

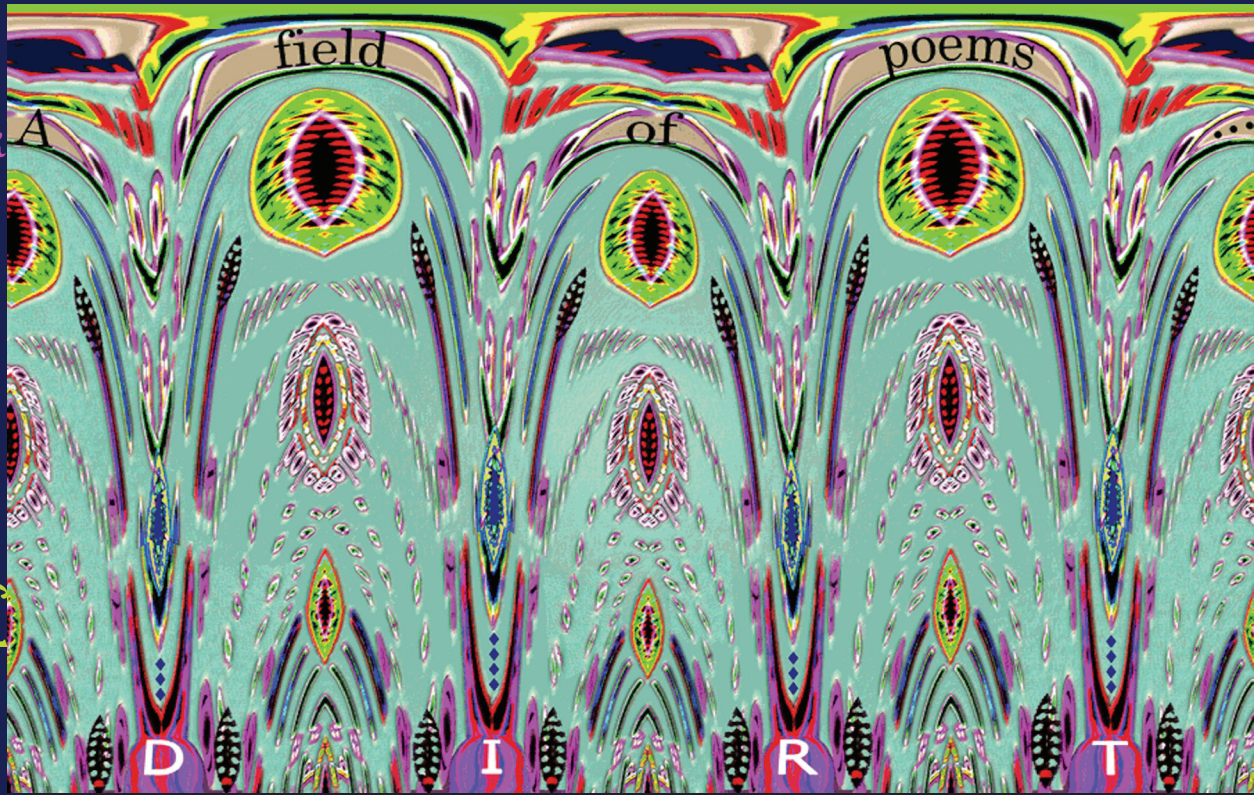
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MIDWEST POETICS 

 **SELECTED PROSE** *VERSE* **WISCONSIN 2009–2014**
EDITED BY **SARAH BUSSE & WENDY VARDAMAN**

LOCAL GROUND(S)—MIDWEST POETICS

BUSSE  VARDAMAN

cowfeather press



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LOCAL GROUND(S)—MIDWEST POETICS

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 Selected Prose *Verse Wisconsin* 2009–2014

EDITED BY SARAH BUSSE & WENDY VARDAMAN



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*To red wine, to dark chocolate, and to coffee, sustainably sourced.
To all the poets who have put time in in the poetry mines, one decade
or another.
To each one who has raised their voice in their own time and way.
To purple.
To our families.
To you, reader.*

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🌀 Forewords & Backwards: Some Notes from the Cupcake Circus

BY WENDY VARDAMAN & SARAH BUSSE

Twenty-five years of parenting conditioned me to make lists. Keep calendars. Juggle schedules. It's how I managed three children, no car. It's how I approached arts administration and what I brought to Verse Wisconsin. Well. That and the ability to do projects with next to no money. Flash forward five (or is it six: yes, it is six) years, and, though I'm losing my taste for Post-Its with the departure of child #3 this fall, I still think in list... (It's what my oldest called me in his first poem about 20 years ago, giving family members rhymed titles: Mister, Sister, Trickster, Lister.) I share some VW lists in the boxes to the right and below. The project we started with is not the project we leave, and this collection is one attempt to solve the differential equation of its shifting significance at this particular moment in time. Six months ago, six months in the future, the book, the answer, would be different for many reasons. For one there are serendipities—historical, political, local, personal—that shape this project as much as editorial interests or poetry. We write in the uncertainty of what November's election will bring Wisconsin. Like many of you, we've struggled with our relation to the state these last few years, as we simultaneously struggled with our relation to poetry: Does any of it really matter? To whom? Why? To what end? Under what circumstances? Some days it did. Some days it seemed counterproductive. Some days it was tedious and way too familiar. Some days it seemed to explain everything. Other days it just seemed absurdly inconsequential.

🌀 Verse Wisconsin by Numbers

- Poetry contributors in print: 887* in 13 issues
- Poetry contributors online: 1117* in 15 issues
- Books reviewed online: 314*
- Prose essays & interviews published, online & print: 119*
- # of subscribers at any given time: 150 – 240
- # of guest poetry editors: 16
- # of volunteer proofreaders: 13
- # of social media channels: 4
- # of Facebook followers: 815
- Largest # of views a VW video has received on YouTube: 470
- # of HTML pages at the website: 3367
- # of individual visitors to the website (2009 – 2014): 125,027 (as of 9/25/2014)
- Most visited single content page online: "Interview with Martín Espada"
- # of organizations/groups VW collaborated with on a project: 38
- # of paid staff, incl. editors: 0
- Avg. # of miles run/week 10/2008 (WV): 20
- Avg. # of miles run/week 10/2008 (SB): 0
- # of physical therapy visits Summer-Fall 2014 (WV): 7
- Avg. # of miles run/ week, 10/2014 (WV): 5
- Avg. # of miles run/week, 10/2014 (SB): 7

(*Give or take a 5% margin of error based on late-night VW-strained eyes.)

It is fall of 2014 in Madison, Wisconsin, a transition season in the city as students come back to the university, classes get underway, we all gear up for

another election. This essay, like almost everything we write, is being co-created in libraries and coffee shops on the west-to-far-west side of town, our own local writing ground: the area defined by streets like Monroe, Regent, Old Sauk, Gammon and Odana. Like most everything we write, these words you read emerge out of the ongoing conversation we have in person and by email, an unending back and forth of two women who are good friends and colleagues, filled with ideas, enthusiasm, laughter, code words and the occasional tired rant. Like a duet for two instruments, this conversation has woven back and forth between us for years, and out of it emerged poems and essays, calls for submissions, panel discussions, public appearances, poetry vending machines and books and bowls of chocolate kisses and plenty of magic markers and glitter and a few feathers drifting under the table. And the magazine, of course.

There was a day last winter when my son had emergency abdominal surgery and the limits of poetry—its borders—came into sharp focus, as I looked into the faces of two doctors who told me that there was no waiting a day or even an hour for my husband to get back from his business trip on the West coast. The borders of poetry were also clear when I contemplated the privilege that allowed our son to live and to thrive. Speedy access to world class pediatric surgeons at a top facility in walking distance from home. Excellent medical insurance, even with cutbacks in state employee benefits. A group of people—surgeons, nurses, janitors, lab technicians, the taxi driver who took us to ER at 2 a.m. on a weekend, friends who checked in on us and fed the pets—whose collective mission existed outside the realm of poetry and art. And even as I passed the time and processed what was happening by journaling and writing poetry, I saw the limits of the work I did. I mention this event for a number of reasons besides my own epiphanies about the obvious. As a stay-at-home mother-poet, children have come first for decades. Writing was secondary. At best. While that has been frustrating, it has also been a method, a source of material, a mode of operating, a model. It's a model that carried VV forward as we juggled and balanced the magazine and what we knew about the needs of writers and our ideas for projects and events and invitations and intrusions. We tried not to dictate. We tried to listen. We tried to improvise. When one thing didn't work, we did something else. When something worked, we moved in that direction for a while and then did something different. There wasn't a plan, unless it was the mission statement and breaking even, but what it meant to fulfill the mission changed as our understanding of poem, of poet, of poetry, of publication evolved. Broadly speaking, we have tried to understand how poetry could better be integrated into everyday life and ritual. In big and small ways. At home. In the organizations we belong to. In civic space. There was no poetry at the hospital last winter, though there was abundant visual art. In spite of everything, I still found myself asking myself after a day or two, why not poems?

We are of two minds (at least) as we put the finishing touches on this collection.

On one hand, we are working hard to get it completed and done—we feel we owe our loyal family of subscribers (and it really does feel like family to us) this last “issue” of the magazine. And, admittedly, we would like to be done with it ourselves. Out the door, bye bye, on to other ideas, projects, maybe just a little time to stare out windows and doodle, thank you very much. On the other hand, it's difficult to find closure, to choose exactly which pieces we want to include and to find the right framework to justify the selection. “Midwest Poetics ...” How do these voices, these particular pieces of the huge

✂ Verse Wisconsin by Issues & Projects

2010

- 101, “Doors & Windows”
- 102, “Alternate Realities”
- 103, “Work”
- 104, “Belief” (print)/“On the Road” (online)

2011

- 105, “Poems in Form”
- Main Street (special online/Facebook issue that included “Poems About the Wisconsin Protests” and the publication of “14 BroadSides About the Protests”)
- 106, “Luck of the Draw” (special joint issue with Poetry Jumps Off the Shelf, guest ed., Shoshauna Shy), the Verse-o-Matic launch
- 107, “Ecopoetics”/“Earthworks”
- Cowfeather Press launches

2012

- 108, “Verse Drama”/“Mask & Monologue,” VW begins accepting verse drama
- 109, “Community” (special joint issue with the 2011 Wisconsin Poets’ *Calendar*), plus guest curated content from Madison Museum of Contemporary Art (MMoCA)
- 110, “It’s Political,” plus special section from participants in the UW–Madison Hip Hop Educators’ 2012 Summer Institute
- With WFOF, UW–Creative Writing, First Wave, Black Earth Institute, brought Frank X Walker to the 2012 WI Book Festival

2013

- 111, “Tribute to Ellen Kort” (guest edited, Fabu)/“Women & Publishing,” Tribute to *Hummingbird* (online, guest edited, CX Dillhunt), plus guest curated content from MMoCA
- *Decomposium* with Worm Farm Institute, created VW’s (de)compos(t)ing station
- Publication of *Echolocations*, *Poets Map Madison*, launch event, exhibits
- 112, “Parents & Children,” plus special sections on the “Exquisite Uterus Project,” and in partnership with Forward Theatre

2014

- 113 – 114, “Midwest Remix” with 10 guest curators, including founders of Monsters of Poetry, Bonk!, Overpass Light Brigade, *Burdock*, Still Waters Collective, Pitymilk & Plumberies Press, plus content from MMoCA, from the Dane County Lakes & Watershed’s 25th Anniversary Celebration (a traveling exhibit of poetry & photography), and from *Echolocations*, *Poets Map Madison*
- Publication of two anthologies from Cowfeather: *I Didn’t Know There Were Latinos in Wisconsin: Three Decades of Hispanic Writing*, ed. by Oscar Mireles, and *local ground(s)—midwest poetics*

Verse Wisconsin quilt, fit together in this new form? Taken out of their original contexts and thrown together anew, what do we all have to say to each other? And ... should this sort of conversation ever be set and settled into book form?

In this infancy of our digital age, it’s tempting to dream of creating Tumblr

pages, mixed media video, blogs that continually stir, sift, shake, and generally re-engage these pieces in new juxtapositions and patterns as we continue to ask the questions that have preoccupied us in the last six years: is there such a thing as Midwestern poetry? Who and what and where is the Midwest? Who, what, where is poetry? If, as we claim in the closing piece, community and diversity have been our buzzwords in this project, twin stars to steer by, how can we place borders or walls around those ideas now, in this book?

The week at the hospital reminds me of what life in the Midwest is all about. It's February, -20 F, a foot of snow on the ground, and all of these friends, mine and my son's, are checking in, coming over, feeding the pets, walking the dog, offering rides if I need them, picking me up for lunch or dinner. My son's friends come in packs. His coaches come with their kids and spouses. They drive team members over after practice. His best friend's parents come with and without their son. The best friend's dad is also away on a trip and comes to the hospital from the airport. When I moved back to the Midwest 14 years ago after 20 years in the Northwest and East Coast, I was struck again by some of the same things I noticed moving to the Midwest from the South as a teen. The sincere concern. The kindness. The speed with which people invite you in. The unassuming attitude. The importance of community. Though the flipside of that (isn't there always a flipside?) is perhaps a certain intolerance for individual quirks, individual boundaries, unusual choices. I remember, for instance, the way the moms our first winter here expressed concern about our strange carlessness. Offered to take the kids to school (a few blocks?!). Wondered why we didn't belong to Scouts. Kept asking me to join things. Book groups. Church groups. School groups.

We're tempted to put off the publication of the book to emphasize we have not reached any place of closure, ourselves. Not with the above questions, and not personally with the *Verse Wisconsin* project. For five (now six, Wendy reminds me) years, we poured a tremendous, incalculable, really, amount of time, energy, passion, commitment into not only publishing poems, but supporting poetry within Wisconsin and the upper Midwest and beyond. We spent a great deal of energy to create something that, although ephemeral, had and continues to have great meaning for us personally as artists. We tried to make a statement—multiple statements—about what poetry can mean to community and to a region, what it means politically as well as personally to write, share, speak a poem. We attempted to inspire our readers to always write the next poem better whatever that meant, and we shared a few ideas (our own and others') about what that could mean.

*I was recently asked by the journal *Midwestern Gothic* why there hasn't been more of a push for "Midwestern Literature"—the way there has been for *Southern Lit*, for instance. Many reasons, I think. But the one that seems most important to me right now working on this book is that such a push begins from the inside. Think of the Black Arts Movement. Or the Abbey Theatre and the Irish Literary Renaissance. It begins with a collective assertion of existence and the right to exist. With the members of a literary community writing themselves rather than being written. Where do we start if we don't simply want to point backwards to monolithic figures in an idealized rural white farmscape? The vastness of contemporary Midwestern literature is bound up in contemporary Midwest culture and what it means to be Midwestern.*

It is concerned, as we have been, with the relation of art to daily life. With art in public space. With questions of community and diversity. With identifying and repairing differences that divide us along lines of class, race, age, gender, education, geography. With noticing people who are nearby and making a difference to each other. Sometimes in large ways, sometimes in very small ones. It documents events that happen here. It is playful. It produces creative political actions, as we witnessed during the Wisconsin protests of 2011. It is founded on a long-standing ecopoetry, poetry of place, and environmental awareness that includes many current examples and past luminaries, as well as living indigenous Midwestern cultures that inspire and shape present-day awareness of important issues like mining, water quality, and fracking. It is multicultural. It is urban. It is inclusive at its best, and we have come to think of the particular kind of Midwestern editing we practice as an Editing of Witness. We have also thought of it in terms of maximalism rather than minimalism. Of generosity rather than austerity. Of honesty, though we like our irony and work hard to maintain a sense of humor. (What's not to laugh in a place where winter lasts nearly half the year?) Of relevance and connection. Of practical. Of multifaceted. We say yes to experiment and yes to technology, as long as those things aren't privileged. We say yes to plain speaking and accessible and formal, as long as those things aren't privileged. We say yes to what is new and what is traditional, separately

✂ Verse Wisconsin by Event

VW participated in, co-ordinated, and co-produced about 60 events, apart from individual author readings given by its editors. An archive is at versewisconsin.org/events.html. We've also given papers and participated in conversations about Midwestern literature/poetry and VW at various conferences, including the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature, the Popular Culture Association, the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, and the Midwestern Modern Language Association.

and in the same poem and poet. We have been about providing space for poetry in VW and in its projects and assert that that act, however small or large, is a kind of activism. We assume that good editing includes finding out what people are already doing and making. That it's about creating new relationships with a diversity of makers, and that, too, is activism. We invite you to be activists by making more space for poetry in your daily life and in the lives of people and organizations you interact with, however large or small.

In the end, however, we decided despite our reluctance to press ahead with our original publication schedule. Here is a book. Here is a collection of voices that all join

together to reinterpret and reinvigorate our central notion of “the local” when it comes to poetics—as many as we could pack in, as great a variety as we could reach out to hold at once. We have never been terribly comfortable with the idea of editors as gateway guardians, always preferring to think of ourselves as hosts to a larger conversation, a party, an ongoing event that we titled *Verse Wisconsin*. And in that same spirit, we prefer now to offer this book as not the final word or any sort of conclusion, but just one more sort of remix, another temporary midway and Midwestern point as we ask ourselves, what was that work for, what ground, if any, did we claim, and what do we do next. Your voice, reader, can be part of those conversations. Reading this book, you join the party. Welcome.

It's the notion that we've been part of something larger than ourselves that has made this project so enjoyable. That and the chocolate. And the feathers. We hope that the significance of Verse Wisconsin and this collection of essays will be clear, not just with respect to a Wisconsin-based audience, but to everyone engaged with local or regionally driven arts. There is always something worthwhile to document nearby. Writers and artists are always doing just that. The sum total of what a group of writers/artists do in a region defines the poetics/aesthetics of that region. There are diverse writing/arts in every location. Getting to know the totality of that production is a matter of research and is vital to a larger understanding of those poetic/aesthetic principles. Many people have been part of our party, and we thank them all, especially those in this particular book who stopped in to share their thoughts. And you for listening. We invite you to visit the online archive of Verse Wisconsin where you can read other prose, other interviews, book reviews (none of which appear in this volume), poetry, and inspiring project-based Wisconsin poetry news. A lot of Midwest poetry happened during the last six years, and Verse Wisconsin is one snapshot of that.



ON THE GROUND—
THE SCENE IN WISCONSIN

✂ Small Press Poetry Publishing: I Ask Myself What's It All About—The History of *Free Verse* & Marsh River Editions

BY LINDA ASCHBRENNER

Q: One hundred issues of *Free Verse* were published from 1998 to 2009 in addition to 17 chapbooks with Marsh River Editions (marshrivereditions.com). How did you start publishing poetry?

A: Innocently. I did not intend to start a poetry journal. The first issue of *Free Verse*, March 1998, featured six poems by four poets from our newly formed regional poetry group, MAPS, Marshfield Area Poetry Society. Our writing group rapidly expanded, and I kept publishing our monthly output of poetry. To my surprise, poets outside our group learned about *Free Verse*, submitted poetry, and asked to subscribe. By May 2001, *Free Verse* was twelve pages, monthly. It expanded over the years to 40 pages. I set out stacks of *Free Verse* at the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets conferences, at poetry readings, etc. *Free Verse* then had hundreds of subscribers, most from Wisconsin, some from various parts of the country. Submissions even arrived from corners of the world.

Q: What advice do you have for poets who would like to start a small press poetry journal?

A: If you are thinking of starting a poetry journal, think finite—a poetry journal restricted to sonnets about solar flares, for example. Or, how about villanelles about elephants, odes to cats. Restrict the submission period to two weeks out of the year. I am only slightly kidding. What is manageable? Frequently small press poetry journals fold due to heavy time demands.

Vital to the process, at least for me, proofreaders! I acquired two proficient proofreaders, Sherrie Weber and Kris Rued-Clark. They caught my typing errors and other blunders (or as many of my blunders as humanly possible), and they also contributed book reviews and interviews. Serendipitously, Sherrie and Kris were long-time friends before I started *Free Verse*.

While still in high school, our son Nick submitted poetry and wrote book reviews for *Free Verse*. Later, he developed and maintained a website for Marsh River Editions. It was fun to have poetry as a family project.

One also needs adequate space—which probably nobody has, not with a poetry journal published out of a home. I worked mostly with paper, not email submissions. Bins multiplied—bins for incoming poetry, bins for outgoing, bins for contest entries, bins for new subscriptions and renewals. In addition to poetry, *Free Verse* published book reviews, essays, interviews, articles, photographs, news items, letters, cartoons, and ran four contests each issue. I searched for *Free Verse* cover quotes from the many poetry journals and books that filled our house. (Eleven years of the cover quotes provide an excellent

poetry education.) We lived with files and bins, stacks of mail, and poetry books. The office had limited walking space, sometimes just a tunnel to the computer.

Q: Are there courses in “The Small Press Poetry Journal: Editing and Publishing”?

A: Perhaps. And no doubt such courses would be helpful. On the other hand, it’s liberating to jump in: just publish who you want, when you want, with the design you want. Computer skills help. In 1994, Nick (still in grade school!) and I both learned QuarkXPress for desktop publishing and basic Photoshop skills. (I learned how to use a mouse at this same time.) Nick helped me with our computer crashes and other computer-related problems. We had ancient computers during the early *Free Verse* years—we didn’t have high speed internet until after I stopped publishing *Free Verse*. It could have been worse. At least it wasn’t the era of publishing poetry journals on a mimeograph machine.

Q: Why did you start publishing chapbooks?

A: Poet Louis McKee (1951–2011) of Philadelphia submitted his poetry to *Free Verse*. After I had published several of his poems, he insisted I publish his chapbook, *Loose Change*. He was an editor/publisher himself and talked me through the process. Without his persistence (and because I liked his poetry), I might not have created Marsh River Editions in 2001. Nick volunteered to do the layout and design of the chapbook that became the pattern I followed. Of course, once you publish one chapbook, you will be inundated with manuscript submissions. I found I enjoyed editing and publishing books. (I am working on our family books now and for the foreseeable future.)

Q: What type of temperament or personality seems to coincide with this type of work?

A: If you are going to edit/publish poetry, ask yourself: *Am I a hermit? Could I be a hermit? Do I love to spend time alone with poetry?* It also helps if you can let other things go—like sleeping, or having a perfectly clean house at all times—or at any time.

