to answer. OK. I'll be your girlfriend. He walked me home, showing me the shortcut through the woods, the "umbrella graveyard" where kids abandoned anything they were too ashamed to carry to school—out-of-date lunchboxes, shirts and coats no longer in style. Umbrellas which, he explained, were really uncool, no matter what. Sometimes a girl would change shoes on the path, leaving the ugly ones she had to wear at home hanging from their laces on a tree branch. The fat boy huffed and puffed up the tiniest inclines. I did too because it was fall and that's when my asthma flared up because I was allergic to the changing seasons. One time my nose started to bleed and, because I didn't have any tissues, the fat boy gave me his science worksheet, then a big maple leaf, to catch the blood. So what if he couldn't dance? That was love.

—Denise Duhamel, Hollywood, FL

Kindergarten Boyfriend

My kindergarten boyfriend said his mother had taught him to waltz, so I told my mother about how he'd taught me, how we glided around the schoolyard during recess. How all the other kids dropped their balls and abandoned their jump ropes to watch us. My mother said, Really? like she didn't believe me, which made me angry even though my story was totally untrue. I liked to color with the boy, who was quiet like I was. One day, after biting into a cracker, he spat out his front tooth which looked like a tiny ice cube on the pad of his finger. The teacher made a fuss and wrapped his tooth in tissue. During naptime, he slept on a plastic mat by my side. I stayed awake trying to will him to give the tooth to me, but when I asked him his plans, he told me he was going to take it home to put under his pillow. I flung puzzle pieces and started to cry. Even then, my expectations were too high.

—Denise Duhamel, Hollywood, FL

than a regular class. Poetry invites students to write about their feelings more than they might do in prose. Students sometimes reveal more about themselves than they realize they are revealing and then feel embarrassed. It's much harder to grade a poem than an essay. It's much harder to critique creative work. Still, I am comfortable now doing workshops. I enjoy sitting in a circle with people rather than standing in front of a classroom with a piece of chalk.

KH: Yes, I agree. Teaching gave me permission to talk poetry and to buy books—which I did, both, in copious amounts. Is there a different dynamic between teaching a workshop versus teaching a regular class?

DD: I think I became funny by mistake. I tended to be melodramatic and gloom and doom when I was younger and people laughed at me. So I hammed it up, I guess, and at some point tried to be funny with a purpose. Yes, I did try to write funny fiction.

KH: You've recently published a collaboration with Amy Lemmon called *ABBA the Poems*. (Coconut Books, 2010. www.coconutbooks.org) According to your process notes, the

poems use an ABBA rhyme scheme in eight quatrains, and must include a reference to the musical group *ABBA*. Amazing! And what fun! You add that the poems were written via email, one line at a time. How long did each poem take to write? How did you revise?

If my current project doesn't work out, I can always write another poem about my failure.

DD: I think our project took over two years. The poems with additional constraints (like palindromes or all "o" sounding endings) took quite a while. We were slow and methodical actually. Amy was moreso than I was. We were able to "keep" most of the poems we wrote.

KH: I know poets read other poets and reading is essential for lots of good reasons. But when you're not reading other poets, what kinds of books do you like? Mystery? Romance? Literary fiction?

DD: I really love young adult novels. Francesca Lia Block, Peter Johnson, Lisa Glatt, Ron Koertge, and David Hernandez are among my favorite YA novelists. Teenagers, I think, feel more and experience more in a novel than other characters. Each teenager encounters

a new generation and cultural norms, and the way they buck against those norms is fascinating to me. I love the bridge between childhood and adulthood.

KH: Interesting that some of these authors (Glatt, Koertge, Hernandez) are also poets. Do you think about

writing fiction again?

DD: Yes! In *Ka-ching!* I have a long poem called "Lucky Me" about my rejection in the fiction world, so I'm a little superstitious to say I'm working on anything. If my current project doesn't work out, I can always write another poem about my failure.

KH: When can readers expect your next book?

DD: I'm not sure. Maybe 2013? I have my chapbook projects to keep me going until then. One is called *Help in 47 Languages*, and the prose poems all fit into frames I found on sale for a penny a piece in a craft store. Each poem has the title "HELP" from a different language and uses the word help (in English) at least once. The

inspiration was from a rumor that when the famous linguist William Jacobsen was struck by a car, he shouted, "Help!" in 47 languages.

KH: As the author of numerous books and chapbooks of poetry on your own and in collaboration, do you have a favorite?

DD: No favorites. It's kind of like admitting you have a favorite kid.

KH: Once when I asked if you were bothered by critics' sometimes-tough comments, you said, if you believed the criticism, you must believe the praise. How hard is this to do?

DD: It is hard not to want everyone to think you're doing great work. I just noticed I wrote that last sentence in the second person because it's easier to do so. So when I say "you," I mean "me." You can't be an artist and expect everyone to love your work and feel comfortable with it. You have to ruffle feathers. That's part of the job description. So a bad review is better than no review at all.

KH: Speaking of publications that ruffle a few feathers—if there were a *National Enquirer* headline about you, what would it say?

DD: "DNA Tests Prove Poet Denise Duhamel is the Love Child of Frank O'Hara and Anne Sexton".

It's the Meds

"I wish my hair was thick."
 "It's the meds," they say.
 "I wish my legs were thin."
 "It's the meds," they say.
 "I wish food tasted better."
 "It's the meds," they say.
 "I wish I could lose weight."
 "It's the meds," they say.
 "I wish you wouldn't complain so much," they say.
 "It's the meds," I say.

—IDELLA ANACKER, PORTAGE, WI

Tongue Piercing

Mondays are
 the splinters
 you get
 licking an
 ice cream
 stick, trying
 to remove
 last remnants
 of chocolate.

—JAMES REITTER, SHEBOYGAN, WI

Fool the Bears

One way to protect your camp from bears is to take the piss bottle you keep in the tent to piss in (so you don't catch a chill going outside in below freezing temps) and empty it each day on trees nearby so eventually your tent is surrounded by a circle of your urine—
 but when you pour it on the trees pour it high as you can reach while walking in a circle around them so they're circled with your piss scent from eight feet up to where their trunks go into the ground. Why? That way the bear will think the creature that pissed must have a penis over eight feet off the ground and depart post-haste thinking a monster lives there.

—ANTLER, MILWAUKEE, WI

Woman with a Guy and a Motorcycle across from Heather's Saturday Night

From a distance she looks good: short blonde hair, leathers, a comfortable stance. He stoops by the engine, adjusting something. That's me, two motorcycles and three Ford Mustangs ago before Vietnam, bankruptcy and divorce.

Now I walk my dog who's looking for a place to crap. I want a woman to hug me from behind as we roar into the warm summer night. Maybe stop for a few beers. Ignore the guy and his dog staring at us from down the street.

—JOHN LEHMAN, ROCKDALE, WI

taking over

the fat corporate beast swaggers
 into the bar, kicks
 the skinny old bum offa his stool,
 wiggles his high end ass onto
 the seat & buys everyone a drink
 for himself.

—NORMAL, SAUCERTIES, NY

Hearing Perfectly

"You're missing all the high pitched, soft consonant sounds," the audiologist told me.
 "You mean women's voices?"
 "Well, yes I guess you could say that."
 Isn't it odd, how men suffer this deafness?

We stare intently with sympathetic smiles watching their lips shower us in sentences half heard.

I've noticed that missing so much of what she tells me has deepened my affection for her.

Is this what they mean by making more out of less?

—CHARLES RIES, MILWAUKEE, WI

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- foster critical conversations about poetry
- build and invigorate the audience for poetry