When I’d walk *Free Verse* letters to our mailbox, I’d sometimes be surprised to notice it was spring or autumn—I’d be oblivious to the seasons. Darn, did I miss summer again? If I’d glimpse a football or baseball game on TV with thousands of people cheering, I’d wonder why these individuals had time to travel to a game and then just sit there for hours—why weren’t they at home working on their poetry journals? Had they read all their piles of submissions? Responded to them? But no, we poets are a tiny minority on this planet. We poetry editors/publishers are an infinitesimally smaller group. We’re the people not going anywhere—just to our computers. Dust settles on us and on the stacks of papers surrounding us.

Q: What are some of your favorite memories from publishing *Free Verse* and the chapbooks?

A: I enjoyed *Free Verse* related poetry outings with family. Sometimes my husband and Nick would tend the Marsh River Editions book table at the Wisconsin Book Festival in Madison while I attended programs, or we'd attend events together. My husband and I went to numerous poetry readings throughout the state and delivered boxes of newly printed books to poets. I also enjoyed corresponding with poets over the course of each year. Letters and emails grounded me to the living world.

Great fun: getting an issue of *Free Verse* to the post office! I stuffed *Free Verse* into envelopes on our kitchen table—and sorted and bundled issues by zip code, sometimes with the help of my husband. Outgoing bins filled our living room—all the bins barely fit into our car. I loved driving home from the post office knowing an issue was done and out! The euphoria lasted one night, and then it was back to tackling incoming mail, etc. I also enjoyed driving bins of Marsh River Editions review books to the post office. Books going out into the world.

I also appreciated that I was learning. I learned something with each poem I read, with each issue I published.

I felt grateful to the many poets who submitted poetry, wrote book reviews, essays, did interviews, submitted cartoons (John Lehman, Lee Kisling, and Ed Galing), and to those who entered and judged contests. It's difficult to mention names because I'm sure to miss many, but frequent book reviewers/article writers included: Sarah Busse, Robin Chapman, Karl Elder, Karla Huston, Michael Kriesel, John Lehman, Charles P. Ries, Lou Roach, Thomas R. Smith, Richard Swanson, and Wendy Vardaman. There were numerous poets who submitted excellent reviews and articles.

And of course, the subscriptions and donations were essential to the entire process. (But one never publishes poetry for financial gain.)

An aside: I love the cartoons in *The New Yorker*. I wish I would have had crates of cartoon submissions. Another ideal occupation: wouldn't it be fun to be a cartoon editor?

Q: Was it easy to select poetry to publish from the submissions?

A: Oddly, yes! Fresh, unique poems stood out, stood up, begging me to publish them. Editors develop their own sense of what they want to publish. It could be a danger, I suppose, to fall into a comfort zone. You have to be open to new voices, styles, forms, ways of thinking. Then again, it's the editor's/publisher's prerogative to select what she likes.

An editor/publisher of a small press poetry journal is unlikely to relinquish poems to a selection committee. Why would one? Reading and selecting poetry is the best part of the publishing process. It's endlessly absorbing. (I wonder why all poets don't rush out and start their own poetry journals for this reason alone.)

Q: What were the time constraints during the publishing years?

A: Time always seemed in short supply. During many of those years, I also published two business newsletters from our home. I subscribed to and continue to subscribe to a number of poetry journals—unread articles, pages of poetry, and entire unread issues haunt me. I'm counting on heaven as a haven for reading. There I'll finally get to read everything I've missed.

I also spent time organizing a monthly poetry reading series in our community that ran for four years—from 1999 through 2002. Poets were invited to be featured readers, and we found grants and funding for those coming from Madison, Milwaukee, etc. Glory! Money to poets!

An unexpected outcome: I was so occupied by publishing deadlines that I stopped attending the meetings of our local poetry group that I had started. Sadly, four members passed away. A few moved to other cities and joined new poetry groups. Alas, our local group that inspired *Free Verse* ceased to exist. (I could always start a new group. I could offer to publish our poetry monthly....)

Q: How did you feel after your decision to relinquish *Free Verse*?

A: After 11 years, I felt ready for a change. I was delighted to find two poets to take over *Free Verse*. I asked Wendy Vardaman and Sarah Busse if they'd be interested. I knew from their poetry, book reviews, academic degrees, and interest in *Free Verse* that they would be ideal candidates. It helped that they lived in Madison, an area receptive to poetry. To my joy and gratitude, they accepted. They have accomplished miracles with the publication now known as *Verse Wisconsin*. They seem to have unlimited energy to do separate online and print issues, start a book press (Cowfeather Press), edit the 2013 *Wisconsin Poets' Calendar*, and serve as Madison Poets Laureate (2012–2015), along with keeping up with their own writing and busy families. I think of Wendy and Sarah as higher beings from some advanced planet.

Q: What are you doing now?

A: Besides talking to myself in this dialogue? (Typical behavior for a hermit, however.) I'm doing more reading and writing (including writing book reviews for *Verse Wisconsin*), and I'm spending more time with my family and friends. My husband and I travel to visit our adult children and they visit us. My two sisters and I are writing a book in poetry and prose about growing up in a Finnish American home. I'm collecting my poems and writing new ones for chapbooks that I plan to self-publish. I even have time now to exercise and tackle house projects neglected during the *Free Verse* years. I notice the seasons. Wind chills are 30 below tonight. I noticed that.

[Eds. note: This is an interview of Linda Aschbrenner by Linda Aschbrenner.]

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✿ Jessica Nelson North: Recalling The Reaches Of Silence And Sound

BY LAMOINE MACLAUGHLIN

If anyone asks, tell him that the wind mislaid me
In a high, forgetful place. —“Travail” (*Dinner Party*, 1942)

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 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 *Adelphian* 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.

Three Guests

I had a little tea party
This afternoon at three.
'Twas very small—
Three guests in all—
Just I, myself and me.

Myself ate all the sandwiches,
While I drank up the tea;
'Twas also I who ate the pie
And passed the cake to me.

She married Reed Inness MacDonald in 1921 and in time, had two children.

For many years, North worked on the staff of Chicago's *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. She was regularly published there during the twenties, thirties, and forties. The magazine's history lists North from 1928 as an assistant to editor Harriet Monroe, working alongside writers such as Lew Saret, Eunice Tietjens, Thornton Wilder (also from Wisconsin), Edith Wyatt (another Wisconsin poet) and others. At one point, Harriet Monroe wrote of her, "Jessica Nelson North ... needs no introduction to the readers of *Poetry*, as she has been on the staff of the magazine for seven or eight years, sometimes taking the place of an absent editor." In 1936 North succeeded Monroe as editor, and from 1937 to 1942 she jointly edited the magazine with Peter De Vries. From 1942 to 1949 she collaborated as part of a group editorship along with De Vries, George Dillon, John Frederick Nims, Margedant Peters, and Marion Strobel. Finally, from 1949 to 1969, North continued her involvement with *Poetry* in an advisory capacity. During her writing career, in *Poetry* alone, she published more than one hundred fifty poems and articles. Jessica Nelson North died in 1988.

North's major works include *A Prayer Rug* (1923), *The Long Leash* (1928), *Arden Acres* (1935—which won the Friends of American Writers first novel award), *Morning in the Land* (1941, her second novel), and *Dinner Party* (1942). Her three major collections clearly show her development and growth as a poet. In her review of *A Prayer Rug*, Eunice Tietjens wrote, "Once in a while a book comes from the press which, instead of being a promise, is a fulfillment. This is such a book. There are not a half dozen women in America who could have written its equivalent ... *A Prayer Rug*, fine as it is, will hardly establish Miss North in her rightful niche. Yet I expect to see her as one of the leading poets of the next generation" (*Poetry*, August, 1923). This first collection already reflects a thoughtful and careful artistic apprenticeship, a skilled and refined talent, and a clear understanding of the poetic craft exemplified in the following poem.

A Frosty Night

Breath of the dying vines,
That whistles and is still ...
The brazen moonbeams clang like coins
On our window-sill.

The earth with grief is big,
 Frost has stripped her of green.
 The harsh peak of a barren twig
 Tickles our screen.

We should be up and forth,
 The air is white with death.
 A hand is stretched out of the north
 Stopping our breath.

In 1927 she received the John Reed Memorial Prize “... not only for her group of five poems, *Impersonal*, in our December number, but for her earlier entries, and for the general quality of her recent work, as evidenced by notable contributions to *The Forge*, the *London Mercury*, and other magazines” (*Poetry*, November, 1927). Her second book of poetry, *The Long Leash* (1928), was selected by the Poetry Club as one of the best volumes of the year. In his review of the book, Horace Gregory said, “Her poetry is largely a technique of restraint... Jessica North’s promise lies in her ability to hunt down an emotion, size it up and then hand it an exact definition. So far this is her real contribution to contemporary poetry” (*Poetry*, March, 1929). Consider the concrete imagery and understatement she employs in the following selection.

from **Hibernalia**

Now is the season of frost, lovely and cruel,
 Taking the world in strong transparent hands,
 When country children gather boughs for fuel
 Along the bottom lands.
 What do you know of frost, you who only
 See it out of a warm, well-lighted pane
 Under the roof where pigeons in the sun
 Chuckle and strut and coo?
 Once I knew
 That to be cold was to be never lonely,

That to be cold was to feel iron enter
 Into your heart out of the iron ground
 To hear the core of fire at the earth’s center
 Endlessly turning round,
 To give one’s body over without sound
 Into the arms of winter.

In 1942, *Dinner Party* evidences the work of someone who remained true to her concept of form, reflecting an ease in composition and a polished grace. John Frederick Nims, while reviewing the book in *Poetry* (June, 1943), said, “It would be an unfortunate thing for modern poetry if the quiet excellence of *Dinner Party* ... did not gain the attention it deserves...” He goes on to describe her technique as “... the art which conceals art, so rare in a show-off generation.... Almost every poem reveals strength and sensitivity in the conception, control and grace in the expression. Everything is deft, firm, and musical....” We can

hear a wonderfully mature music flowing through all of her poems.

Origin

Once on a summer beach her moment caught her,
Child of the lake, recumbent and adoring,
As if the shore had snatched her from the water,
Liquid she lay—miraculous outpouring,
Her loins more undulant than waves, her hands
More languid than the sands.

She heard above her countless human voices,
Their strident syllables beginning, ending,
She thought the stony earth was making noises,
While she, like water, lay uncomprehending.
Only the ripples could she understand,
Insistent on the sand.

And in this final collection she could be as playful as she had been in 1912.

Advice To A Girl Child

Daughter, observe the mating dove
And be not eager after love,
But preen your breast
And wheel and rest,
And let the springtime do its best.

Daughter, observe the anchored flower
That sure and steadfast waits its hour.
The world's a-hum,
Sit sweet and dumb,
And take whatever bee may come.

For nearly fifty years, from the 1920s through the 1960s, Jessica Nelson North published her own work and exercised editorial leadership in publishing many of the major poets of the twentieth century. We would do well to rediscover and applaud the beauty of her poetry. Her voice still sings to us today with a timeless elegance and loveliness. On our shelves, next to her brother's children's books, Jessica Nelson North deserves her own special place. Among Wisconsin writers, her poems deserve a very special ranking in our literary esteem.

Here I lie like a storm-buffed sparrow
Tossed out of the reaches of silence and sound....
(from "Travail," in *Dinner Party*, 1942)

Published in Verse Wisconsin 106

✂ Recollections of a Wisconsin Small Press Editor and Publisher

BY GARY C. BUSH

My first introduction to the small press came about as a student in Doug Flaherty's introductory poetry class at UW–Oshkosh in 1972. I got interested in literature, mainly through my enlistment in the Army and my two-year stint in Japan, where I discovered the many kinds of poetry and fiction in the post library. Remembering back to high school, I had an interest in poems and stories, but didn't think of myself as a writer. In fact I made few attempts at writing.

In Flaherty's class I learned about the small press. Small presses were the place to go for beginning poets, experimental fiction writers, and anyone starting out and trying to get some publishing credits. Doug said that any student who had a poem published in a small press publication would get an A in his class. No one in our class did. He pointed out how difficult it was to get poetry published. There were less than 2,000 small presses operating in the US, and most published a few issues and disappeared. I had sent out a few poems, had some reject slips in my files, but soon realized that I was not writing well enough to be published.

In a class in the summer of '72, during a class break, I met fellow student Chris Halla. (Chris died in January of this year). He and I were in a fiction writing class together. He commented on one of my short stories I had submitted for class discussion. He said he worked on the UW–Oshkosh *Wisconsin Review*, the student literary magazine. He liked my story and asked if I would be interested in joining the *WR* staff. I said I would and became a staff member. I started out mainly sitting at a table trying to sell the latest issue of the *Wisconsin Review* to students. At that time, the *WR* was a quarterly and partially funded by UW–Oshkosh, but was expected to sell issues and try to be self-sustaining.

Chris Halla was a small press publisher of a magazine called *River Bottom*. After he showed me a few of his issues, he asked if I would like to join him as a contributor and associate assistant. I said yes. At that time, *River Bottom* was a wonderful example of kitchen table, small press publishing at its most basic. The editor/publisher chose what he or she wanted to publish and did most of the work to put the publication out, and footed all of the bill. This was usually a one- or two-person production that would include

- Design and layout, including front and back cover art and copy. The editor chose size, cover stock, and inside paper.
- Assembly. The editor did the collating, folding, and stapling of the books. This was usually done on the kitchen table and required careful and patient work. Also, the books were often pressed to flatten them. I used bricks or construction blocks for weight. After pressing, for a day or two, the books usually went back to the printer for trimming.

- Mailing. The editor's distribution went to subscribers, authors, and reviewers who, one hoped, would review the work.
- Record-keeping. The editor kept track of and documented sales and distribution of the publication.

My role on *River Bottom* began as a helper, then as typist/proofreader, and then as co-editor. Chris and I co-founded a new publication called *Wolfsong* soon after *RB's* last issue. In 1978 *Wolfsong* began as a quarterly, then became an irregularly published magazine. Irregular meant we published when we felt we had enough publishable material or the right manuscript for a chapbook or the money to print it. The magazine eventually turned to doing chapbooks of individual poets exclusively and published through the '70's into 2000. We did chapbooks and broadsides (single-sheet or poems) of new and well-known poets, such as Peter Wild, William Kloefkorn, Dorothy Dalton, Bruce Taylor, Mariann Ritzer, Dave Etter, Doug Flaherty, Michael Koehler, and others. See the complete list at the end of this article.

While on the staff of the *Wisconsin Review*, 1974–5, I had the opportunity to see a wide variety of small press chapbooks come into our small office on the third floor of Dempsey Hall at UW–Oshkosh. I also received through Chris a wide variety of small press magazines. I became familiar with many small press publications. Some of these publications were monthly or quarterly magazines, such as *The Paris Review*, *The Wormwood Review*, and *Poetry Now*, while others were chapbooks of a single author. Some were of low-quality paper, produced, mimeographed, two 10-sheets, 20 pages, and a few at the other end, 100 pages plus, glossy cover, perfect-bound editions. Many of them were in trade (that is we swapped *WR* copies) and others came in over the transom (in the mail) or unsolicited. I liked the variety of these publications. Most were stapled (saddle-stitched), with one, two, or three staples. A few were perfect-bound, on high gloss paper with fancy art, and some even with advertisements. I liked the simple, non-glossy, chaps that showed the work done by someone who didn't have much money, or didn't use it on slick production.

I graduated in January 1975 and passed the editorship of the magazine on to other staff members: all capable poets and editors. I stayed in touch for a while with *WR*, and since I was unable to find work, I began taking graduate courses at UW–Oshkosh. In the meantime, I applied to graduate school at UW–Madison in the English Department. I was shot down there. However, I was accepted at UW–Eau Claire, where I received an assistantship in the English Department.

Without knowing a single person in Eau Claire, in the late summer of '75, I, my wife Linda, and young daughter Laura packed up what we owned, loaded a truck, and headed from Oshkosh to Eau Claire for my fall semester. During this time I continued to be in touch with Chris Halla, who continued publishing *Wolfsong* and other publications. I was also sending out poems and short stories to a number of small presses, trying to establish myself as a writer.

The small press student publication at Eau Claire was *NOTA* (None of the Above). It came out irregularly and was in newspaper format. I worked with the

editors and staff and had a few poems and short stories in *NOTA*. In the English Department I met professor Bruce Taylor, who also had his own small press publication: *Red Weather*. *RW* was also in newspaper format. During my stay at UW–Eau Claire, I published a couple of poets under my own Willow Wind Press name, and also, with Chris, under the Wolfson name. These publications were aided by my having bought an IBM Selectric typewriter in 1975. With interchangeable typeface balls, one could create a professional-looking magazine.

I had also begun correspondence with Len Fulton, the founder of *The Small Press Review* and *International Directory of Little Magazines & Small Presses*. Len was revered by editors and writers alike as the man who gave much impetus to small press publishing in America. Since the early '60s, Len had listed publishers for free in his widely respected magazines and directories under the Dustbooks name. My correspondence with Len centered on work in the UW–Eau Claire English Department and on “English Week,” during which a variety of small press writers, poets, and publishers were invited to take part. During the spring of '77, I recommended Len to the English committee as an English Week guest, and he was scheduled to talk about the small press for the event.

What became clear during Len's talk was that beginning, and even established, poets had little chance of being published in the large, mainstream magazines, such as *The New Yorker*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and others. Few poets made it into those magazines. Also, the number of poems printed was few. The small press was the place to give new and established poets and experimental fiction writers a place to start. The small presses at that time were mostly one- or two-person operations, operating on a limited budget, doing most of the collating, assembly, stapling, and distribution on their own. Almost no advertising was published, mainly because advertisers saw the low runs and poor distribution as unprofitable and reaching a small audience. Also, most small press publishers didn't want advertisers anyway. The goal of many small press publishers was to be fiercely independent and not beholden to anyone. Wisconsin small press publisher Tom Montag produced a valuable series of chapbooks on how to establish and maintain a small press publication, from layout, design, printing, distribution, and other business concerns.

I liked the idea of independence and publishing what and when I wanted. Naturally, publishing poetry meant in most cases losing money. Small press publishing took money to mail and advertise. Money was needed to print the books. Money was needed for paper, ribbons, office supplies, and utilities. Once the chapbook was put together, money was needed to send out flyers and notices. And when orders came in for the book, money was needed for envelopes and postage to get the books to the buyers. It took money to send out review copies, pay the author or authors a few copies, and pay other incidentals that were sure to arise. Plus, the small press publisher was working for almost nothing, not paying himself or herself, and hoping to sell enough books to break even or make a little bit over to apply to the next book. It is no surprise that many thought small press poetry publishing was crazy.

Today, in 2014, I consider the small press a valuable outlet for writers, especially serious poets. The battles continue to be distribution and costs associated with

producing a small press book. However, with desktop publishing and computer programs, putting together a publication is much easier than decades ago. Some small press publishers, such as Norbert Blei's Cross+Roads Press, did an exceptional series of fine chapbooks over the past two decades. Sadly, Norb died in April 2013. Such publications are a credit to editors of small press publishing because of the talent of the writers and quality of production and art. Also today, online publications are emerging as another source for beginning poets to see their work in print or on the tube. Norb Blei's *Basho's Road* and other sites come to mind. Therefore, aspiring poets have more opportunities to get published, I think. However, the issue of publishing quality remains as it always has—at the discretion of the publisher. Good editors/publishers produce good writing and books when they have good writing coming in and when they have the skill to recognize talent and publishable work.

As a small press publisher I've dealt with many poets who have had high opinions of their work. Sometimes these personal opinions were correct, but often they were not. A good editor needs to deal with easily bruised egos, and perhaps that's the most difficult part of being a poetry publisher. My experiences in this regard have been mostly good. I liked the poets I worked with and published, and I kept *Wolfsong* active for as long as I could after Chris ended his relationship with *Wolfsong* and left it to me. I recently began publishing my own work (haiku and small poems) in a mini-chapbook series.

Wisconsin today has a strong small press and continuing active interest in poetry. I hope that more independent publishers emerge. Online publishing has changed the landscape of publishing dramatically. Some state organizations for poets have been and are effective and useful to poets, among them the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets (WFOP), the Council for Wisconsin Writers (CWW), and Wisconsin Regional Writers (WRW).

The internet has had good and bad influences on poetry writing and publishing. For poets, the reader only sees the finished work and not the revisions and rework always needed to hone a poem for publication. Future generations may regret not seeing the poet at work, sweating over words and ideas. For publishers who only publish online, the reader doesn't have the delight of holding the poem or collection in hand. All you get is the poem on the screen. Personally, I prefer to have the work in printed form, on a sheet of paper or in a book. Yet, we all adapt to technological changes, or at least try to.

My involvement with the small press has been valuable and enjoyable, as an editor, publisher, and poet. Of course poetry needs financial support. The support of the small press means buying small press books and publications. It also means supporting poetry readings and events to keep poetry alive and in the public and active in Wisconsin because poetry gives so much more value to life.

The deaths of Norbert Blei and Chris Halla are a serious loss to small press publishing in Wisconsin. These two men contributed so much to the small press and served as mentors and teachers to thousands of beginning and established poets and writers. One can only hope that others with their skills and knowledge will emerge to fill some of the gap they left in the editing and publishing fields.

Magazines, broadsides, and chapbooks produced by R. Chris Halla and Gary C. Busha

The following is an index of publications I took part in publishing or published with Chris Halla. E/P means Editor and Publisher.

1975

River Bottom, Vol. II, No. 1, "Storyteller," Busha typesetter

River Bottom, Vol. II, No. 2, Mag, Autumn, co-editor/Busha typesetter, Chris and Jan Halla E/P

1976

River Bottom, Vol. III, No. 1, "The Skeptic's Dream," Busha, Spring, Busha typesetter

River Bottom, Vol. III, No. 2, "The Adventures of a Freelance Farmer," Halla E/P, Spring, Bush typesetter

River Bottom, Vol. III, No. 3, Mag, Busha co-editor with Halla, Chris Halla E/P

1977

River Bottom, Vol. IV, No. 1, Mag, Spring, Busha co-editor/typesetter with Chris and Jan Halla E/P

River Bottom, Vol. IV, No. 2, Mag, Summer, Fiction editor/typesetter, Halla E/P

River Bottom, Floating No. 5, Broadside, "Swoon of Papposilenus," Bruce Taylor, Spring, Busha E/P

River Bottom, Floating No. 6, Broadside, "Thanksgiving," Lisa Busjahn, Summer, Busha E/P

1978

Wolfsong, No. 1, "Gold Mines," Peter Wild, Busha typesetter, Halla E/P

Wolfsong, No. 2, "Stocker," William Kloefkorn, Busha typesetter, Halla E/P

Wolfsong, No. 3, "Waiting," Debra Frigen, Busha E/P

Wolfsong, No. 4, "The Moon Rides Witness," Dorothy Dalton, Busha E/P

Wolfsong, No. 5, "River Boy, River Town, River," Chris Halla, Halla E/P

Willow Wind Press, "Warping Time," Joe Ryszewski, Busha E/P

1979

Wolfsong, No. 6, "Riding the Rock Island through Kansas," Dave Etter, Busha typesetter, Halla E/P

Wolfsong, No. 7, "The Lost Tribe," Peter Wild, Busha typesetter, Halla E/P

Wolfsong, No. 8, "Idle Trade: Early Poems," Bruce Taylor, Busha E/P

Willow Wind Press, "The 3rd Punch Hole," Cecily Smith, Busha E/P

1980

Wolfsong, No. 9, "Portable Shelter," Joe Napora, Busha E/P

Wolfsong, No. 10, "North Farm," Rodney Nelson, Busha typesetter, Halla E/P

Wolfsong, No. 11, "Angst," Arthur Winfield Knight, Busha typesetter, Halla E/P

Wolfsong, No. 12, "Soapstone Wall," Travis Du Priest, Busha E/P

1982

Wolfsong Chapbook Series 1, *Dream of the Electric Eel*, Robert S. King, Busha E/P

1990

Page5, #1, Bruce Taylor, Gary Busha typesetter, Chris Halla E/P

Page5, #6, Norbert Blei, Busha typesetter Chris Halla E/P

Page5, #9, Bay View Stories, Gary Busha typesetter, Chris Halla E/P

1994

Wolfsong Pubs., *Water*, Chris Halla, Busha E/P

1995

Wolfsong Pubs., *Willowdown*, Gary Busha, Busha E/P

Wolfsong Pubs., *Grace*, Robert Schuler, Busha E/P

Wolfsong Pubs., *Harvest Work*, Russell King, Busha E/P

1996

Wolfsong Pubs., *The Skeptic's Dream*, Gary Busha, Busha E/P

Wolfsong Pubs., *How to Fall Out of Love*, Mariann Ritzer, Busha E/P

1997

Wolfsong Pubs., *The Liege Poems*, Rich Bowen/Gary Busha, Busha E/P

Wolfsong Pubs., *Next Time You See Me*, Dave Etter, Busha E/P

1998

Wolfsong Pubs., *Last Hunt*, Doug Flaherty, Busha, E/P

Wolfsong Pubs., *Benthos*, Liz Hammond, Busha E/P

1999

Wolfsong Pubs., *Notes from Skinner's Elbow*, Michael Koehler, Busha E/P

Wolfsong Pubs., *A Wolfsong Anthology*, Various, Busha E/P

2000

Wolfsong Pubs., *Weird Sisters*, Nadine S. St. Louis, Busha E/P

2001

Wolfsong Pubs., *Knots of Sweet Longing*, Richard Roe, Busha E/P

2012

Wolfsong Pubs., *On the Dock*, Gary C. Busha

2013

Wolfsong Pubs., *Rhyme Tyme*, Gary C. Busha

Wolfsong Pubs., *Canoe Haiku*, Gary C. Busha

Wolfsong, Pubs., *Frog on the Bay*, Gary C. Busha

2014

Wolfsong, Pubs., *Bay View Spiders*, Gary C. Busha

Published in Verse Wisconsin 111

🌿 Fireweed Press

BY JERI MCCORMICK

Book by book, over twenty-five years, Fireweed Press has remained a presence on the Wisconsin publishing scene. For a small author's collective, this is no small accomplishment. Fireweed's first book appeared in 1987, followed shortly thereafter by eight others, the works of Madison poets who formed a collective to assist each other with production and promotion. Early encouragement came from Edna Muedt, an acclaimed Dodgeville poet who worked hard in her time (1950s–80s) to bring poetry to the public. The press's name came from a botany guide describing colorful weeds, among which *fireweed* stood out, displaying vivid hues and prolific renewal properties—metaphorically relevant in the writing world.

The first five years of the collective saw regular meetings of the nine writers at the home of Jeri McCormick, author of the first book, who met to pool editing and production ideas. Strategies for marketing soon followed, once the books were in print. Since that time, the group size has more than doubled and spread geographically, and the publishing process has become well-charted and computerized. Full collective meetings are no longer held, but some of the original nine members still serve as consultants in the development of each new book. In addition, volunteer help from other members is available upon request for editing, design, blurbs, proofing and reviews—valuable support for the writer about to face public scrutiny. Each author maintains autonomy in making final decisions, and in financing the book's production costs. Following publication, the author retains all proceeds from sales. The outlay of expenses is usually recouped when half of the print run is sold.

By 1992, Fireweed had published thirteen books and a packet of ten post cards. Also in print were flyers with sample poems from each book and order forms. Members gave presentations about the press at many gatherings, including Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets conferences, writers' workshops, bookstores, Madison Writers' Place (active in the 80s and 90s), and to a large convention of the National Federation of Poetry Societies' attendees from around the country, including the featured presenter, William Stafford, who graciously accepted complimentary copies of the books for his personal library. Since those early years, Fireweed has added another eighteen books to its list most since the year 2000. Recently, the press has appeared in the programming of two Madison Book Festivals, including the 2011 festival, in which five members served on a Fireweed panel.

Fireweed's primary goal is to bring quality poetry to the community of readers and writers by means of the printed page—through books and chapbooks. Membership in the cooperative comes by invitation and is loosely defined, with no dues, no contract, and no deadline requirement. Acceptance is agreed upon by at least three original Fireweed authors, one of whom is Richard Roe, Robin Chapman or Jeri McCormick, who offer long-time experience and advice. All assistance is voluntary—a pooling of skills to turn a manuscript into a book.

As with most presses, the biggest challenge is selling the books once they're published. The individual author plays the greater role in this, and the books tend to move slowly, through face-to-face interactions, bookstore readings, and table displays at writers' meetings. The press has a new website, thanks to donated funds, offering publicity for authors, and it has signed with Amazon Advantage, although that marketing service is expensive for poets. Some authors show great imagination in getting their books to the public (a prime example is Sandy Stark [read her article on marketing in this volume], whose *Counting on Birds* has found bird lovers and other readers near and far). Despite the difficulty of selling in large numbers, it is good for a writer to put out a book as tangible proof of his/her efforts, for the sake of personal closure as well as public exposure.

Word has spread over the years, and Fireweed is recognized as an established Wisconsin press. Among its thirty-one books, one book of short stories, *The Other Side*, by retired nurse Cheney Duesler, came out in 2008 and is being promoted far afield—on the east coast and in Germany. In addition, Fireweed is proud to distribute books by former members, Arthur Madson and Frances May, both now deceased, who made names for themselves among Wisconsin poets. Fireweed books have been reviewed in print journals, newspapers, and online, and Garrison Keillor has read from them on public radio's *Writer's Almanac*. Two authors have been awarded the Council for Wisconsin Writers' Posner Prize, and three were recognized by the Wisconsin Library Association with Outstanding Achievement awards. The state's recent Poet Laureate, Bruce Dethlefsen, has a book with Fireweed, and former Poet Laureate Ellen Kort is scheduled to publish with the press. Currently active in the collective are: Sandy Stark, Richard Swanson, Wendy Vardaman, Bruce Dethlefsen, Karen Updike, Lynn Patrick Smith, Yvonne Yahnke, Eve Robillard, Jim Stevens, Fran Rall, Lenore Coberly, Richard Roe, Robin Chapman and Jeri McCormick.

At a time when mainstream presses grow ever more remote as publishing possibilities for the local poet, Fireweed hangs in there, offering support from experienced authors and bringing discerning new voices to light in Wisconsin and beyond.

Published in Verse Wisconsin 109

☞ Center Stillness: Conversations with Phyllis Walsh & CX Dillhunt

Phyllis Walsh (1928–2012) was the creator and founding editor of Hummingbird: Magazine of the Short Poem, which is in its twenty-third year. These conversations took place in December 2011 and January 2012 at Phyllis' home in Greendale, Wisconsin. CX Dillhunt is a poet as well as the editor of Hummingbird.

CX Dillhunt: Phyllis, I remember finding my first *Hummingbird* tucked away on the very bottom shelf in the poetry section of University Book Store on State Street—almost on the floor, flat, and there on the cover was David [Kopitzke]'s hummingbird, wings out, hanging there with its beak in flower, alive as can be...

Phyllis Walsh: A long way down for you!

CX: Yes, I'm surprised I noticed it at all. I didn't know what it was. It was the only thing on the shelf. But I got down there, sat on the floor and read the first two issues cover to cover—I was hooked and sent you a couple haiku the next day.

PW: I guess no one knew where to put it. I'm glad it caught your eye.

CX: Yes, eventually the bookstores began placing it up front near the registers, like candy and gum in other stores—hoping for an impulse buy!

PW: In those early days, it was a real struggle. I was only putting out two a year, March and September. Eventually, I was able to go quarterly, with a June and December issue. You wouldn't think that something so small would be so much work...

CX: Let's start there, with the size. The magazine pages are a quarter of an 8 ½ by 11 sheet.

PW: Well, that's it. I wanted something I could fold into shape, tear, and roll into my typewriter. Like those [pointing to stack of neatly torn 5 ½ by 4 ¼ sheets on the kitchen table next to the typewriter].

CX: So, maybe that's a good starting point for my next question, I mean, what makes a poem work for you, for *Hummingbird*?

PW: Well, yes, anything that will fit on that small page—that's a good start...

CX: ... that reminds me—in preparation for this interview I found a letter where you wrote, "I've gone more in the direction of minimalism, as you know."

PW: Well, yes, as I was saying, anything that will fit on that small page—I've always felt if there is not a lot of space, the words chosen will be forced to carry more punch. Also, especially with shorter poems, it's important to see only one

on a page—seeing it on a page, surrounded by its own space—that’s my meaning of a short poem. And like any poem, the meaning needs to be subtle. Perhaps that’s the nature of the short poem, why I prefer it.

CX: There seems to be some confusion, though, I mean does it bother you when bookstores and even some poets refer to it as “a haiku journal”?

PW: Well, I’ve given up trying to explain. I suppose those are the ones who never submit their work, unfortunately, never read it. Perhaps they misunderstand the form or intent of the magazine, see a haiku or any short work as too limiting? But, haiku or not, the poem I’m looking for might be more haiku-related than not. I’m not sure we’ve all decided on what a haiku is...

CX: So, let me rephrase the question: what is it that makes a good short poem, one that works? I mean other than just being short and fitting on the page? What would you say is the nature of the form?

PW: Something not obvious, not spoken of directly, hinted at. That makes a big difference. But like a haiku, just because you have maybe three lines and seventeen syllables, if that’s how you try to write them, even if you have a season word if you require one, it still may not work. In any poem, I’m looking for compression—it should carry an implied comparison between different things or perceptions, but not directly so. At times, unexpected.

CX: How do you know this? I mean, when a poem works, when it doesn’t?

PW: I was afraid you’d ask that. You mean how do I know if it’s a poem for *Hummingbird*? Experience, I guess. It has to have a certain “something” about it. Anything a bit offbeat, unexpected. Short, but everything that needs to be said.

CX: Short and ready.

PW: Yes, ready each time you read it. I guess I learned somewhere along the way that that led to the best poetry. Poetry should be condensed. I didn’t have a name for what I was writing, I was just trying to write poems. It’s what I preferred. So, as the editor I get to choose. I hope the magazine speaks for itself in the sense that it encourages readers and writers to consider what works.

CX: So it’s not just brevity you’re looking for?

PW: Actually, that is all I’m looking for. Brevity. It has to hold up on its own, not just look short or fit the page. A certain tightness of expression and emotion that I don’t think is really achieved in a longer poem.

CX: When did you start writing?

PW: Probably first grade. Trying to write a poem. I didn’t keep any—my mother didn’t encourage saving. I had a poem file. I threw them all away. I remember her saying, “You don’t read this anymore.” So I didn’t keep anything for that long. They were mostly short things—something that needed to be expressed.

My first grade teacher, I was really close to her—Miss Kahl. I ate lunch with her every day.

CX: What did you talk about?

PW: What was going on in our lives. She tried to influence me to be more outgoing. I kept going back through sixth grade. I'd just stop by to visit. Sometimes I'd show her some poems.

CX: Were there any other teachers or authors who influenced you?

PW: My sixth grade teacher, Miss Lance. She taught poetry. Before that as I said, I just wrote because I wanted to. She had us read poetry. And I forget his name, but I had a freshman English teacher at Milton who encouraged.

CX: I know you're a letter writer.

PW: I started that at an early age, too. I like to write.

CX: I know we corresponded for almost twenty years before we met.

PW: And we still write to each other. I think there's a connection...

CX: How so?

PW: I mean between poetry and letter writing.

CX: Do you think there's more of a connection to the shorter poem?

PW: I never thought of that; maybe it's the focus. Paying attention to that person, to what's going on, knowing you should be succinct, more to the point.

CX: Yes! Your letters, too, are always short, but carry the news.

PW: That's it. And it's a pleasure to write, to keep in touch.

CX: Perhaps how a poem keeps us in touch.

PW: Especially that short poem!

CX: I enjoyed the years when Cid Corman appeared in *Hummingbird*. I hear you corresponded.

PW: Oh yes. For years. I miss hearing from him.

CX: He died about seven years ago?

PW: That sounds right. We shared poems. He suggested it—a magazine like *Hummingbird*, I mean. We talked a lot about haiku and short poems.

CX: Did you ever meet?

PW: Yes, at the Lorine Niedecker Centenary in 2003. We were all fortunate to have him there. I think he died shortly after that, in 2004.

CX: And that's another connection, you and Lorine both being from Fort Atkinson. Did you know her?

PW: We both worked at the Fort Public Library. I was a librarian there for a short time before accepting a position at UW–Richland Center. We were acquaintances, our families knew each other. Everyone did.

CX: Yes, in your small book of essays about her, you comment: “My awareness of Lorine Niedecker began in my childhood when I glimpsed her reclusive figure in our hometown, Fort Atkinson ... a town of 8,000 situated in the midst of rich dairy country ... townspeople whispered that Niedecker wrote poetry, but I never knew anyone who read it. Since she seemed to avoid interaction with other people, it was generally assumed it was of little consequence.”

PW: That was such a lesson for me.

CX: It seems your study of Niedecker influenced your work.

PW: I suppose.

CX: Well, in the introduction to your essays [*Lorine Niedecker: Solitary Plover*, Juniper Book 56, La Crosse, 1992] you say: “Although LN is becoming recognized as a poet who made a major contribution to American literature, her work can reward without benefit of scholarship. Her genius lies in the clarity of vision she brings to the most common objects and experience.”

PW: That's it. That precision. I felt I got to know her that way, through her poetry.

CX: But also, the comment on “scholarship.” I think your statement about her works as the motto for *Hummingbird*.

PW: Yes, very much so. I finished that collection of essays just as *Hummingbird* was getting underway.

CX: And going back to Fort, You grew up on a farm?

PW: Yes, I was born there. I think that influenced my sense of poetry and love of down-to-earth poetry. My grandfather loved to tell me stories for hours at a time out on the porch. He had a great sense of humor. We also went to the river to fish. It was a great small-town atmosphere. That was my life. After Milton I went to UW–Madison for my degree in Library Science. I worked at the Madison Public Library downtown for a while.

CX: *Hummingbird* is in its 22nd year. Any advice for writers?

PW: Not really, other than to be yourself as much as you can.

CX: What have you learned from editing *Hummingbird*?

PW: Not to make instant judgments about poems or poets.

CX: What do you mean?

PW: First time through on submissions don't make a major decision to take something or to dismiss it. I think the same goes for the poet, don't immediately embrace or reject your work. It's that going through that decision-making process, knowing you've eventually achieved something.

CX: What's the most difficult part of the job?

PW: Turning down someone I know and see regularly. Correspondence is a bit easier. There are some I think of very highly as people but who write poems I don't want to accept. That's very difficult. I try to do something else once in awhile—like lunch or a play or a movie. I try to do something together that has nothing to do with poetry.

CX: What's been the role of correspondence for *Hummingbird*?

PW: Significant. Some of my best friendships. But even there, it's up and down. Something works for a while and then it falls apart. I suppose that's the nature of all relationships, even though the friendship may remain.

CX: Any regrets?

PW: No, not that I can think of. Not with *Hummingbird*. It's one of the most important things I've done in my life, not only for my own pleasure in doing it, but for the feedback from others.

CX: Would you say it's been "fun"?

PW: Yes, fun for the most part. One of the most positive experiences in my life. And I can't imagine it ever ending.

CX: I'd like to end by reading you one of your poems from my favorite collection, *Center Stillness* [Phyllis Walsh, Scythe Press, Dakota, MN, 1989]. For the sake of our readers, I want to point out that it's a small, hand-stitched book, about the size of *Hummingbird*, with ten poems, each on its own page.

canoeing closer
 driftwood branch
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PW: Yes (chuckling), I can see that to this day.

CX: Thanks!

PW: Oh, how can I thank you?

December 2011 & January 2012, Greendale, WI.

✂

Phyllis Anne Vosburg Walsh

November 4, 1928, Fort Atkinson, WI

September 4, 2012, Milwaukee, WI

Phyllis was, in many ways, a role model for me. Despite the exhaustion that comes from a long and challenging work life—and despite the considerable obstacles created by a severe aneurism, Phyllis was determined to make a success of her retirement years. “Success” for her meant poetry—the highest quality, spare, moving, funny and wrenching. And then she decided to involve me in her efforts by way of challenging me to illustrate poems. Long before the printing of each issue of *Hummingbird*, I would get a phone call or a note. She would have chosen a poem to be illustrated—always along with a precise deadline—and always with gentle or quite pointed promptings to produce the best.

So she taught me to make the most of the time given to us, to use our creative juices to their utmost, and to aim high.

Thank you, Phyllis.

David Kopitzke, Art Editor

Hummingbird: Magazine of the Short Poem

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✂ A Means to Open the World: A Conversation Around Blogging, Five Women in Three Acts

WITH SARAH BUSSE, JENNIFER MORALES,
MARGARET (PEGGY) ROZGA, MARGARET SWEDISH,
AND LISA VIHOS

As Wendy and I began brainstorming our “Women and Publishing” issue, it occurred to me that here was an opportunity to explore that most recent form of publishing, the blog. I have never written a blog of my own, but I have thought about it (hasn’t everyone, by now?) and I’ve been curious about bloggers’ experiences. [Note: Since this piece was published, I do blog as Sarah Sadie at patheos.com.] I don’t read any blog entirely regularly, but there have been a few that have been important to me as a learner and thinker. For the purpose of this feature, I wanted to gather a group of women together and for the sake of sanity, I put some limits around my choices: they had to be poets, and they had to be living in Wisconsin. Margaret (Peggy) Rozga, Margaret Swedish, Jennifer Morales, and Lisa Vihos were all kind enough to say Yes, when I asked them. What unfolded over the month of January 2013 was a wide-ranging conversation. Interestingly, we all had to duck out at various times for personal reasons. The flexibility of the project allowed for people to come in and out as they could. I have tried, in what follows, to edit out repetition but retain as much as possible the informal feel of a conversation that happened around a virtual kitchen table.

Warming Up...

Margaret: This month is good for me. I should be able to participate without a problem over these next weeks...

Jennifer: I should be around all January. I’m looking forward to the discussion!

Lisa: I hope I will have something to add, because I do not use my blog the way most people do...

Sarah: Lisa, you guest blog for *Best American Poetry*, don’t you? I hope you’ll speak to all of your various activities as poet, publisher, editor and blogger—you wear a lot of hats!

Lisa: Hey, thanks for clarifying and reminding me that it is about “blog-dom” in many different ways, and when you put it that way, yes, I do have many different blogging hats that I wear between my own blog, *Stoneboat*, and *BAP*. Okay. I’m done thinking I am not a right woman for the job!

Here are all the various blogs I am involved in:

stoneboatwi.blogspot.com (this is the *Stoneboat* blog, Myself and the other editors variously post something when the mood strikes us or when something interesting happens.)

lisapoemoftheweek.blogspot.com (this is my personal blog, of my own poetry. It began in 2008 as Poem of the Week, and I used to post a poem every Sunday. Now, I only post on the first day of the month. I rarely ever write “blog entries” though I occasionally have a short intro...)

And here is an entry from among the 15 or so I have written for *BAP* over the past couple years: blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/the_best_american_poetry/2011/09/the-unleaving-time-1.html.

Peggy: I'm in Mexico now with intermittent web connections. I found out that the city of Merida has free Wi-Fi in many parks, and the signal today is strong. Rather than host my own blog, I blog on the Benu Press website...

Act One

Sarah: To start, would you each describe your own work as poets, writers, and bloggers? I'm particularly interested in how long you have been blogging, if you have your own blog and/or guest on someone else's site, and what got you interested in blogging in the first place? What blogs do you read?

Margaret: Writing has been an aspect of my life's work for decades. For more than two decades, I was an analyst, news writer, and author of many narratives related to the Central America liberation struggles of the 1980s and 90s, culminating in a book on the US side of the movement, entitled, *Like Grains of Wheat: A Spirituality of Solidarity*. Sometime in the early 2000s, I became overwhelmed by the ecological threat unfolding quickly across the planet and shifted my attention there, writing a second book on the various aspects of the crisis, *Living Beyond the 'End of the World: A Spirituality of Hope*. I was coming out of a very radical Christian perspective but was ready to move beyond that into the larger cultural context that this crisis requires.

What compelled me to my recent writing was my return to Milwaukee for family reasons, and then, in my explorations of my family roots, and in the remarkable journey of my mother's death and dying, discovering a multi-generational history that opened up for me the meaning of the Myth of the American Dream in a wholly new way. This discovery, including some pretty remarkable family secrets, offered a new lens through which to view the cultural underpinnings of that Dream and why we are having such a hard time letting it go despite the evidence that it is completely unsustainable and is, in fact, creating the conditions for the collapse of the culture altogether.

I was drawn to what for me was a new adventure with my writing—creative nonfiction, memoir, the telling of personal stories that open windows on the culture.

Now, the poetry came about somewhat indirectly, as a way to work on the writing craft itself. I had never imagined myself a poet but began writing poetry as a way to hone my own writing style, to work on the creative aspects of the memoir, to begin exploring metaphor and rhythms, efficiency of a phrase, to enrich the “creative” part of creative nonfiction.

Well, poetry has a way of getting a hold of a writer. Pretty soon I found myself not just sitting down to practice the writing of poetry, but poems beginning to write themselves, or appearing. It was as if a well had opened and the water came up when it felt like it. Every now and then I noticed that I had actually written a good poem.

I still feel like a newbie, still trying to develop, or open, this aspect of my work. The memoir has crowded out some of the time needed for the poems to appear, and then to go to work on them. But I think poetry comes out of a similar energy, or desire, as the memoir and some of the essays I've been writing—a means to open to the world, to see it, not just out there, but from within where we must allow it to appear to us. For me, no poem is more powerful than one that helps me see differently, see truthfully. There are a million lenses out there and each one can show us something that can wake us from delusion, or open us in a way that helps us feel connected.

I started blogging from that desire for connection. I created *Swedish in Milwaukee*, which was like an affirmation of my return to my hometown after 25 years living and working in the Washington, DC area. It was a way of stating that this is the ground I'm standing on now, the source of my material, my deep cultural roots right here in Wisconsin. That's what I'm exploring now. The blog is about writing and it's about how I see the culture. I have another one focused on the ecological crisis, called *Spirituality and Ecological Hope*. That's where I express the concerns that form the basis of the work I do through a little nonprofit that helps pay the bills. The two are connected, but I wanted one "space" where I could just write about writing, explore the craft, the themes that arise for me, and what I see of the world through that lens.

What blogs do I read? I don't have habits of reading certain blogs but list some on my homepage that I visit from time to time—a few other writers I know, blogs on ecology and culture, nature things. I look for blogs that share my themes and learn from, or get enriched by them.

Peggy: I starting blogging with a 2011 new year's resolution to try it for a year. I knew other blogging poets, especially my friend Lois Roma-Deeley. Benu Press, publisher of my two books, already hosted two bloggers. But they wrote on miscellaneous topics, and I thought I'd focus on topics closer to those central to the mission of the press: social justice and poetry. And publisher LeRoy Chappell loved the idea of my blogging there.

Turned out my timing was good. When Governor Walker pushed through measures against state employee unions and the demonstrations began, the blog seemed a perfect way to document these tumultuous events. Maybe, I thought, it was a way to write a very rough draft of a book.

If a book is to be born of that blogging, it's having a very long gestation period. Now that I've been introduced to your blogs, Lisa, Jennifer, and Margaret, I've marked them as favorites so I can return to them. I still read Lois Roma-Deeley's *CIAO POETRY* sometimes; she posts infrequently. I regularly read Andi Cumbo's *AndiLit.com* because so often it seems she writes with new insights

about topics that concern me. I also read Barbara Miner's *LESSONS FROM THE HEARTLAND*, not a poetry blog but she's brilliant on social issues, especially local educational issues with national implications.

Somewhat off topic, Margaret, your book about the end of the world is now on my "must read" list. In a class I taught a few years ago, I realized all the students assumed the world would end and realized I didn't make that same assumption though I probably used to do so. So now I want to know what you have to say on the topic.

Lisa: I have been a writer, and in particular a poet, ever since I was a child, but I did not really own any of this until age 48. I was lucky enough to have Nancy Willard as my poetry teacher at Vassar College in the early 1980s, and for a brief moment, I felt my poet-self emerge under her guidance as a young adult. This "poet-self" evaporated quickly, though, after I graduated and was without a support circle of other writers. I convinced myself I was really not very good (compared to other people), and I really had nothing to say. For the next two decades, I took many creative writing classes, dabbled in writing children's books, and wrote extensively about art for a wide audience of readers as part of my work as an art museum educator. But poetry was tucked deep, deep into my closet and I did not know how to dig it out for many years.

I started writing poetry in earnest (after a 28-year hiatus) in January of 2008, after meeting and being inspired by the poet Philip Dacey at the Great Lakes Writers Festival at Lakeland College, where I had just started a new job as an alumni director. It was at that moment that I decided to start a project, "Poem of the Week." My plan was to write a poem and circulate it to friends every Sunday, via email. I started to do this with 23 people on my distribution list. Keep in mind this was an email, not a blog. I did this because I finally had come to the realization that in order to write, I needed a deadline, and I needed to know that some other consciousness was going to look at my words. So, I invited a small group of friends to be the recipients of my weekly email (mom, dad, neighbors, friends). Within a short amount of time, friends began to hear about this and wanted to be added to the list. They also wanted to see what poems I had sent out so far, and that was hard to do as the weeks piled up. So, it was at that point that I created my blog, "Lisa's Poem of the Week." This was really begun as a repository, or archive, of all the poems. I rarely ever actually "blogged" here. I simply posted the poem *after* I had sent it out to the email distribution list. The blog was like my "document of record."

In March of 2011, after never missing a Sunday in three years and three months, my friend and mentor, Karl Elder, suggested that I ought to consider cutting back, so that I could give myself some room to actually do some "crafting" as opposed to "journaling" poems out into the world. He suggested going to an "every other week" approach. I decided that the best thing would be to send out a poem to the email list and to the blog on the first day of each new month. So, that is what I do now, though the blog still bears the name, Poem of the Week.

"Do you read blogs?" Someone must read them, right? Otherwise, why are we writing them???

I don't follow any blogs. I should. But, I don't. It is too much reading and I am lazy, I sheepishly will admit this to you. I have too much to read just keeping up with the inbox at *Stoneboat*. As one of the associate editors of this little upstart journal, I sometimes will write a post on our blog about what we are up to in "Stoneboat-land." I hope someone reads these little essays. Sometimes, it feels like it is just a record of our process, myself and the other three editors. We support each other there. We keep our Facebook group informed, but I'm not sure if people actually read much of what we say. Blogging there makes me feel like we (*Stoneboat*) are real. That we are giving writers a forum and that we have something to offer and share.

The most "true" blogging I have done is when I have been a guest blogger for *Best American Poetry*. The invitation to do that came from meeting the *BAP* digital editor, Stacey Harwood, at the Great Lakes Writers Festival in 2009. (Boy, that GLWF sure has changed my life as a writer!) We communicated for over a year just as friends via email and Facebook, and then one day, she invited me to take on a week of blogging. I was honored but totally intimidated. I could not imagine what anyone would want to hear from me. I (still, at that point) felt like I had nothing to say, just like when I was a recent college graduate. She said she just wanted to know what poets think about when they are not writing poetry. She said, "you write good sentences, so don't worry and just do it." I took on the project and found that during those intense stints (I blogged for her twice, each time for one week) when I had to post something to the blog every day, that the whole world suddenly became "blog-worthy." That experience was amazing for me and I learned a lot about myself as a writer. That was the first time I actually had people I did not know respond to my prose musings and share their reactions with me. It helped me recognize my voice. It was a very important awareness for me and I am so grateful to Stacey for giving me that opportunity as a writer.

Jennifer: I began blogging in 2007 by invitation from the staff of *OnMilwaukee.com*, a very popular website covering Milwaukee entertainment, arts, food, and lifestyle. Although they don't do "hard news," they asked me to write a blog about whatever I wanted, which at the time was largely on political topics. I knew I had been asked to blog based on my particular mix of personal identities. I had come out as a lesbian a half year before; I was an elected official, one of few Latinos ever elected to public office in Wisconsin; I was an artsy and political mom of a multiracial gaggle of teens in one of the country's most segregated cities. To wit, the editors knew I had a lot of material to draw from! The *OnMilwaukee* blog ran for about a year and the results were a series of reflections on life and the news, viewed through a political lens and colored with liberal doses of snarkiness or tenderheartedness, sometimes a mix of both.

So, my first blog was written by my political avatar. Politics was something that found me; I wasn't looking for it, but I care deeply and speak well, so I got dragged in. I've spent the five years since that first blog struggling to get to my true self as a writer. It's been a painful fight and I've lost a lot of things: a partner, a business, another electoral campaign, money, time. My current blog, at moraleswrites.com, is about that struggle: How do I accept that I'm a writer and an artist—not a politician, not a businessperson, not a public figure—and make

a life of that? I started it in the summer of 2012, after an excruciatingly bitter electoral loss, as part of a refocusing of my life.

I read mainly (sigh) political blogs, including *Urban Milwaukee* locally, and many LGBT and Christian blogs nationally. You know, the reading list you'd expect from a queer Sunday School teacher with an interest in urban planning.

Sarah: How does writing for your blog posts interact with other writing you do? Does it give you new ideas? Does it tap into the same well that poetry does, or some different energy?

Margaret: Often when I start a post, I have no idea where it will go, how it will end. So, yes it does sometimes give birth to new ideas. It is also a way of testing them, to see what they sound like, how the words come together, if any insight arises. It is also another way of working on the craft, not just for its own sake but for the sake of the reason I write, which is stated on the cover page.

This is one space where I try to let the creative energy run a bit freely. I suppose for that reason, poems sometimes surface from these posts. I write about ecological threat a lot as part of my other work, along with the looming end of the "American Dream," so many of the poems that surface reflect those themes. A recent example, "2012: At the End of the World."

Did you think it would last forever?
You?
This clever life?
Your beautiful life?

Not a happy poem, reflecting on how we are:

unable to hold what we know
and choose not to know

The Newtown massacre is in there, too.

Shorter answer to this question—yes, it taps into the same well as the poetry.

Peggy: Very different answer on this point from me. At this last turn of the year to 2013, I felt fatigued, asked if the prose were absorbing energy I'd otherwise have for poetry, wondered if I should continue. I haven't settled into an answer on that point. On the one hand, the blog keeps me writing. It gives me space to write about topics that I wouldn't write on in poetry, but sometimes after concentrating on the blog, I fear I don't remember how to write a poem.

Lisa: The daily/weekly discipline of the Poem of the Week blog helped me take ownership of being a poet. The opportunity to write for *BAP* and *Stoneboat* have helped me find my prose voice as well, and I have been working for about a year now on a memoir. It is very free-wheeling at this point, and I don't have any particular goal, other than, once again, for the writing to serve as some kind of record of my experience, which might then bring forward some sort of

universally “helpful” awarenesses for other women, mothers, struggling artists ... anyone who is stuck in that place of self-doubt that does not allow a person (a woman) to move forward with her expression. When I sit down to write a poem, it is much more as though I am opening a gift that has been given to me. I tune in, and I try to get the lid off the box in one piece so I can show the gift to everyone else. Margaret, I could really relate to what you said when you wrote this: “but poems beginning to write themselves, or appearing. It was as if a well had opened and the water came up when it felt like it.” I know this feeling very well.

With blogging, I think it is more like “I know (more or less) what I want to share” and I’m going to sit down and share this little tidbit with my mythical reader. I get into the mindset of when I write an email to a dear friend, I write the post TO someone, albeit a hypothetical someone. I have learned over the years that with my prose, I do my best writing if I imagine I am communicating with ONE person. SomeONE. As that process unfolds, even though I thought I knew what I wanted to share at the beginning of the communication, I can’t tell you how many times I have started out in one direction and found myself taking a surprising turn. I have come to feel the same as Margaret on this, when she said, “Often when I start a post, I have no idea where it will go, how it will end.”

I think it is a matter of being open to one’s own mind and thought process and taking a stroll with the reader.

Poems, I don’t know. They seem different to me. I want to think about this some more. Making a poem is like making a very eloquent and poignant photograph or sculpture. You have to craft it. A blog post is like talking on the telephone. You say what you want to say and you might say a bunch of things you didn’t know you were going to say, and then, you are done.

Jennifer: Generally speaking, I post once a week on Monday mornings. I aim for about 500 words and the topic can be anything that’s consuming me right now, often the first thing I think of when I wake up. I do it as a writer’s discipline, a commitment to start the workweek with writing, regardless of what else is on my to-do list for the week. Writing quite literally comes first.

My obsessions are my obsessions; I’m exploring them no matter what I’m doing —cooking dinner, walking around the neighborhood, teaching. The blog has become a way to use the particular liberties of prose to explore those obsessions and, yes, they do often emerge in poetry soon after.

Sarah: Do you find that blogging puts you in direct touch with an audience of specific readers, or is it another way of casting words out into the universe?

Margaret: The latter. I still need to construct more of that specific audience. Every blog is sent out into the universe with literally hundreds of millions of others. It isn’t enough to set one up and post some words. Some labor-intensive work is required to draw an audience. It takes time to create the community. I look forward to finding some of that time this year.

Peggy: Because I blog on the Benu Press website, I don't have access to the number of readers of a posting or to information about where they come from. Le Roy Chappell (Benu publisher) told me once I have 93 regular followers, but I have little sense of that. Two or three people have contacted me separately from the blog, so I know there are at least a few.

But most of the time I feel like I'm writing to and for myself. So sometimes I find things pop into a draft of a blog that I wonder about: do I really believe that, and do I believe it to the extent I seem to as I've written it? But I go ahead and post it anyway, having this feeling that I'm just talking to myself anyway.

I let the self-censor go to work a little more when I'm doing a blog exchange with other bloggers or when I know I'll share a link to that blog post on Facebook where I have more sense of audience.

Lisa: At this point, it is more of the "casting into the universe" approach. I write as though there is someone reading, but I don't have much proof of that, nor does it exactly matter. It just helps me write "better" and more clearly when I remember that I want someone to comprehend, gestalt, and god forbid, be moved by what have I say.

Jennifer: The only promotion of my blog that I currently do is to post the link on Facebook as soon as I'm done. Sometimes I'll send an email to a particular person if I think the topic is of deep interest to them. I have some regular readers who send me comments and share the posts, but I don't think my readership is very large right now. I'd like it to be larger and will be working with a consultant this spring to make my blog more accessible and prominent. This will be especially important as a way to have a conversation with readers once my books are published.

For now, I know that my mom and my big sister are my most devoted readers. It's an opportunity for them to get inside my hard, introvert's skull!

By the way, Margaret's responses made me think of this poem I wrote this summer, what felt like a cataclysmic season as I observed the effects of climate change and my relationship was also falling apart:

Je m'accuse

I spoke of the end of the world, and
you didn't say "No."

You said, "When," and, "What do we need."
You knew why.

I was thinking you wouldn't want to discuss
that the lakes will boil and the corn will fall to dust
from still-earnest stalks.
That the loon in his dark robe will prosecute us, judge,
while deerfly jurists bite our heads

pressed down on the rock-riddled shore,
forcing us to confess, “Yes.”

If you can stand the accusation,
the oaks’ diatribe,
condemnation of both hawk and moth,
I will sit with you
and hold your shackled hand.
I was meant to be there,
by you, awaiting forgiveness.

Lisa: Wow, powerful poem, Jennifer. Thank you!

Peggy: Powerful poem, Jennifer! In the blog posting I read, you talked about some of these same things, especially the break-up with your partner, also in a powerful way. I can see your topics in the two forms overlap. Still I wonder about how you shift or glide into the more metaphoric approach.

Jennifer: Thanks for the praise for the poem, all. I think about the end of the world a lot these days. I’m sure the subject will reemerge many times.

I have given myself explicit permission to enter any register I want on my blog. My previous blogging (at *OnMilwaukee.com* and occasionally a guest post elsewhere) used language that was passionate, descriptive, playful, and sometimes funny, but almost never metaphoric or poetic. I knew that, coming off a life of politics and amidst whatever expectations readers would have that my blog cover political topics, I would have to make a conscious decision to keep this blog centered around writing and art. I knew also that I would have to pointedly tell Jennifer the public speaker to shut up. Although in my blog I am speaking to the public, I’m doing it in my poet-performer’s voice, not my activist-elected-official voice.

The post you refer to, Peggy, about my breakup, is a good example of the free range I’ve given myself here. I start out talking about the end of the relationship but then move into a metaphorical examination of what went wrong by telling a story about an audience member at my most recent performance art show. I didn’t try to knock the reader over the head and say, “Hey, now I’m going to make a connection between Map Store Guy and how things went bad with my ex. Are you following me?” the way I might have if I were strictly committed to staying in a typical blog-prose register. I’m allowing myself to experiment. That’s one of the few posts so far where I’ve gotten no comments via any means, by the way, so I’m not sure how well the experiment went!

Peggy: Now that I see none of you try to post every day, that gives me a clue as to why blogging sometimes seems to exhaust me. I’ve been trying to make it a part of my every day writing practice, and while sometimes three or four days pass without my blogging, more often than not, I do post every day, sometimes just a couple of sentences, sometimes more.

About length of postings, Jennifer, you mentioned thinking in terms of 500

words. What about length for yours, Margaret? And Lisa, do you try to keep the poems you post fairly short?

I like what you say, Margaret, about learning from or getting enriched by the blogs you read. I find that in some ways reading other blogs is like going to a conference without the travel expense.

Lisa, please talk a little about the *Stoneboat* blog. Do you think the blog is at least part of the reason your *Stoneboat* inbox overflows with submissions?

Lisa: I think the reason the *Stoneboat* inbox is overflowing with submissions is because we are on Duotrope. As soon as we joined that, we were inundated by submissions. I do think some of our contributors look at the blog, though. We also send new posts to the Facebook page to remind our group that a new post is up. Here is the *SB* blog address: stoneboatwi.blogspot.com/

Act Two

Sarah: Thank you for sharing your poem, Jennifer, and also, Margaret, you shared excerpts of poetry. I'd like to encourage everyone to feel free to include poems in the conversation as they fit.

I'm interested in how you all see blogging in relation to the traditional writer's practice of journaling. I keep a journal—it feels these days like the true heart of my own writing practice, with poems being a lucky and occasional by-product. I try to write three pages a day, in the mornings, as a way of keeping faith with my writer-self, however many directions I may feel pulled in. I know Margaret referenced the open-ended nature of her blog as a way to explore, and Lisa, you mentioned that your blog entries feel like a casual phone call—but that the *BAP* practice of blogging daily for a wider audience also helped you find your voice (an important function of the journal practice). Margaret, you talked about your blog in terms that remind me of journaling, “letting energy run freely” and Jennifer mentions writing first thing on Mondays as a way of checking in... So how about it? Is a blog another sort of journal? Is there a benefit to blogging OVER journaling? Do any of you also (more privately) journal?

And that brings in the idea of privacy. While it seems you all have as yet small and mostly unknown readerships, a blog is not private. Is there something about the public nature of a blog that taps into your writing, or shapes it, differently from a private piece? I know my poems need long gestation before I allow anyone to see or hear them—and my journal entries are what they are, fragmented, repetitive, mostly boring and occasionally small scraps of interest, because I know they are private. So what do you see as the benefit of a public platform?

As you think about that, I would be interested also about how your blog interacts (Jennifer hinted at this already) with other social media. Are you on Facebook? Twitter? Tumblr or Pinterest? I don't even know exactly what all of these are (I admit I am a slow adapter)—but I wonder how you all use social media, email (Lisa do you still send to your email list, or do you only maintain

the blog now?) and other ways of building virtual community.

All of you are engaged in so many different ways, both in writing various kinds of things but also just volunteer and professional work of various kinds. Do you see a blog as a way to focus? As a way to reflect multiple interests? Does a blog provide any sort of mirror to the multi-faceted self, or are you careful to keep only one face turned to the scrolling words? Margaret, you have two blogs—do they bleed together for you or is it easy to keep them separate?

What about in the non-virtual world—it sounds like you all have support in writing communities and family/friendship circles for your lives as writers. How does the “real” world interact with the virtual world for you, as a writer?

It’s interesting to me that in this response you separate the “poet-performer” from the “activist” Jennifer—this seems very different from Peggy’s work as poet and her vision for what poetry might do and be, as she’s written about it for *VW*: versewisconsin.org/Issue110/prose/rozga.html. Which parts of ourselves do we put into these blogs, and which sides do we keep out ... and why?

Jennifer: Good question, Sarah. I’m an activist by nature, but I’m taking some time now to reconsider if writing and performing can form the bulk of my activism. Here’s a snippet of my inaugural post on this new blog (“On Becoming Practical,” 30 Jul 2012):

I’ve been resisting being a writer for 30 years, because it always seemed such an impractical enterprise. Words? You’re going to change the world with words? I have fought a lot of fights—ran for office, barricaded doors, given lectures, organized marches, outwitted corporate lawyers, advised minor neighborhood insurrections—all trying to change the world in ways I wasn’t best-suited for. The work I’m cut out for is writing, performing, and teaching.

It’s not that those fights aren’t critical, it’s just that I’ve been coming to the fights with the wrong tools in hand. It’s time for me to radically change my approach. I hope my writing and performing advance the work of my com(p)adres organizing for a sustainable, just society. And believe me, I’ll still show up when the antibiotic-laced factory-farm slurry hits the fan. I often joke with a longtime friend of mine—a friend I’ve butted heads and hearts with more’n a little bit over the years—that we may disagree in the short term about when to take action and what to do, but when the revolution comes, she knows she’ll see me there on the front lines.

This has been a year of big self-discovery for me. I’ve come to realize I probably shouldn’t be serving on your organization’s board. I shouldn’t be volunteering to help you galvanize support for your issue. I don’t have the emotional or financial resources to attend your political party banquet. I definitely shouldn’t be spending time organizing any rallies. So I won’t. I should be writing. It’s impractical for me to try to do anything else.

I’m going to be writing for now, as much as I can. Let me know when they come for the kids or the water, though, give me a sec to grab a rock or

something, and I'll see you on the ramparts.

In this sense, the blog is actually a form of weekly reinforcement of my commitment to find out what it's like to live as a writer, rather than an activist.

Lisa: The conversation is getting really interesting. I thought this comment of Jennifer's was fascinating, that she felt held back from her true nature because of the impracticality of writing:

I've been resisting being a writer for 30 years, because it always seemed such an impractical enterprise. *Words? You're going to change the world with words?*

I guess I would say, in answer, what else but words? I mean, we need actions too, of course. However, education, inspiration, persuasion, and the art of raising consciousness all begin with words. I guess it is how we use them, what form we choose, and who we think is our audience. The difference between making an argument as a lawyer or writing a manifesto as an activist or writing a poem as an artist ... well, they could all take you to the same place eventually. Just by a very different road.

Maybe the art of the blog is that it can be so free-wheeling. It can make a point, it can draw on metaphor, it can be a random musing. It does not have to have a beginning, middle and end necessarily. It does not have to follow any certain form. It is a ramble. But, it is different (for me) than journaling. I do keep an intermittent journal and my journal is so boring. I mostly say the same thing over and over about what is bothering me at that moment (usually it has something to do with relationships, just like when I was in 7th grade). Blogging is personal, but the good blog posts seem always to expand to the universal. This is similar to the way a poignant poem takes something small, personal, and intimate and shows how it fits into a grander scheme that others can also feel and relate to.

In answer to a few other specific questions that came up: Yes, I still send each "Poem of the Month" out to my mailing list first and then I post it on the blog "for the record." I have maybe 8 followers and I don't know who they are. That blog is really not a blog at all. It is a repository of my poems!

When I have blogged for *Stoneboat* or for *BAP*, yes, I have then shared the posts on Facebook. But, I don't do a lot with social media. Like you, Sarah, I am a "slow adapter."

I think when I did the *BAP* blog, it helped me find my "public-personal voice" because I knew I was talking to readers out there who would expect something interesting, quirky, and personal (yet universal). I wanted to appear intelligent and thoughtful. So, if a person is trying to work on their writer's voice, then I would say that blogging is definitely "better" than journaling. In a journal, it is too easy to just devolve into complaining. For me. When I first started writing a journal as a young girl, I imagined that someday, my journals would be published, like Anaïs Nin. I think as long as you assume a reader, the writing is always better. Whether that reader ever shows up or not is another question entirely!

In answer to Peggy's question: my poems just tend to be "short" anyway, so I don't aim to be short with them for the blog. But, when I wrote for *BAP* and when I write for *Stoneboat*, I try to be short. Shorter is better than too long because people have too much to read as it is. I like Jennifer's word count of 500. That seems about right. Long enough to develop an idea, but not too long.

Margaret: The comparison to journaling. I have journaled off and on most of my life, have piles of them. During the writing of the memoir, that has fallen off, which I find interesting. The difference between journaling and blogging is absolutely about the privacy factor. I journal to explore and give expression to the deepest "innards" of my life. That is not for public consumption, but it sure gave birth to some of the best material in the memoir.

When I blog, I am always aware that there is a "public," small though it may be. I am actually addressing that world "out there." I am desiring to communicate. What I find helpful in doing this exercise is that it helps me focus on exactly that longing of any writer—to be able to communicate what I am feeling, thinking, "angst-ing" about with others. And I want anyone who reads it to know how seriously I take writing!

I am on Facebook—a lot—and have a "community" there. It keeps growing (like my new connections with the Kaleka brothers from the Sikh temple in Oak Creek). I always post links to the blog posts and sometimes "friends" share them out to their friends. That is probably my largest "reach," though I have no way of knowing what that means.

I don't think my two blogs "bleed" together as I am very conscious of what separates them. That said, my writer's blog is bound to address some of the same cultural questions I am asking on the ecology blog. But I imagine different audiences, even though I am aware that they intersect. In both "realms," however, I am preoccupied with this sense that the culture is reaching a critical tipping point, facing an abyss, outcome uncertain. What do writers have to contribute to the articulation of that tipping point? How do we express it?

Because I believe our human predicament to be unprecedented and often beyond our rational longings for solution, creative writing is for me a crucial aspect of our cultural work, and poetry especially crucial—because it is not logical or rational, because it can bring impasse to the rational mind, open wells, or trapdoors, or visions. It can bring us back to awareness, snap us out of the mesmerizing delusions of a consumer culture, an economic growth culture on its way to collapse.

For me the virtual world is not separate from the real world. I know that separation happens for a lot of people. But I always believe, whether I am on Facebook or LinkedIn or blogging, that there are real human beings on the other end of these essays and I want so much to connect with them. What has surprised me is that on Facebook that has sometimes actually happened. I have actually expanded my "community," found real people searching and struggling along a common path, people I have never seen in person with whom I am able to share these deeper cultural searches and questions.

The blogging world and Facebook world is not as “virtual” as I once thought it to be. There are real flesh and blood people out there seeking connection.

Jennifer, in response to this particular post, I don’t think I would bother writing if I didn’t think it could contribute to changing the world. Because writers have changed me, have actually altered how I view the world, I know what this can mean. Just one example, Alicia Ostriker’s “Volcano Sequence.” Haven’t been the same since.

I know friends of hers, and because of that, I have met her, talked poetry with her, and marched with her in the streets of DC against the war in Iraq. When a writer makes a commitment like that, to a way of being in the world, the impact can be quite extraordinary.

I, too, was deeply engaged in more activist work for many years. Even then, I remember how important writers were to the work of activism, what it meant to have a poet show up, for example (like Alicia Partnoy, an amazing human being and poet, and a friend who taught me so much). I am also aware of the debate in the poetry world about this very thing—whether poetry ought to remain detached and “pure” from these things. I believe in writing for its own sake. That’s fine. But given the times ... I think of Arundati Roy who gave up writing fiction because of the urgency of the times.

I think of Wendell Berry, of Whitman, Eliot, Ostriker—how they take our world apart and make us see things in a new way.

What blogging does for me is give me a “space” to vent and explore, test what I’m thinking, how I see this world, and what it means to be a writer in it.

Words can change the world. There are too many of them in the background noise of our culture, and maybe that’s why poetry is making such a comeback and impact right now.

Lisa: Margaret, you talked about how amazing it is to realize that friends you have connected with on Facebook, who start out as seemingly “virtual” become “real.” I just had that experience recently when I got to meet my FB friends, Michael Rothenberg and Terri Carrion, who are the founders of 100 Thousand Poets for Change. (By the way, this is a group that I would like you all to know about, as they are dedicated to the power of words, and poetry in particular, to change the world.) Anyway, they left their home in Santa Rosa, CA, earlier this fall and along the way, they were meeting up with poets in their communities who were part of the movement and who were all working on bringing forth change. I met up with them by coincidence down in Florida about a week ago. They were visiting Terri’s mom and I was helping my dad who is very sick and is now with me in Sheboygan. I digress. Check out the blog post I wrote for them, and scroll down to read about many other poets they met and adventures they had along the way. Especially moving: the entry about Damali, the woman from Jamaica (her post is on Jan. 1, 100tpcontheroad.wordpress.com/).

Please check it out to see how rapidly the virtual is becoming the real...

Jennifer: Good morning and thanks for the great conversation.

I absolutely believe that words can change the world. But because I was raised by a bookkeeper and an autobody worker, I was raised to believe that *writing as a career* was foolhardy, irresponsible even. Electoral politics gave me a way to turn my activism into a “responsible” career, but I did it in order to bury my writer self, to use up all the time I had in trying to change the world through meetings and organizing and protest. That’s the struggle I was talking about in my blog excerpt above. It’s a variation on the common one for writers: Do I take the job at XYZ Corporation to pay the bills, or do I claim myself as a poet and accept the consequences?

In my case, I was able to finally notice that I was intentionally using my activism and my paid work to smother my writer self. There just wasn’t any time left to do the work of a writer after I got done barricading the doors at the state capitol or attending meetings. And the world reinforces that imbalance. I’ve gotten a lot of props for my political/activist work. It’s highly visible and seems useful. It looks like it’s changing things in concrete ways—the cops didn’t get through the door; the school board resolution got passed; we have a new funding stream for arts education, etc. Poetry may be changing things, but one rarely gets a moment where I see it and I know everyone else sees it.

My blog sometimes has a defiant tone because of this. I’m using it to carve out space and say, “I’m accepting this role. Give me credit for the work I’m doing, even if it’s quiet and nearly invisible. What I’m doing is important.” It’s a terrifying thing to say, so I have to say it in “print” in “public” to make myself live it out.

Sarah: Jennifer, thanks for sharing a little more of your story and background. I think I have a better understanding of where you’re coming from and what you mean when you talk about “activism” and “writing” as different—and needing to clear space quite actively for yourself to live into your writing life. On some level, I think most (women) writers feel a need to almost violently clear space and defend it—family, community, household chores ... everyone wants a piece of our time and to claim that we need an empty hour or three takes a lot of spine. Do others feel this, or is it only me? And does blogging make it easier to define yourself as a writer? Does it help to have some clear, finished outcome to point to, on a weekly or daily basis?

I want to push this idea of virtual and real a little more. Granted, Margaret, that there are real people on the other end of every social media interaction—reading our blogs, posting, re-posting on Facebook. I too have made some very good friends on Facebook, real connections ... but I’m struck that some of you started blogging because you had met people at conferences, or knew people in your community.

Maybe that’s the word I’m looking for, to tease these issues out: community. What role does blogging play in building or supporting community—Lisa, I think of your *Stoneboat* experience here—and what needs might blogging meet for writers, who so desperately need community (as much as we need self-time

to write, we surely need a like-minded group to support, critique, and push us forward). Do any of you feel a need to have face time as well as screen time with others? Does one take the place of the other? Are they blending together, as Margaret suggested? Do we still need physical locations to gather? An important question as bookstores disappear and libraries are under tremendous pressure and lack of funds.

Peggy: Sarah, with your question, “does blogging make it easier to define yourself as a writer?” a light bulb went on for me. A major spotlight, in fact. Yes, it does. That is exactly why I think I decided to continue blogging at least one more year. When I retired as a professor a year ago, I found I needed to say, “I didn’t retire. I got a new job. I get up every morning and go to work, and my work is writing.” That helps me deal with the loss of professional identity and fend off requests for my time that I’ve so longed for, time to write. (And, yes, I think most writers, especially perhaps women, feel starved for time, whatever the other factors in their lives.)

Every morning when I’m home, I first do my journal entries. I’ve devised a journaling practice I call 13 Ways, picking up on the title of the Wendy Bishop book (*13 Ways of Looking for a Poem*) that I used when teaching poetry writing, and that Wendy Bishop got from Wallace Stevens, “13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” It is really an observation practice.

Writers are seers, and I mean that in a very literal, down-to-earth sort of way. So I don’t record the ups and downs of my emotional life; I don’t introspect. I look outward—the woman walking her dog (kind of dog, kind of walk), the children waiting for their school bus, the color of the sky and shape of the clouds, the passion in the voice of the speaker at last night’s rally, the wording on a picket sign, all the words I can think of with long *A* vowel sounds ... whatever is around me.

As soon as I’m done with one observation, I write down a new number for a new item or a new aspect of the item I was looking at. No length requirement for any one item, not even a requirement to write a whole sentence, but overall I go for filling up at least one page.

Sometimes what happens is that by the time I get to observation six or seven, I see a poem or blog idea beginning. (“Butterfly Song,” a poem published in *Verse Wisconsin* online this fall began this way). Or sometimes I feel I’ve noticed everything out there but I still have the 13th item to do, and then when I finally see some 13th thing, it unfolds and I can’t stop writing (but I always make myself take a break every hour or so, sometimes setting the timer on my stove).

At any rate, I’m not frustrated if these entries don’t turn into poems. Not every day is game day, but I want to be ready for game day. So it’s my journal that’s random and all over the place. And usually this writing takes about a half hour. If the journaling hasn’t suggested a poem, then the next item in my inbox on this new job is my blog. The blog ideas often define themselves as I do the 13-ways journal.

I try to keep blog postings to three paragraphs or less. Some are only a couple of sentences. If I hit on a topic that keeps expanding, I divide the blog up into multiple entries. Most of the time I work ahead on blog entries. I like to develop threads in my blogging. For example, I once had a series of 4 or 5 consecutive entries on revising.

Working ahead also gives me a chance to re-read before posting. As I said before, I sometimes post entries without softening or re-thinking an opinion, but I often rearrange and reword so that the posting has a catchier beginning and overall livelier tone. Yes, I want to do what I can to interest readers.

Sometimes poets I've met at conferences will suggest we post each others' blogs, and having done a little of that has helped me get some sense of audience, and a sense of community.

Jennifer: Peggy ... Minus your greeting and closing, you just broke your observations about your writing into 13 segments. Funny. That number must be seared on your brain!

Peggy: LOL! I didn't even notice! I find I like to write about blocking the door or the flow or blockage of discussion at a meeting, but I very much identify especially with what you say in your last paragraph above. So beautifully said.

And I wonder if your having been identified as a Latina lesbian political figure is/was a factor in your thinking through these questions.

Margaret: Yes, using blogging to establish who one is as a writer—I think I do this as much for myself as for the world “out there.” I have only a moment now, have to go out, but just wanted to share today's post. Racism is a theme running through much of my thought and feelings these days. In Barbara Miner's op-ed in *Crossroads* on Sunday, she used the term “hypersegregation,” which really stuck with me, and then kept me awake in the early hours of the morning. So I sat in the dark with my coffee trying to wrestle with it, and then with what surfaced (milwaukee reflections.blogspot.com/2013/01/racism-on-my-mind.html).

Poetry is not all I write about on my blog. I write about writing, and how the writing comes to me happens in many different ways.

Jennifer: I remember when my children were little and I was a stay-at-home mom, I insisted after a couple of years that my then-husband pay for the kids to go to daycare for two mornings a week so I could write. At the time, sticking to this demand until he gave in was one of the boldest things I'd ever done on behalf of my writing. My kids are nearly out of the house now (the last one's a senior in high school), so carving time out from them is less of an issue than from everything else (paid work, church, social life, housework, etc.). I was raised to keep a house extremely clean and I've let up considerably on the standards my mother set in order to make room for my creative life. I'm good now at allowing myself to write even if there's a stack of dirty dishes in the kitchen. It helps that I don't ever write in the kitchen!

The blog itself doesn't help me define myself as a writer, except in the vague sense that it's a sample of my writing that potential writing or editing clients could read. In many ways, I think that the blog is a better introduction to me as a person and to my particular voice than to the kinds of work I can do for my clients. The blog is getting up into that metaphorical register pretty often these days and I have to hope my potential clients know I can still write starchy business copy with the best of them.

Blogs are a great way for me to keep up with my fellow writers from the Antioch MFA program. Several members of my graduating cohort have blogs and the virtual network helps me stay in touch with their work, what topics they're mulling over, and what they've had published. Our cohort—the Carnelians (all the Antioch MFA cohorts are named after stones or colors or birds, that's how you know you're attending school in California)—is rather tight-knit and we use Facebook and blogs to celebrate each other's work all the time. We promote each other's books and other publications, publicize each other's performances, and share links to each other's websites. All that said, I still need to see my "Carnies" in person. A bunch of us met up at AWP last year, for example. And I have a local, in-person writing group that I rely on heavily for feedback and moral support as a writer.

Peggy: Now that we are in touch with each other and know about each other's blogs, I wonder if we could do some sharing? I'd love to have each of you to be a guest blogger on my blog *for-words*, perhaps writing on a topic you've already addressed in these emails. And, Lisa, I'd welcome the chance to post one of your poems, since that is what you usually do. What I usually do when I have a guest blogger is use the day before to introduce the upcoming guest, naming the guest as "Poet of the Day."

Or we could do the sharing on a larger scale. That is, on a given day, we could all post the same piece from, say, Margaret. Then on another day, all post the same piece by Jennifer, and so on. We all seem to have expressed the desire to increase our blogging audience. Maybe this would help.

Margaret: One answer to the issue of time is to really strip life down to the basics, and to change expectations—a lot. Last year I really got down to the memoir-writing—at the sacrifice of my project that is sponsored by a nonprofit which requires me to do fundraising, as well as speaking and workshops. All of that suffered for the sake of the first draft.

So my balance needs revolve around the energy required to move in both of these directions, one that with a lot of work and initiative pays the bills, the other that requires a lot of work but, well, doesn't pay the bills (yet). There's no regular rhythm to life, everything must be created out of my initiative. And then to live as simply as possible while I do this. That more than anything is what frees up the time. It also makes things interesting.

Now the thing about doing a blog is that it provides a space for me to explore ideas as well as to share what concerns me, what I'm thinking about, as a writer. And it gives me a space to practice writing about those things. And then it

gives me space to practice writing, to work on the craft itself. It's a form of thinking out loud, but with care for the expression, the way the thinking is communicated.

I desperately need a physical writing community, for all sorts of reasons. For feedback, critique, moral support, affirmation, connections, actual conversation, to feel less isolated, as writing can make one feel from time to time. It is such a solitary work yet one in search of connection.

I connect with the RedBird-RedOak writers community and participate in a wonderful critique group. That little circle means a lot to me! And those relationships open other doors to other communities and publications and events that support writers. I don't think of the blog as a replacement in any way for real human contact.

I think writers have to be the foremost defenders of the "spaces" where we gather. We have to put some energy into this by supporting the spaces that exist. RBRO is part of that for me, as is attending events where my fellow writers read. I feel the need to do more of this, to show coffee houses, bookstores, etc., that there is a community base for these things.

Finally, I think the idea of sharing space on our blogs intriguing. I would want to think about how to make that purposeful, part of the mission of the blog itself (which in my case is written across the top of the page). It would be a creative way of supporting one another, and maybe getting other writers to think about blogging—into a blogging community.

But the caution is that this also takes time. I have often invited others to write for my project blog, and it's like pulling teeth.

Time—always that issue of time. I think our busy lives are killing us. Sometimes cultural work feels like pushing against the great weight of that. I don't know how to overcome it except by becoming less busy—which requires changing other aspects of our lives. And that returns me to the question of stripping down lifestyle and expectations, to simplicity, and to the need for community. It also means not believing we can do everything anymore. Anyway, I'm getting way too old for that belief.

Lisa: Since I don't have much of a readership on my poetry blog-that-is-not-really-a-blog, I could see if 1. *Stoneboat* blog would like to entertain some guest bloggers at some point or 2. query Stacey Harwood and ask if she would be interested in posting an entry from Sarah that mirrors what you are going to write for *VW* (kind of a "reprint" of what you are working on for *VW*, Sarah). Stacey has done this in the past where I sent her an isolated idea and she posted it.

Act Three

Sarah: We're all ducking in and out of the conversation as we need to, and that's fine. One of the benefits of holding a conversation virtually (as opposed to, say, meeting for coffee every Tuesday at 10 or something) is that we can come out

and in as and when it works for us. Much greater flexibility. And flexibility is a keyword for so many of us.

We have a lot of issues and questions on the table, but I'd like to add in a couple more and take us back (since this is going to be published in our "Women and Publishing" issue) to specifically focus on questions of gender. Realizing that none of us can, or should try, to speak for "women," yet each of us can speak out of her own experience as a woman, here are some questions to ponder—

We've mentioned a lot of bloggers, many, almost all, of them women. In your experience, is there something about a personal blog that is attractive to women, specifically? Are we more likely to blog than to, say, start an online zine on our own? Do we as women use blogs in particular ways? What sort of virtual "space" does a blog create and does it feel like space that we are familiar with?

We've all heard, I'm sure, the complaints from editors that women don't submit as much, or as frequently, as men. The follow up is almost always to chastise women and say that we should be more like the men ... a conclusion that has always sounded a little "off" to me. Perhaps that's another conversation entirely... But—is a blog a "safe" space? Does it offer an intimacy of sorts?

Is there anything to say about this topic that is relevant to gender, or is that stretching it too far or falsely? I have to say, reading over what I've written here, that even the need for "flexibility" and the quest for "balance" that Margaret mentioned before—these are issues that women are very concerned with, it seems to me. So maybe my questions are worth asking.

Peggy: Most of the men who blog that I can think of, blog on a much higher profile—for *Slate* or the *Huffington Post* or *NY Times*. One of the other bloggers on my publisher's website is a man, but he's much younger, and our interests seem at least partially age-related. Then, too, I wonder if I gravitate toward blogs of people I'm friends with or those I meet at conferences, and those are women.

On a different note, congratulations to Jennifer on the success of her poetry students' opening night event at the Gallery@Large in Milwaukee. These young students took on some serious topics, the Holocaust and civil rights, and seemed to zero right in on the emotional heart of their topics.

Jennifer: Thanks for the kind words about the students, Peggy. I wrote a blog post (!) this morning about the experience: moraleswrites.com/blog.php?s=the-writer-and-the-bullies.

In answer to Sarah's questions: my current blog feels mostly like a space for conversation with people I know. Like today, I wrote about teaching writing and so a teacher friend and a freelance writer friend were the first to comment, via Facebook. The comments function on my current blog is not very robust and also requires my approval before any messages appear on the page, so it's common for my readers to comment on my blog in other ways. In that sense, my blog is very much a safe space—and gendered, too. It seems like most of my readers are women.

My experience blogging on more popular sites—such as my time at *OnMilwaukee.com*—did not feel particularly “safe.” That’s not the fault of the host; I think it’s just the nature of the internet beast. I was subject to hostile comments, as many bloggers are, with much of the hostility targeting me as an out gay woman, a Latina, and as a progressive elected official. The internet gives bullies an anonymity that allows them to vent their animosity as they please. I think women in general are raised to be more sensitive to personal criticism and more fearful of public rebuke, and the blogosphere dishes out both in spades. It feels risky and it is risky. When I agreed to write that guest blog, I had to consciously acknowledge that I was going to be attacked and I had to choose to be OK with it. Electoral politics was really good training for blogging in this way—it thickened up my skin.

Margaret: Just these additional thoughts on blogging. I started my project blog (*ecologicalhope.org*) to communicate that work out into the community, to help define the project, its intentions and priorities. It’s something I can point people to who want to know what that work is. It is also a “writing” project, helps me collect and disseminate some of the crucial info and thoughts on our ecological crisis and how we can respond to it from the core of our beings, what gives shape to meaning and ethics.

I started the writing blog because I wanted to have a place to share what I’m writing about, what matters to me, what shapes the personal universe, if you will, out of which I write. I am a woman, I am gay, I have been an activist much of my life, I have written as part of my work all my life, and now I am overwhelmed by the socio/cultural/ecological realities that threaten to swallow us all—and I write out of that being-overwhelmed, being deeply troubled by a culture that does not want to SEE how much trouble it’s in. The whole point is to connect and communicate. The writers blog is not where I intend to connect with the whole big world “out there,” but in a smaller space, a kind of virtual “salon,” where I can share my concerns as a writer within that space.

I don’t really have an answer to the question of whether women and men blog differently, or with different motivations. I do know that I appreciate the small community around my blog where I can share thoughts and reflections on my writing. I’m thinking out loud there, letting ideas develop. I continue to write out of my own journey of self-discovery, a journey that I imagine never ends, because life would be boring if it did. The blog helps me develop my thoughts and ideas, and the ways to express them, to connect the writing to what concerns me about my world, my culture and society.

Lisa: Regarding men, women, and blogging: I’m not sure there would be any distinction to be made along gender lines. I think a blogger, male or female, is one who truly wants to express their musings on whatever topic to this unnamed audience that is out there. The interesting thing about blogging is that the writer can receive the gift of immediate and heartfelt feedback through a comment that would not be the case if one simply wrote a letter to the editor, for example. Paradoxically, the online nature of the endeavor has the potential to make the conversation oddly intimate. Two people who would otherwise never meet or discuss something can have an exchange. Facebook offers this as well, but in a

more abbreviated manner, I think.

Jennifer: A final thought from me about the value of the poet's blog that we haven't touched on yet:

I had a discussion with a friend this weekend that left me thinking about some issues around blogging and poetry. My friend reminded me that, at a particularly difficult parenting moment a few years ago, I posted a poem I wrote about my stepdaughter on Facebook. This friend, a rhetoric/composition MFA candidate, was coincidentally writing a paper at the time about intellectual property and artistic control on social media sites. She used my posted work—a poem ranting against my stepdaughter joining the military—as an example of loss of such control. She directed me to the section of the Facebook terms of use document where it basically said that I had just given the corporation my poem. I have been much more careful about posting my poetry on social media now—in fact, I simply don't post my poems on the internet at all. The only exception is online journals (I have a poem and audio recording forthcoming on *KenningJournal.com*, for example) or equally “safe” sites which clearly state their rights agreement with the poet (e.g., one of my poems is up on the *Winning Writers* site and was recently recirculated via their newsletter, but I have no fear that Jendi Reiter is going to steal my stuff).

Although I haven't posted any of my own poems on my blog, the relative security of it is one reason why I started the blog. Our discussion here for *Verse Wisconsin* has inspired me to take the leap and use my blog to share my poetry.

Lisa: Jennifer's email reminds me of something:

Remember the moment nearly three years ago now, when there was a question about *VW* accepting one of my poems because I had put it on my blog previous to submitting it to the journal? To me, my posting of my own poem did not constitute publication. To me, this was standing in the town square reading my poem to the few passersby who happened to be listening. At first, you and Wendy had thought you could not accept the particular poem, but after some very good discussion between us, you guys came up with a great solution. When the poem was published in *VW*, I removed it from my blog and linked to the poem in *VW*. Not like I have so many readers, but the idea being that the linking could potentially bring more readers to both sites...

I just wanted to remind you of that moment and how pleased I was that you found a really logical and mutually beneficial solution to that particular dilemma.

I have always wondered if other writers later made use of this same system? Surely I am not the only poet who has had occasion to utilize this option?

Just curious!

Sarah: Yes, I do remember that conversation, Lisa. Many poets have used this same option very gratefully, and they are all happy that we have a

clearly thought-out policy on the issue. Plus, as you say, we all feel like we're (potentially) connecting with new communities. So, thank you for giving us the opportunity to think it through.

Jennifer: That's a good outcome, Lisa, and a great metaphor ("standing in the town square reading my poem to the few passersby..."). I'm on the board of the Council for Wisconsin Writers and we debate all the time about what "publication" really means in the internet age. As poetry journals and contests adapt to the new forms and meanings of publication, I hope they'll take the question of poet's personal blogs into consideration, too.

Peggy: I like your metaphor, too, Lisa. And about the sharing, just let me know if and when you'd like me to post on my blog a poem you're also going to be posting on yours. If I have a couple days notice, I'll post introductory comments beforehand to prepare for your appearance as POET OF THE DAY!

By the way, in case you didn't see it, Barbara Miner raised a question about why *JOnline* has only one woman among their seven bloggers: jsonline.com/blogs/purple-wisconsin/189017481.html

Here's the question I raised in my Facebook response to Barbara Miner's taking the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* to task for having only one woman among their seven bloggers:

How invisible do women blogging about poetry and/or politics feel they are?

In some ways, I feel like I've just begun to think about this question and that our emails have been a sort of "consciousness raising" time.

Lisa: I want to let you all know that the editors at *Stoneboat* would be pleased to host guest bloggers. I am copying my co-editors here to pull them into the conversation so they know what's up. Tomorrow, I will be writing a (brief) *Stoneboat* blog post that introduces all four of you (Peggy, Margaret, Jennifer, and Sarah) to let our readership know that sometime in the next several weeks, they may be hearing from each of you on a topic having to do with writing, community, change, daily life, WHATEVER.... To give this enterprise a context, I will also explain that the five of us have been in a conversation the past month under Sarah's guidance, and that Sarah is writing an article for *VW* on the topic of Women Poets, Publishing, and Blogging.

This segues into Peggy's request for a poem of mine to post on her blog. Peggy, if you are able to do this on short notice, here is the poem that will appear tomorrow on Lisa's Poem of the Week. It is in honor of all of us.

Some Facts about Poets

Poets do not grow on trees,
but they do tend to inhabit gardens.
Poets are not above the law,
but the law is of no concern to them.

Poets have a mission, which is,
generally, impossible.

They run like any other human, but
are known to sprout antlers and wings

when least expected. All poets began
as children, back before the dinosaurs.

They grew aware of sun and moon,
flying saucers, mud, and old age.

They never forget an ancient touch, taste,
or smell, but can't tell you what was for lunch

yesterday. They are Einstein's theory
of relativity in the flesh. They don't

split infinitives, except under duress.
Their shirts are clean, unpresed.

Awake, they dream.
Asleep, they work.

Poets are just as rowdy or quiet
as the next guy. They love the world

and will tell you in every rhythm imaginable,
and ask no wage for their tinkering.

—LISA VIHOS

Jennifer: Lisa, I love this poem—so many great lines but the one I love the best is “They never forget an ancient touch, taste,/or smell, but can't tell you what was for lunch/yesterday.”

It makes me think of a blog topic (and a poem to post or include a link to, if appropriate). I think I'd like to write about the value of MFA in Creative Writing programs, particularly low-residency ones. The poem is one I wrote in honor of my Antioch MFA cohort on our graduation and it's about how our hunt for the muse doesn't stop because we got the paper that says “master.” We still have to look for her every day.

Peggy: I love your poem, too, Lisa, and I'll be happy to post it on my blog tomorrow, cross-reference your blog, and proclaim you POET OF THE DAY. And thank you for the bio. That'll be on my blog tomorrow as well. I'll follow up the next day(s) with more about you and about this project. About your poem, I have to say I've so been feeling this lately—

Awake, they dream.
Asleep, they work.

Margaret: I am surfacing from my book revisions to revisit all of you.

This is all very inspiring! I have thoroughly enjoyed this exchange. If you have visited my writer's blog, you have an idea of what I do—I write about writing in the context of social critique. I would be happy to have contributions from any of you. When this memoir is done, I will have more time to devote to the blog—and a whole host of other things.

Sarah: So we're ending this conversation by agreeing to appear on each other's blogs and sites, sharing poems, and opening up the conversation to further questions and, as Peggy says, consciousness raising. Well, as Rilke said, we must "live the questions." And this conversation has certainly helped me to do that!

Thank you, all. I look forward to future conversations, whether in person or online!

Published in Verse Wisconsin 111

✂ After Your Book is Published, Then What? Getting Your Work Out There

BY SANDY STARK

A good year later, I still remember driving home from the printer with those neatly boxed copies of my first poetry book from Fireweed Press. I immediately signed and gave one to the first friend who happened to be home on a Friday afternoon. Other friends dropped by; my publisher arranged the official book launch/reading in November; I arranged another in December.

I started carrying boxes of books in my car. Friends wanted more for holiday gifts; neighbors seemed curious; I took books to my gym, my walking group, to potlucks, to family over Christmas. I was on a roll.

And then it was January. I seemed to have exhausted the first circles of connections. What next?

Well, a trip to Texas to visit family and friends happened, and with it, the chance to read to a friend's birding club in a small town east of San Antonio. The setting was one I couldn't have imagined: a combination cafe, coffee shop, and chiropractic office called ChiroJava.

That morning inspired this poem:

The Economics of Poetry

Spend \$325 for a plane ticket to Texas,
put \$50 worth of gas in your sister's SUV,
drive an hour to a small town coffee shop,
read to a dozen folks, half in conversations
of their own, sell 4 books (\$12 each),
give a freebie to the owner, buy lunch,
then walk back to the car alone,
find a ticket for 25 bucks
for violating a two hour parking zone.

The story still makes me laugh, but in a good way: I finally realized how much it would take in terms of time and guts to introduce my work to a wider audience. Lucky for me, I enjoy reading my poems to people, so the question was, how could I translate that to securing reading and sales venues?

I found a few answers that worked for me.

1. *I approached nature and birding centers/stores.* The title of my book, *Counting on Birds*, puts me into this niche category. Why not take advantage? I was looking for reading venues as well as sales; and if I could donate a percentage to places I supported anyway, all the better.

As it turned out, what could have been a routine visit to a nature organization turned into a conversation and opportunity for book sales; multiple visits to my local birding supply store resulted in book sales, first, at a table for display/signing; next, an inquiry to a birding newsletter about a book review turned into a wonderfully personal recommendation later. And all while talking about things I enjoy.

2. *I chose independent bookstores over national chains.* This strategy suits the “first book/little known/local” status I am in. And, because we still have these bookstores that support us and are familiar places for poets to gather and read, it’s important that we support them, too.

3. *I discovered the power of book clubs.* Actually, they discovered me. Friends who saw me get excited about my first drafts (I admit to carrying the first mockup of my book everywhere) invited me to their book club meetings; my first exposure, early last year, was to five women who had read my book cover to cover, taken notes, and bombarded me with questions the second I sat down—technically, I didn’t do a reading at all that day. If you think book clubs are just for prose books, think again. I’m now trying to snag a poetry reading for an environmental book club in the area.

4. *I’ve fallen in love with house readings.* Why? Because you can discuss the background to your poems, invite your neighbors, some of whom are IN my poems, to tell their side of your story, count on their interest to keep the event entertaining. And you can all just walk there, in any weather, any time of the year.

5. *I enjoy performing poetry in public places.* At the farmers’ market, a quick reading became a barter opportunity: a poem, or a book of poems, for produce. In an art and framing store, as part of planning how to frame one of my poems as a gift. In my fitness center, as part of a discussion about redesigned lockers.

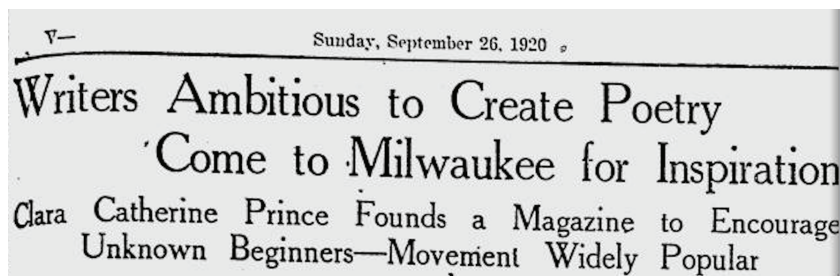
In fact, that’s one of the biggest surprises to me over the last years, having been a previously fairly shy reader. I think it involves taking my work more seriously, as well as a basic trust that friends, neighbors, and strangers can connect with at least some of the stories I tell.

There’s a new reality to marketing yourself in a crowded world: sometimes you just have to be a little shameless about announcing what you do. Keep books in your car; carry bookmarks like business cards in your shoulder bag. And keep your energy up. It really does pay off in many more ways than you might think.

I should tell you that after I got that parking ticket in Texas, I drove to the county courthouse, fully intending to plead my case. When the clerk couldn’t find my information in the computer, she asked when I’d gotten the ticket. An hour ago, I said. *Oh Hon*, she replied, *that isn’t even entered into our system yet; give us a week.* I thanked her and left, discreetly tucking that copy of my book back into my bag. I mailed the check the very next day.

☞ EveryMom, or How—and Why—to Support Wisconsin Writers

BY WENDY VARDAMAN & SARAH BUSSE



Milwaukee Journal, Sept. 26, 1920, on the founding of *American Poetry Magazine*

How does a well-meaning writer—say poet, say woman, say unemployed, say Wisconsin, say middle-aged—support the writing of not just herself, but also her friends/children/acquaintances & others she feels friendly toward? Last November Wendy was a panelist for “How to Support Wisconsin Writers” at the Wisconsin Book Festival. Instructions were loose, the four participants a small sample of state writers from genres covered under the Council for Wisconsin Writers’ Awards, which actually doesn’t, now that we think of it, include all writing, and which (by coincidence?) as it turned out meant mostly poets, though others were invited. We give a lot of thought to “how to support Wisconsin writers” at *Versé Wisconsin* and Cowfeather Press, small projects that exist to do just that. Wendy arrived with a page of preliminary thoughts, sorted and prioritized. Call her over-prepared.

It had occurred to her that panelists might mean different things by “support” or even “Wisconsin writer.” She was eager to hear what others had to say, panel and audience, but the discussion kept veering into anecdotes about writing rather than ideas about how to support writers, what it means to support writers, or maybe even more importantly, how to identify the problems of writers whom we don’t already know, then try to support their work. It’s the feeling of unfinished business that prompted this essay. As always, we invite response from you about what and who supports your writing, as well as how you support other writers.

1.

For the MFA-holding, teaching poet in the group, support meant bringing a willing audience in front of a credentialed poet. Others supported his writing when they provided an audience for him, and he supported others, and advised us to support each other, by doing the same.

So here is the first clear, and relatively easy, idea: Start a reading series. When your friends come to town or nearby, they’ll come read in the series, and vice

versa. There's lots to like about this idea. It provides an incentive for poets outside your town to visit; it gives you outlets to read when you do a book tour; you'll encounter new writers and new ideas, assuming that your friends have different ideas and sometimes bring their friends whom you haven't yet met. And if you have a few people read at the same time (and their friends aren't identical), then bringing them together will also bring their audiences together, always a bonus with poetry, since audience tends to be small and a little inbred. Including different kinds of writing—fiction or nonfiction—might draw more people to a series. Probably fewer people than you think will actually buy your book, but if you can at least swap yours with a few other poets, that's good, yes? This is pretty much how lots of poetry series work, whether you're organizing them in Door County or Sheboygan or Chicago.

Our concern about starting a new series is that, at least in a place like Madison, they seem to contribute, just by virtue of their proliferation, to walling-off poets in groups rather than bringing them together, if for no other reason than that events get scheduled at the same time, making us choose among readings or just avoid the whole problem and burrow in at home, writing or scrolling through Facebook. Or people do similar things, sometimes at oddly similar times. In March, Madison offered three different groups—the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets, the Bridge Series, and the Monsters of Poetry—at three different art venues—the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, the Chazen at the UW, and a private gallery—that featured a reading of a large group of poets responding to works of art. It's simultaneously exhilarating, dizzying, and perhaps a little unbelievable, to imagine that there's this much demand for ekphrastic poetry, even in Madison.

Before you start a series you might think about what's already there, who your audience will be, and how you might expand that audience, as well as about readers and how to expand the pool. It would be good to talk to people—friends and not friends, poets and others—about that. And look around you. What's missing? Who is missing? What's needed? A lot of reading audiences tend to be fairly homogeneous, whatever their stripe. Exceptional series deliberately invite different kinds of poets/writers/other artists together: those inside and outside universities; people from different cities; people traveling through paired with local poets; those with different aesthetics and audiences, of different backgrounds and ages. *Crosshatxh*, a series that existed for just one year in Madison, paired page poets with spoken word artists, Madison & Milwaukee, university poets & those with other kinds of day jobs/no jobs; the living & the dead. Wendy learned as much or more going to a handful of those readings, organized by Laurel Bastian, as any other reading series she's ever frequented. (Sarah, unfortunately, was home momming during this series—which is probably another essay. Or maybe not—anybody ever consider how to provide reading/listening opportunities for parents of young children with limited childcare? Now there's an unmet need!)

Several series in Wisconsin regularly bring poetry about visual art, as well as poets and visual artists, together: the previously mentioned Bridge at UW's Chazen Museum and the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets at Madison Museum of Contemporary Art; Pewaukee Arts Council in Oconomowoc; Vision and the

Word in Eau Claire, just to name a few. Others bring together music/poetry/ spoken word, like First Wave's Just Bust monthly open mic in Madison, and the always creative Bonk! in Racine. The Encyclopedia Show in Chicago (run by Shanny Jean Manny and Robbie Q.) ups the ante without being a slam, styling itself as a fun and entertaining poetry variety show with a theme, artists/writers/ poets of various persuasions who write to an assignment, and comedy.

Questions of who gets invited, how and from where/what groups, whether there is an open mic component, and whether there will be other kinds of writers/ musicians/artists/actors are all important to establishing a reading series, as are questions like, *Why do we read? How often? When—and for whom? And are we ready?* It might be better to read out loud in our writing groups more, less often (but better-prepared) for an audience. Maybe it's time to reintroduce the art soiree? The hootenanny? Little groups that jam together—poetry/art/music/ whatever—have a few drinks and understand that they're just messing around for fun/a little practice and to get the creative wheels turning.

2.

Beyond the reading series, the open mic, the opportunity to slam or jam or be a ham, though, there's a LOT besides pen and paper that poets need or might use or may not even know they want in order to write better and connect with other poet-readers. For all the thinking we've done around these issues at *Verse Wisconsin*, we haven't spent much time talking about why we should all want to find ways to support one another. Maybe it seemed so obvious to us that it was a good idea, we never felt the need to explain. But let's step back a moment and break it down. Wisconsin is a largely rural state. The more distant we are from cities or universities and the infrastructure that they create, the more we need to create/maintain/locate this infrastructure ourselves: for learning, critiquing, publishing, connecting with new ideas and groups, and expanding the public space for poetry, by which we mean the amount of attention and resources our culture has for the poetic word in its spoken, visual, performed or written forms.

In the professional poet model, all of these things are provided by the university system: by different academic departments, professors of creative writing, professional organizations founded by and for professors, university-based journals and presses, visiting writers, reading series, social events at which to meet distinguished visitors, travel and research grants. And yes, universities are wonderful, and a limited number of these things are publicly accessible, like readings and conferences, if you can learn of them and get to them, and if you can afford to pay for them yourself. Wherever there is an institution with any sort of expectation of longevity involved, however, we also have to look sharply at who these programs support, and why. A university program is naturally going to be interested first in supporting the writers on the faculty, or coming up through the ranks as students. Their sense of community will be filtered through their own definitions and their very real need to prove, again and again, their worth to the larger university community—funders and stakeholders, private and public—in order to survive. When seen in this light, it becomes clear that university poets are strangely not free to offer equal support or attention—even when and where they might desire—to poets outside of their own institutional definitions.

Even among credentialed poets and writers, those who emerge from a decent program with an MFA, however, there are far fewer jobs than qualified teacher-writers. More and more of us are otherwise- or under- or un-employed, and more of us will be so in the near future. And even if you do get that job, even if it lasts, even if it's tenure track and you succeed in acquiring a permanent position, the reality is that this system is changing (and perhaps disappearing) with about the same rapidity as the New Jersey shoreline. Sure, some clever scholar-authors at some universities will protect their low-lying disciplines with the hydraulic pumps of the Digital Humanities (if they can figure out how they operate). Some territory may be saved entirely by quick thinking and fortification. Some areas may not be as threatened as others. But some humanities disciplines and programs at some universities are going underwater, and some folks are going to be stranded. The model of the best/brightest/most talented poets being nurtured and sustained by a network of good, well-paying jobs that offer enough flexibility to write year-round, and even require that for promotion, is just not one that's going to endure, anymore than, apparently, Lower Manhattan.

But you knew that already. You know what stranded looks like. You may have been stranded a time or two yourself or seen it happen to a poet friend. And so it's really *you* we're looking at when we think about how do we (and by that we mean you and us) support this writing—yours and ours—and the writing of those who may not be lucky enough to have access to a computer or to this community of poets or to the time to figure any of this out, let alone access to a whole university network. It isn't a new question. Women and people of color and working class and other marginalized writers have always had less (often far less) than the best access to top-tier support systems, educations, jobs, publishing opportunities, or an “even” playing field. And sometimes they come up with work-arounds to their lack of access and resources. Creative ways to make do and do more with less.

3.

VW recently learned about a Milwaukee editor, Clara Catherine Prince (aka Mrs. Carl Homann), who in 1919 founded *American Poetry Magazine*, the second oldest poetry magazine in the country. On its 10th anniversary in 1929, the *Milwaukee Journal* congratulated Prince, calling her magazine “one of the two little magazines of verse that seem blessed with longevity. The other is Harriet Monroe's *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*.... [*American Poetry Magazine*] has an imposing list of patrons and patronesses including Hamlin Garland, Edwin Markham, the Viscountess Astor and the Princess Troubetzkoy” (MSJ 11-16-1929). On its 20th anniversary, Prince was again lauded by the local paper: her publication was the “official organ of the American Literary association, an organization which has grown from ten Milwaukee poets to a group of 500 poets and writers” (MSJ 9-19-1939). Prince was presented “the Golden Scroll award for 1937, by the National Poetry Center, Rockefeller Center, New York City” for her service to poets and poetry. *APM* suspended publication for awhile in the 40s due to “lack of support,” later resuming and appearing until 1957; Star Powers, who died in 2010 and was also a president of the WFOP, was its last editor. Prince was herself, of course, a poet as well as a novelist. Wendy has

been in contact via e-mail with Prince's great-granddaughter, Sarah Gorham, founder and director of Sarabande Books in Kentucky, who told us that Prince went on to found *Wisconsin Poetry Magazine* in 1954, published until 1967. Neither Gorham nor Wendy could figure out if *Wisconsin Poetry Magazine* was essentially a renamed *American Poetry Magazine*, how Powers ended up as APM's editor or why Prince then started *WPM*, which appears to have overlapped with *APM* for a few years. Whether they collaborated at any time, or Prince simply handed off *APM* to Powers and then missed editing, is also unclear. Gorham says that there's a family story that Prince had some connection to *Poetry's* start, too, but Gorham hasn't seen any evidence of that.

After similar beginnings and enviable longevity from both publications through difficult financial times, one magazine became the country's largest institution related to poetry, and the other disappeared with hardly a trace. We're dismayed but not surprised by the not entirely incidental fact that *Poetry* hasn't had a single female editor-in-chief since Monroe, even though the fortune that made its recent expansion, and the Poetry Foundation, possibly was donated by a woman. Of course, many women have been part of *Poetry's* "editorial staff," "support staff," or "advisors." Among those women happens to be Wisconsin poet Jessica Nelson North who was born in Madison. (You can read LaMoine MacLaughlin's essay, "Jessica Nelson North: Recalling The Reaches Of Silence And Sound," in this anthology.)

One thing we took away from the "Supporting Wisconsin Writers" panel, in fact, is this: poets, particularly female ones, are in a unique position to speak about "how to support" writers, because we are used to doing this work for ourselves, used to having less access to resources than other kinds of writers, and used to collaborating and organizing ourselves in groups to make things happen—as if we were planning a bake sale or a book fair or some other event at our children's school. This vision is the antithesis of the institutional model. It offers more flexibility, possibly greater creative amplitude, and a more intimate connection to one's immediate community (measured not necessarily in geographic terms, but also possibly in terms of connection to specific readers, to smaller, more defined sets of like-minded individuals). It's also more dynamic and flexible over time: magazines, reading series, local groups that meet in libraries and coffee shops, can gain energy and then dissipate as need, desire and ability dictate. There's a level of directly responsive connection and even intimacy to this sort of work that is absent in a larger and more professionalized arena.

Is the story of women as poetry publishers, despite exceptions and changes in the nature and valuation of women's work, often that kind of a story, with so many individuals just identifying necessary tasks, working without compensation or recognition, then being forgotten after the fact? Do we find meaning, and therefore choose work, through relation rather than profession?

A combination of individuals, small organizations, and nonprofits, rather than universities, have supported both of us as "Wisconsin writers." Besides friends and family, writing groups and the poets who organize them have provided steady support; so have particular editor-poets, mostly women; community-based poets who organize readings and reading series; those who take an interest

in bringing poetry to the public's attention, either by reading or creating projects involving poetry, usually without compensation for their work; those who run bookstores that carry local poetry; Wisconsin's poets laureate, working to bring poetry to the public's attention; poets who have said yes to interviews; nonprofits and volunteers at the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets, the Council for Wisconsin Writers, the Wisconsin Book Festival, the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts & Letters, Madison's public radio station WORT, especially the program "Radio Lit"; small non-commercial organizations like Fireweed Press, MadPoetry.com, and Poetry Jumps Off the Shelf. Though it gets in the way of writing, *Verse Wisconsin* also supports our poetry, bringing us into contact with new work and new ideas; so more help comes to us from poets who contribute good work, poets who review, and everyone who comes to *VW*'s events and conversations, as well as those who help *VW* exist, including subscribers, donors, proofreaders, those who hand their magazines to friends and leave them in the dentist's office, and those who buy an extra subscription and donate it to a library or somewhere else where those who don't know Wisconsin poetry might pick it up. "Support" after all has multiple definitions. Financial support, though we would never argue against money, can be a two-edged sword. Bigger is not necessarily better, although it is more visible. Lack of funding can force creativity, and also allows the artist/editor/curator to maintain a wider freedom to do what they envision with no strings attached.

For us, support is less about selling books or providing an audience on a given occasion, and more about helping and being helped to practice, reflect on, and improve our art in order to live a more meaningful life, wherever we are in our artistic journey. This statement gets directly at why we writers should take time to support each other. Because meaningful support does take time—time we could be writing, editing and submitting our own work.

4.

One important assumption that we make at *Verse Wisconsin* and have never acknowledged: we assume every poet wants to improve. As the writing center at Sarah's alma mater used to put it, "Every writer can be a better writer." And we at *VW* add our belief, "every writer wants to be a better writer." We assume every poet, therefore, is willing—and looking for ways—to stretch themselves through what they read, who they converse with, what they attempt to write, and the critique they seek out. At this point, it may be fair to admit that if there is a poet out there who is perfectly pleased with what you've written, perfectly happy with the books you have published and the reviews and readers you have garnered—in short, if you believe yourself to be of adequate expertise—then whoever you are, whatever rung of the ladder you inhabit, we don't have all that much to say to you.

But for the rest of us, who do strive to improve, who wear the eraser out more quickly than the pencil lead, who know too well our work is flawed and seek out those who might help us see the flaws clearly, whose reach still exceeds our grasp on a daily basis, we must build this necessary infrastructure for ourselves. Not only to know our flaws and go to work on those, but also to know our value. We don't envy teachers the too-often bored and disenchanted gazes of the students

they meet every day. On the other hand, those very faces, and the administration that hired them to teach, and their colleagues, act as a sort of mirror reflecting their place in the writing world and attesting to their worth in some measure. That there is a crisis in higher education does not negate the formal recognition their profession has allowed them. For the rest of us, we must provide for each other that same mirror. Not by gushing, “Oh I love your poems,” though that is always nice to hear. But by taking time to figure out specifically what lines, tropes, or rhythms it is in a particular poet that you most value, how they affect you as writer. And then to have the guts to testify to their importance publicly, through reviews, through sharing their poems when you read your own, through quoting or responding to them in your own work. This is how we build connection and prove worth.

One of the strengths that poetry has to offer our particular time and place in the cultural conversation, it seems to us, and one that we are free to attest to at *VW*, is the absolute lack of the possibility of objectivity. Poetry is not science. We cannot duplicate another’s poem, even if we sit at the same desk, use the same pen or computer keyboard, drink the same blend of coffee, read the same books. As readers, we are better able to appreciate your poem the more we know about both the poem and the poet. The more intimately we know your voice, the more able we are to respond to nuance. This is why we ask for three to five poems in a submission. Music lovers know this. Those of us familiar with *Aida* or “My Funny Valentine” or “All Along the Watchtower” know that our familiarity helps us appreciate variation, change, growth. Knowing Verdi or Ellington or Dylan and Springsteen’s early work well helps to give further perspective on the later work, no?

Why should we think that someone completely unfamiliar with our work and words would have any advantage at all in writing about it? In judging its value? A fresh take may be helpful, of course, but it shouldn’t be the only sort of reviewing available and it shouldn’t necessarily be privileged. The cult of objectivity and anonymity in poetry comes with its own inherent biases. What does a judge look for in texts he is unfamiliar with? What pleasures are the most immediately felt? And what pleasures take time, and appreciation of nuance, to enjoy. Whether we’re talking about poetry or sex, these are questions worth pondering.

Along with this comes the truism that to read well is to know yourself better. We admit to our preferences, and to our blindspots. Reading widely and openly for *Verse Wisconsin* and book reviewing has helped us gain further knowledge of our own strengths and shortcomings, and that awareness has helped us to write better and to read more sympathetically work that isn’t exactly to our first, original tastes. Acknowledging our own partialities as readers within reviews and editorials, seems to us to remind the audience of a reviewer’s essential humanity. A review, in our opinion, says essentially, “Dear reader, here is my take on this book. This is the necessarily flawed, and perhaps at times, mistaken view of one individual. I’ve given it my best shot and I hope you will too.” We’re all in this together and the art cannot survive in any healthy way if we don’t attempt this work and allow ourselves to be vulnerable. Does it take some courage? Yup. But this isn’t a game for the faint of heart, now is it?

Inevitably, in such a community of writers as we have worked towards, we will occasionally end up reviewing the books of poets we know, poets we are even friends with. Again, in the professional/academic model which values a sort of anonymity for the sake of remaining impartial, to review a friend's work would be questionable at best. However, in our alternative vision, we're all friends rowing in the same direction. The better we know each other's work, the better we can see the successes and the weaknesses in our poems. If we see you doing some things well and some things not so well, we'll call it like we see it in the hope that it's helpful to you. And we trust, you would do the same for us.

As editors we're passionate too, and subject to our own preferences and blindspots. What good would a magazine be if each one were as anonymous as the next? An editor finds the backbone to shape a magazine through exercising her own individual taste. Even at a publication like *Verse Wisconsin*, where we strive for (small c) catholicism, we admit to our biases.

What the poetry world needs right now, we would argue, is less anonymity and objectivity—the first one a too common ailment for many of us and the latter impossible anyway—and more small clusters of writers who know each other intimately and spur each other forward and then do their best to get the word out about each other's work and why it's important.

5.

An important assumption that we make at *Verse Wisconsin* and that we have always acknowledged as part of our mission: we assume every *VW* poet wants to support not just their own work but also the work of Wisconsin poets and writers in general. But what does “Wisconsin writer” even mean? At *VW* we have thought of it as anyone who does or wants to write in Wisconsin, as well as writers elsewhere with a significant past connection to the state; in either case, an interest in Wisconsin's writers is also important, as is the willingness to be considered a “Wisconsin writer”—there are probably some people who live in-state who feel less connected to Wisconsin's writing communities than others living out-of-state. Being a “professional” writer seems beside the point.

Interestingly, the longer we do this work, the more we question the value of the label “Wisconsin” writer as an identity. Identifying our state as a literary geography will only work if writers more locally identify regions and specific areas of poetic activity that they can help define and build. A few examples of where this is already occurring and will (we hope) continue to grow:

- the Sheboygan area, where Lakeland College contributes the annual Great Lakes Writers Conference and *Seems* magazine, and now a local group of community poets (affiliated with Lakeland though the magazine is not) has brought *Stoneboat* into existence as a print magazine, blog, publisher, and reading series;
- Viroqua and the surrounding area, anchored now by the new Driftless Writers' Center;
- The Foot of the Lake Collective in Fond du Lac which hosts a fantastic monthly reading series and has worked to put poetry into new places within

- the community;
- the larger Fox Cities area, which hosts an impressive Book Festival every year as well as the Harmony Café reading series;
- Door County, with its support for literature and the arts, its high percentage of practicing poets, and its attraction to tourists from out of state.

This list could go on and on, with regions both big and small. And these are only geographic identities. We could also look at cultural (Mead Lake Collective) and multicultural groups of various kinds (Hibiscus Collective), writers that are politically active (Black Earth Institute), and groups and publications that are moving poetry in new formal/experimental directions (the print magazine *Cannot Exist*), or all of these at once (First Wave at UW), but it seems to us that the crucial challenge is to find ways to identify the group or groups you belong to and to build bonds within and between them that help to distinguish and define all of these various groups as separate and sparky entities. Then Wisconsin will gain the reputation we who live here know it already deserves. And then, perhaps, we can start to look at how to build connections as a larger region of states of writers connected by geography, politics, agriculture and economy and population.

6.

As VW/Cowfeather, we volunteer to help poets publish their work in a range of media and make most of the product available for free; we partner with groups with common goals to try and have a bigger impact and hopefully extend the small circles that often originate in our writers' groups a little farther. Publishing a book, let alone a single poem, is a bit like arcing a pebble into the air above the Grand Canyon and then waiting for noise—it makes more sense at least some times to send up a shower of these pebbles at the same time, or work together to toss something with more weight. That something could be a reading series. Or an anthology or magazine or webzine. Or a program serving others through poetry, working with young people or the homeless or Alzheimers' patients, for instance. Or a performance group. Or group of poet-artists. Or group of artists in different media who collaborate across arts and share ideas and audience.

“Support Wisconsin writers” can be as simple as writing a review, or buying a book by a Wisconsin author and sharing it with another person, or posting a link to someone else's poem or book on Facebook or Twitter. Or blogging about another writer or interviewing someone else for your blog. Or reading someone else's poem in public. Or reading a poem in a place it wouldn't normally be read. Or sharing news of other groups and poets—their events and efforts. Or teaching a Wisconsin writer to your middle school, high school, or college students. Or donating books and magazines by Wisconsin writers to a literacy program, prison, nursing home, library, or school. It's probably natural that we'll be willing to do this more often for our friends than for strangers. But what if we looked outside our circles sometimes to make new friends? So many writers need that.

Many organizations, from institutions to collectives and co-ops—a university, school, library, literary center, community center, publication, literacy program,

manuscript or other writing-driven group—could support writers outside their own immediate membership. Most of these groups function by collecting and distributing our support of them in money and time: what we share matters and makes a difference. The biggest challenges for small projects like *VW* and *Cowfeather* have to do with the fact that we have no funding, we are not an institution, and we can't sustain the work we do long-term. Even in the short-term we need help with things like

- creating audience for Wisconsin poets beyond the borders of the state;
- making regional connections;
- reaching younger poets and other new audiences.

Collaborating on a project like *VW* allows us all, with the help of everyone's best work, to raise our collective profile as "Wisconsin writers." We believe it challenges us individually to do better work when we pay close attention to and think carefully in multiple ways about the work our neighbors are doing. Deciding who to invite to a reading series, who to publish in a magazine, whose poem to respond to, quote, or whose book to review—all of these require close attention to the poetic project of another: support, if you will.

Importantly (and perhaps on some level also selfishly), such work helps to build the alternative infrastructure that those of us outside the university also require but often don't have access to. We try to interest well-known Wisconsin writers in what *VW* does collectively. We also look to find, reclaim, and connect with poets who grew up here and left, or those who came to school in Wisconsin but then moved on. If you know a poet who has a Wisconsin connection, let them know about *VW*. Let us know about them. Know poets who aren't connected to Wisconsin? Do the same. The only way *Verse Wisconsin* can build an audience for Wisconsin poets as a group is to publish the best work that we have access to and then tell people about it over and over again. We can't do that by ourselves. If you want your work read in Chicago & Minneapolis & Iowa City & Ann Arbor & St. Louis, we need your help to build those connections. University poets do that through professional organizations and through working with young people who graduate and go elsewhere, creating another connection, another dot on the map. For those of us outside academics, even if we participate in national writing organizations, our connections are more likely local—intra-state rather than inter-state.

As difficult as it is for those of us with "day jobs" or no jobs to cultivate a wider audience, however, it's hardly an option for the Wisconsin writers we so easily forget: writers in prisons and those recently released; homeless writers; disabled writers; writers emerging in literacy programs; school-aged writers; writers in nursing homes; writers in mental institutions; writers who don't write because they have to work two or three low-paying jobs to support their families, or writers who are housebound, for whatever reason, including being a stay-at-home parent without access to other childcare. How do we support these writers, and when do we ask them what they need?

IN THE SPOTLIGHT—
POETRY AND THE ARTS

✿ Threaded Metaphors: Connecting to Community

BY CJ MUCHHALA

Trajectory

We began in water, crawled onto the muddy shore, stood and walked. We grasped all things with mind and hand.

1.
The land is flat,
forgiving. We are the hunters,
the hunted. Fire comes,
and seed. Above us,
the moon, round, seductive,
cannot be grasped.
We believe.

Up rivers, across plains,
through woodland and desert,
we keep our faces turned
to the distant peaks.

2.
Cautionary tales
litter the foothills. We believe
only what the moon says
and continue our climb. Flags
we strung along the ridges
sing in the night's radiance.

3.
Wind shrieks
from the summit, claws
at the banners. Our supplications,
our blessings, lie shredded under snow.
Snow-blind, we see. This is no place
for prayer, and beauty
cannot substitute for truth.

We are left to balance on the edge,
knowing the moon is a lie.

—CJ MUCHHALA,
Response to "Mountain," by Elizabeth Lewis

How does an artist work? The first image that often comes to mind is of an “ivory tower” with the muse in attendance. As with all stereotypes, there’s an element of truth here. But the artist (in the broadest use of the term, encompassing oral, visual and literary arts) does not exist in a vacuum. Sources of inspiration may include the personal and emotional aspects of her life, the social and political communities she inhabits and the work of artists in other media.

All of these strands came together when a metro Milwaukee group of fiber artists and the poetry critique group to which I belong collaborated for the first time in 2000. It was serendipity to say the least. Poet Phyllis Wax knew fiber artist Connie Tresch, they each knew other women who were similarly engaged, and the idea of working together on a project blossomed. Since our first successful exhibition, *Threaded Metaphors: Text & Textiles*, we have continued to explore how the visual and literary arts intersect to expand our creative voices. We are making new connections with each other and with the wider community in which we work. Fiber artist Elizabeth Lewis says, “I am continually surprised, humbled and honored by how much work viewers put into interpreting and finding meaning in [our collaborations].”

At the initial meeting for a new project, we decide on a theme and a deadline. Several months later, we each bring a work inspired by that theme for a blind exchange. Individual art pieces are wrapped and each poem is in a plain manila envelope so that neither the work nor the artist is identifiable. Each poet chooses a fiber art piece and each artist a poem with which we will live for the next few months. The new piece created is in response to, but not necessarily a literal interpretation of, this chosen work. The final project consists of 6 poems inspired by 6 works of fiber art and another 6 art pieces inspired by another 6 poems. There’s an element of risk in responding to a work of art you might not have chosen if you had seen it first. The results can be quite surprising, but we have found, in every instance, rewarding. As poet Helen Padway puts it, “I love the challenge of writing about something I do not relate to.”

Who knows how inspiration begins? Mara Ptacek says, “I hesitated after receiving Judy Zoelzer Levine’s “Wind Dance.” I frequently revisited her piece, and then I waited until the beginning of a poem came to me when I woke up one morning.”

I had a similar experience. For months, Elizabeth Lewis’ quilted piece, “Mountain,” hung on the wall in my workroom. Every day I looked at it and saw a journey. But whose? And to where? Eventually the struggle to answer those questions bore fruit in my surprising (to me) response, “Trajectory.”

Artist Kathleen Hughes also finds that, while the idea might come easily, the execution can be challenging. Since she works with materials rather than words, adding new ideas or experimenting with different techniques can mean remaking an entire piece.

The poets might revise and revise, the artists might design and re-design; we might extend and re-extend our deadlines as we encounter obstacles to

inspiration or execution; we might get discouraged and think this time it's not going to work, but we have never quit a project and we have never mounted an exhibit we weren't proud of.

Over the years, family concerns, illnesses, and out-of-state moves (no ivory tower here!) have caused some members to suspend their participation. Currently we are twelve: poets Helen Padway, Mara Ptacek, Margaret Rozga, Carolyn Vargo, Phyllis Wax and myself, and artists Mary Ellen Heus, Kathleen Hughes, Marla Morris Kennedy, Judy Zoelzer Levine, Elizabeth Lewis and Connie Tresch. One of our founding artists, the late Pat Zalewski, deserves mention for her extraordinary creativity and enthusiasm for the projects in which she was involved.

While our collaborations occur in pairs and our creative processes are individual, the end result is a communal effort to bring art into daily life through shows in such uncommon venues as a bank, a university library, an ethnic cultural center, several senior living communities and a church as well as in more traditional art galleries. To make our art available outside this transitory format (and by request of some enthusiastic patrons), Judy Zoelzer Levine created an interactive CD-ROM of our first collaboration, and Mara Ptacek designed and hand-bound chapbooks of the poetry. Our work has also been featured in literary/art reviews and local news publications.

Threaded Metaphor shows open with a poetry reading and a talk-back with all the artists on how our responses came about. Our goal is to engage the audience, and we find that people are as interested in our collaborative process as they are in our final product. We hope they recognize how integral the arts are to their communities and conversely, how important community is to the artist.



Great Lake

In the wind
Whitecaps rise
Sweep the beach
Maybe I can
Maybe I can't

Michigan lake
Waves break
In their wake
Maybe I can't
Maybe I can't

Force of the sea
Salt free
Sing, sing for me
Maybe I can't
Maybe I can

Surge. Swell
Maybe I can
Maybe I can't
Maybe I can't
Maybe I can
Tide inside
Throat and soul
Freeing me
Maybe I can
Maybe
I can

— MARGARET ROZGA,
Inspiration for "Sing for Me" by Pat Zalewski

*[Eds. note: Photos of the quilts "Mountain" and "Sing for Me" can be viewed at
versewisconsin.org/Issue109/prose/muchhala.html.]*

Published in Verse Wisconsin 109

✿ *The Lamentable Tragedie of Scott Walker*

BY DOUG REED

I have no place writing for a magazine devoted to poetry. I am not a poet.

I do not read much poetry. Aside from dirty limericks, I rarely write poetry.

I am an actor and a playwright, so I feel an affinity for you poets.
When the great day comes when we all choose up sides, I'd like to
think that the poets and playwrights will all be on the same team.

Last winter, I was working on a play called *Reassembling Mr. Dumpty*.
It was a corporate comedy about a CEO who loses his mind and has to
have his psyche reassembled by his underlings in time for an important
meeting. I had a summer slot at Broom Street Theater in Madison, and I
was making good progress toward finishing the script.

Then Scott Walker happened to my state.

I protested. I marched. I slept on the marble floor of the Capitol. I
sang. I chanted. I yelled myself hoarse.

The one thing I didn't do was work on my little corporate comedy.

Not only did I not have the writing time, I had no psychic space. My
thoughts were of nothing but the political emergency of the moment.

I called the theater, and told them that I would not be handing in a
script for *Reassembling Mr. Dumpty*. Instead, I began work on a play
called *Fuck You, Scott Walker*.

My stage manager told me that she had spent her entire winter yelling
at Scott Walker, and had no desire to sit through angry agitprop all
summer. She said she'd only work with me if I did something to make it
interesting.

This presented a dilemma. Scott Walker is not an interesting man. He
is smug, arrogant, and unchanging. When the great day comes for
choosing up sides, I will be proud to stand against him.

This does not make Scott Walker an interesting character for a drama,
however. While trying to imagine how to give the man some sort of
dramatic arc, I had a mental image of Scott Walker giving a soliloquy
to an audience where he simply stated, "I'm right."

The idea that became *The Lamentable Tragedie Of Scott Walker* came to
me in a flash.

I saw all of Wisconsin politics as a Shakespearean history play. There's the corrupt king, whose fatal flaw is that he will not listen. There's the incestuous inner circle featuring the Fitzgerald brothers, and their father, who heads the State Police. There is the rival duke who goes into exile, in this case played by the Fab 14.

For one moment of clarity, I saw the whole thing in my head. I called my costume designer and asked what she thought of Elizabethan. "How big do you want the codpieces?" she asked.

This was near the end of February. Rehearsals for the play began on June 1. I had committed myself to writing a Fakespeare history play about events still in progress, and I had about 90 days to do it in.

The first thing I did was look up "iambic pentameter" in the dictionary.

I have acted Shakespeare on occasion. I played Claudius in *Hamlet* in 2009, so I had some familiarity with the form. However, acting Shakespeare is a question of using the verse to get to the emotion. Writing Shakespeare creates a whole set of constraints—trying to organize the syllabic stresses so that the actor has the emotional hot words in the right places. There's also the question of having the lines actually convey the intended meaning.

I made the decision early on that Walker and his court would speak iambically, and that the protestors and minor characters would speak more prosaically.

My God, was it painful at first. Counting every syllable on my fingers. Running to the thesaurus every time I needed a three-syllable adjective with the stress on the second syllable. Working at a pace of about half a page per day.

After two weeks of writing, I was about ready to abandon the iambic idea when something clicked. Stresses fell where I wanted them to. Lines began popping into my head in the iambic form. I began to feel the 10-syllable rhythm, as opposed to painfully having to count each line out.

From a theatrical point of view, the play was as tremendous a success as could be hoped for. We had sold out crowds. We added shows, and those sold out. We got rave reviews, lots of press coverage, and I heard from several audience members that the chance to laugh at the events of 2011, and to see Walker in a broader historical context, helped to heal some of the raw wounds caused by the ugliness and divisiveness of the Walker administration.

One of the best parts of the *Lamentable Tragedie* experience was making the transition from non-poet to sort-of poet. In future plays, even those not set in Elizabethan England, I've discovered how the

form of the language can amplify the meaning of the language. I'm a prosaic writer, and haven't ever given the shape of my sentences a tremendous amount of thought. I suspect this is stuff you poets learn in Poetry 101 class. I'm coming to it late in my creative life, but coming to it enthusiastically.

The play ends with Walker escaping the mobs by climbing to the top of the Capitol dome. The statue of Wisconsin comes to life, and throws him to the ground (symbolizing his recall). As a committed pacifist, I didn't want to end the play depicting an act of violence against a real person. However, Scott Walker was the title character, and knowing that the title characters in Shakespeare's tragedies never survive to the end of the play, I felt I had to be true to the form.

I'll leave you with the final words of the play, and you may judge for yourself how successfully I used the iambic form. It's the speech I'm most pleased with, as it comes closest to the central meaning of what I was trying to say. The character speaking is Walker's Fool, who represents the best ideals of Wisconsin's civil servants. For opposing Walker, he is cast out of the administration and loses his home. As Walker's body lies on the ground, the Fool delivers the final elegy to the audience.

FOOL

There he lies. *Sic Semper Tyrannis*.
 This should be the ending of our tale,
 but we who read the histories know better.
 Push one tyrant down, there a dozen rise,
 therefore, unsleeping eyes must watch and wait.
 Your vigilance is the cost of freedom.
 Your enemy, you see, is not that ass,
 Your real foe is the ass you call your own.
 That piece of meat behind you on your chair.
 Superfine in jeans, but slow to action
 When danger calls, sits inert on the couch
 Now is the time for all good folks to move!
 To fight that foe and shake that fine fine thing.
 Write that letter. Make that call. March that march.
 Democracy will never never thrive
 as a sullen apathetic lump.
 I saw for some brief moment in the snow
 the blooming of democracy unfold
 I mean to guard it precious evermore
 and pass it to my children to preserve.
 That, then, is the meaning of this fool's dream.
 that all of our labor worked in concert.
 That capitalism's competition
 did never make us into cannibals.
 Nor obscure that deeper mighty truth
 that all men and women are my sisters

and my brothers. That all our work is one.
Your breath is from that same creator god
as animated soul within my breast
That your triumph is my triumph, and your
woe, mine. That I am proud to call you kin
In the family of Wisconsin, of America, and of humanity.
If this, then is a fool's dream, then may I ne'er awaken.
Now, tell me what Democracy looks like.

ALL

This is what Democracy looks like!

FOOL

Tell me what Democracy looks like!

ALL

This is what Democracy looks like!

FOOL

Tell me what Democracy looks like!

ALL

This is what Democracy looks like!

Blackout.

Published in Verse Wisconsin 108

✿ One Month In *March 18, 2011*

BY SARAH BUSSE

Over the noon hour yesterday I stood in the rotunda and sang along with a group of protesters. The drum circle is gone now, but people come at noon each day to sing the old songs, “Solidarity Forever,” “We Shall Overcome,” “Keep Your Eyes On the Prize”... we don’t all know the melodies, and sometimes we start on different pitches and create a weird, unearthly sound which is beautiful in its own way, as it rises into the dome. New verses specific to Wisconsin and Governor Walker have been written. Some people hold signs. Some people hold babies. The State Troopers are still in charge with their metal detectors and wands. When I went over, the Raging Grannies were there too, in their aprons and bonnets.

Outside the building, it was pretty quiet. One lone man with a bullhorn aimed his voice toward the windows and tried to explain how overworking nurses endangers public health. “I’ll be here every day, until you get it,” he promised. The windows were closed; I don’t know what they heard inside. There were pockets of people with signs, and a group of elders marching. A few cars honked the familiar rhythm “show me what democracy looks like!” as they drove by. But it was nothing like the crowds I’ve grown accustomed to seeing, over the last month. Now we wear the buttons; we carry the clipboards; we move out into the towns of Wisconsin. This is a second chapter.

I put my essay under “Editor’s Notes.” I was hoping you would also write something. Wendy emailed me yesterday. It’s a moment of transition for us too. We’re about to post the March issue of *VWOnline*, and with that the protest poems will move from our homepage to a new “Main Street” issue. The original rush of poems we received has slowed down. What happens next?

Very like the protests themselves, this issue began spontaneously, exactly one month ago today, mid-February, as we tried to respond to what was unfolding hour by hour in our community. It grew at an amazing rate, poems came in, the issue took on a shape all its own. We moved forward on our gut and nerve, intuitively making decisions about how to publish, when to publish, how much to make our editorial presence felt. We have heard from many readers and poets how moved they have been by what they read, by the fact that we asked to hear their voices and then provided a space for them to be heard by others. We have been moved as well, and only now, a month in, is there time to take a moment and try to figure out, what is it that’s happening here?

Poetry is a solitary art, but poets thrive in connection with each other. We seek each other out. It’s tempting to focus on geopolitical definitions, but what you have with this issue is not a poetry of Wisconsin or a regional poetry, but a poetry of *event*. We invited poets to engage with current events in a specific, immediate situation, one which personally affects many if not all of us in this

state directly, and as we are learning, has ramifications which ripple quickly out into the national arena. There is an obvious parallel to Sam Hamill's Poets Against the War project, with one very large difference: in our call for submissions, we did not ask poets to choose a side. We actually did just the opposite (and have continued to emphasize this): we acknowledged that there are multiple sides to this issue and invited poets to write from their own truth.

And I like to believe that because of this difference, the pieces we have received try to do what poems always try to do. They voice individual, human stories. They present discrete moments for us to enter. They remind us of our full humanity at a time when, all too often and all too easily, we see both sides trying to de-humanize the other. At times, these poems witness and reflect complexity and fullness when politics too often tries to simplify. At other times, they give vent to the individual shout of revolt. Poets are not journalists or historians. Through my experience in the last month, I have come to believe we serve a different, but important, role in the public square, giving voice to richer truths, allowing readers to ponder heated and polarizing issues in a way that tries to bridge the divides which politics so often, unfortunately, creates.

Now we move into a new phase, as a community and as poets. The poems that bore witness to the fierce jubilation of peaceful protest will give way to new poems, which I look forward to reading. Poets who so far have been too distracted, too caught up, too upset to put pen to paper will eventually come back to the page and screen. *Verse Wisconsin* wants to hear from you, when you do. What is happening now will continue to unfold over the coming months and years. The necessary internal processing we go through to reflect on these events also continues. Re-visioning of all sorts will occur. This issue remains current, growing, organic as the movement of a people in the street. Our call for submissions remains open. Send us your poems, when you have them. Send us your songs, your visual poetry, your spoken word. Add your voice. Speak your truth. Bear witness.

Published in Verse Wisconsin, Main Street Issue

✿ It's Meant to Be Read: Making Poetry Public

BY MARILYN ZELKE-WINDAU

Scrawled with a driftwood stick on sand at a Kohler/Andrae State Park beach:

Time flows.
It is a constant like these waves.
I childishly splash my feet.
Age pushes me to shore.

Someone left these words, a poem, for me and other visitors from my town, this state, our country, the world to read. It was a gift made public by an anonymous author. That author did not know how many people would see these words, remember these words, before wind and water erased them. The author simply cared to share with the common reader, the public.

Poetry is meant to be read. Too often it is entombed in books on shelves in our homes or in libraries. Poetry books may be often dusted, but their words are rarely eyed. We as poets and poetry lovers need to change that. We need to make poetry public, revisit poetry as popular, a gift to the common reader.

As a little girl, my finger, guided by my mother's hand, followed the words of nursery rhymes and poems from *A Child's Garden of Verses* as she read aloud to me. My father recited his favorites to us often. I found later that I had memorized his earlier memorization of Longfellow's "This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks, bearded in moss and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight."

In the early decades of the 1900s, when they started school, poetry was popular. It was taught to develop a love for language and for writing, to foster precision of thought, to hone observation by the senses, to hear the musical rhythm of words, to create emotional connections with others. Children repeated verses on their walks home from school, to the fishing pond, and to the corner store. They regaled parents after supper and relatives on Sundays after church. Poetry could be found in women's magazines, in town newspapers, in church bulletins. Oratorical contests were held in which poetry was a mainstay for public competition.

Later in the twentieth century, poetry, mainly through folk songs, found itself in the public realm via social protests for civil rights, gender rights, and workers' rights and against wars, poverty, and environmental degradation. In recent years, more public venues for poetry have emerged. Social network sites and blogs have been created, as well as partnership projects such as "Poetry Everywhere," which brings poetry readings to screens on Milwaukee County buses, "Poetry at the Market," which features poems with related recipes, and the traveling "Verse-O-Matic" dispenser of poems.

What can we, as individual poets, groups of poets, and poetry lovers do to

further poetry in public places?

The following ideas are suggestions.

✂Poetry on paper bags

Students at the elementary school where I taught got their message across to the local community by doing art work, posters, or written stories and having them glued or stapled to grocery bags. The public would then get this message to take home with their flour, meat, and bananas. It wouldn't have to be grocery bags. It could be a local bookstore's bags, or another local storeowner's bags.

✂Poetry as computer wallpaper

You could develop a site where poems in various fonts could become your desktop wallpaper, constantly in view, with timed rotation on your screen.

✂Poetry bumper stickers

We all try to decipher license plate sayings. Why not read a haiku on a bumper sticker?

✂Poetry decals

Imprinted on clear plastic, poems could be affixed to windows of homes, in front entry ways for the postal worker or UPS delivery person to read. These decals could be placed in children's bedrooms on their mirror. Font size could vary, depending on the chosen site.

✂Poetry on dishes

Transferware techniques for ceramics have been around for years. A set of dishes, or coffee mugs, would be suitable for everyday use or for gifts. Transferred onto ceramic tiles, poetry could be found in kitchens, bathrooms, subways. There are even decals available for use on glass which can be fused for permanence to become windowpanes or art pieces.

✂A kite festival of poetry

Written by families or individuals on long streamers of paper, poems could then be attached to kites. These kites could then be redistributed, the poems shared, and the kites flown. This would be appropriate for a birthday, engagement, wedding, retirement, reunion, or seasonal party.

✂Poetry as family tradition

To expand on the kite idea, a "we are all gathered here" poem can become a tradition, a family offering at a baptism, a wedding, Thanksgiving. Each year a different family member could write or choose a poem which exemplifies the occasion.

✂Poetry as sermons in churches

Ministers could be invited to plan a poetry Sunday service, perhaps featuring a well known poet. Church members could also share by reading their poems or the works of others.

☞ Poet pen pals

Elementary school children could pick a school somewhere in the world and send a monthly poem they like or have written to another classroom. They could also do this via SKYPE and be able to read their poems, hear others read poems, and see the student authors.

☞ Poems written in dust on tabletops, on steamy mirrors in spas, gym shower rooms, or bar restrooms

☞ Poetry on curbs of towns/cities

When I was in high school, we painted windows of downtown businesses as a part of our football homecoming activities. We also wrote slogans, messages on the length of the curbs with chalk. Chalk messages are visible on sidewalks of college campuses for fun and for announcements of events and meetings. Why not poems?

☞ Poetry donations

Bookmarks featuring local poets' work or poetry magazine subscriptions could be donated to public and school libraries to increase visibility of poetry, promote readership of poetry.

☞ Poetry on television news

PBS News Hour often features poetry which relates to the times, the news. How wonderful if ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX affiliates would give air time to poetry once a month, once a quarter, once a year! We could inundate them with requests for this. Poems could also find a place at the bottom of the TV screen as an alternative to school closings, event cancellations, breaking news during good weather and good times.

☞ Poetry on cruise ships

A daily poem could be available alongside the Sudoku game or trivia puzzle in the ship's library, or run across the wall monitor in red dotted letters instead of, or in addition to news feed and stock market quotations.

☞ Poetry in hotels, motels, and B&B's

What a nice way to welcome a weary traveler: a printed sheet or booklet of poems by local poets placed in their room.

☞ Poetry on placemats

At breakfast and lunchtime, many restaurants use paper placemats. Poems printed there could be read while waiting for the food order.

☞ Poetry postings

Henri de Toulouse Latrec designed and tacked posters all over Paris to advertise dances at the Moulin Rouge. There are many places where papers can be posted in towns and cities: bulletin boards at grocery stores, libraries, coffee houses, church entry ways, art centers, fitness gyms, to name a few. There are not many kiosk venues in our country, although there are some in commercial malls. Telephone poles come to mind. Permission may be necessary to post.

⌘ Do it yourself poetry

Magnetic letters and words could be placed on metallic sheets in odd locations to invite writing poetry. Alternatively, chalkboards with chalk could be used, or marker boards with markers, mounted at bus stops, train stations, doctor and dentist offices. Even alphabet pasta could be used! A large Etch-A-Sketch would motivate spontaneity.

⌘ Poetry alliances

An alliance with a nonprofit organization such as the Girl Scouts at cookie time could afford wide distribution of poetry. Poems on child safety issues or family and community traditions would be appropriate. An alliance with Jaycees, Kiwanis, Rotary Club, or a Main Street Program could oversee distribution of local poets' works at their events, which also promotes their community. At the state level poetry could be printed in tourism brochures and posters for distribution at state and county fairs, at chambers of commerce offices. It could also be posted on their websites.

⌘ Poetry at sports venues

I would love to see poems on the sports page of newspapers, introduced at half time, or even at the beginning of the 5th quarter at Badger games. Poets are referees. They throw flags. They draw attention to unnecessary roughness, illegal procedures, personal fouls. What a channel for poetry that would be!

Ideas generate ideas. It is my hope that these few may serve to motivate your thoughts and to encourage you to take action. We can make poetry a public treasure. I picked up the driftwood stick that was left at the beach by the anonymous poet. I now pass it on to you. The public needs your gifts.

Published in Verse Wisconsin 110

✿ The Art of Resistance

BY CALLEN HARTY

Living in Wisconsin and observing protest and resistance for the last several years sometimes leaves me breathless. The other day, for example, I was at the Solidarity Sing Along at the State Capitol, a daily noontime protest in which song is joyfully used to rebel against the current state of affairs. As the protest songs were sung by a couple dozen singers, a school group entered the rotunda. The children listened at first, then started edging closer to the singers, and were soon following along with the songbooks. After a couple songs one boy could not contain himself any longer and moved from outside the circle into the middle of the rotunda, dancing all by himself to the boisterous singing. He was soon joined by a friend, and then another, and soon the entire class joined together in the middle of the rotunda to sing, dance, and march around in circles. The children borrowed protest signs and started holding them up as they sang and danced and the entire place was filled with an incredible joy.

Music and other arts can move people in ways that standard protests cannot.

Marches have their place but a single image of one protester taken by a good photographer can distill a message into its essence and touch thousands more people than could possibly see the march. A poem, with its spare use of language, can communicate a message far more effectively than a rehashing of the same political speeches we hear over and over again.

The last couple years in Wisconsin protests have been marked not by their numbers, by violence, or anything else but by their creativity. Each new political development brings out new signs and banners decorated by talented artists who manage to encapsulate the message within the constraints of a few words on cardboard. The Overpass Light Brigade does the same thing with LED lights, organizing a few holders of the lights to spell out the vital messages of the day.

It is about simplicity. Most people won't read a 2,000 word treatise on the importance of our rights, but a photograph of an elderly woman with a sign about freedom of speech being handcuffed by police for singing will be seen and understood in a very elemental way. It reaches right to the core of what is happening in a way that nothing else can.

It is about being able to react swiftly. When newspapers started to report about Scott Walker's book, *Unintimidated: A Governor's Story and a Nation's Challenge*, protesters decided quickly to release their own book, *Unintimidated: Wisconsin Sings Truth to Power*. It was an essay interspersed with photographs of the Capitol Police assaults and arrests of Solidarity Sing Along participants. It was a perfect artistic response to Walker's book, using his own title to show who was really intimidated. It also used his title to take people to a different message and draw attention to some of the issues that led to protests against him in the first place.

It is about passion. During the height of the Wisconsin Uprising a group

organized a flash mob in the Capitol. Thousands of people were in the building when the group started to sing “Do You Hear the People Sing” from the musical *Les Miserables*. The words took on new meaning in the fight against the union-busting Wisconsin governor. The song continued to build with more and more people joining in and when it was over the building shook from the applause and cheers. It was one of the most magnificent moments of that whole period, fueled by the passion of song.

Art can move people. It can stir passions. It can move one to action. Without art and the creativity of those still fighting the battle in Wisconsin, the resistance would have died when the masses of crowds left the Capitol Square two years ago. Instead, there are voices still being lifted, images still being captured, words still being shared that continue to speak truth to power and in that resides hope for the people to eventually prevail.

Published in Verse Wisconsin 113-4

✿ Our Expanding Dramaverse

BY WENDY VARDAMAN & GREER DUBOIS

The questions—why there is no poetic drama to-day, how the stage has lost all hold on literary art, why so many poetic plays are written which can only be read, and read, if at all, without pleasure—have become insipid, almost academic.—T. S. Eliot, “The Possibility of a Poetic Drama” (1921)

I think we can still agree that verse drama is not well represented in print or on the stage. When did you last go to see a play? When did you last go to see a verse play? When did you last see a verse play by a living writer? —Joel Brouwer, “The Possibility of a Poetic Drama” (2009)

Theater, like democracy, makes demands. We, as an audience, have to do more than show up and get our orders. Theater turns an audience into citizens instead of just spectators.—Ellen McLaughlin (2009)

Any production that captures the energy and feeling and drive of this hip-hop generation, its issues and concerns, its larger cultural aesthetic, is hip-hop theater. And hip-hop theater is more than just what is on the stage; it’s who’s in the audience as well. A theater work can have all the beats and rhymes and slick moves it wants, but if the production excludes the hip-hop community from the audience, it loses a valuable synergy. The interaction between the performer and the audience is a crucial element of the work.—Holly Bass, “Can You Rock It Like This?” (2004)

What’s in a name? *Verse drama, verse play, closet drama, poets/poets’ theatre/theater, monologue, performance poetry, choreopoem, spoken word, hip-hop theater*... Some of these names, like dramatic monologue and the blank verse drama, have been available a long time; the closet drama is newer; hip-hop theater, relatively recent. Genres change—that sounds obvious, as does the corollary: we shouldn’t expect something written today to look exactly like what was written in the 16th century. The novel doesn’t. Poems don’t. Neither do verse plays. This essay is meant to be a practical, not scholarly, tour of those changes and the shifting points where poetry and drama intersect, as well as some of the questions we have enjoyed thinking about, along with our sense of why those questions are important.

So what do we even mean by *verse drama*? A play, or any other piece of theater, written in poetry? Of course, this definition comes with problems, since the definition of neither “theater” nor “poetry” is clear. We often show what we mean by verse drama by mentioning its greatest practitioners: Shakespeare and the other Elizabethan dramatists; Sophocles, Aristophanes, and all Greek and Roman playwrights; and the great majority of traditional theater, folk theater, and theater before the 18th century. Theater and poetry formed together, through their common roots in music: the earliest poetry was always performed, and the earliest performances were always in verse. If we take the long view, then our

period is the exception, with poets writing for the page and playwrights aspiring to naturalistic, you-could-hear-it-on-the-street language.

It's only in the recent past—say the last two- or three-hundred years—that poetry and theater became separate. A quick overview since Shakespeare seems to support the commonplace that verse drama, though continuously written, has declined steadily in quantity and quality since that peak. In the Elizabethan era, playwrights had already begun writing in dramatic prose, often for comedy or low-class characters (Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*, for example, is entirely in prose). By the end of the 18th century, the most popular plays were romantic comedies (written in prose) and sensational melodramas (theater set to music to avoid licensing laws). Verse drama left the commercial theaters and became the purview of the Romantic poets, especially Shelley and Byron. These poets wrote their plays as homages to Shakespeare and as exercises in blank verse. They didn't even need an audience: Goethe had already pioneered the poetic *closet drama*, a play written for reading, not performing, and the English Romantics adapted this convention for their verse dramas. By the end of the 19th century, the naturalistic prose of writers like Ibsen and Chekhov began to dominate theater. A few straggling verse plays did come into fashion, Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* being the most famous, but these plays were deliberately archaic. Robert Bridges' large body of verse plays, well-known in their time, certainly fit into that category; his friend, Gerard Manley Hopkins, considered them mostly unreadable and unperformable, with their insistence on Elizabethan language and their Shakespearean content and structure.

Few playwrights worked in verse in the early 20th century, but poets rediscovered the form. T.S. Eliot first wrote about this "revival" of verse drama in his essay, "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama" (1921). Eliot, as well as the many poet-playwrights who were his disciples, such as Christopher Fry, assumed that verse drama was a dead form that needed to be re-created from scratch, or at least from something basic, like music hall reviews (a "dangerous suggestion," Eliot says) or light opera. This re-creation would be the task of educated poets, like Eliot himself, who applied what they knew about page poetry to stage poetry. Once they reestablished the form, an individual poet could perfect it—maybe, Eliot suggests in his essay, a Modernist Shakespeare, who would understand both Modernist poetic innovation and popular entertainment. Perhaps inspired by his ambitious ideas of revival, Eliot wrote his own plays, including *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Cocktail Party* (1949), and the fragmentary *Sweeney Agonistes* (1926). Other pro-revival writers joined Eliot, including, in England, Christopher Fry (best known for *The Lady's Not for Burning* (1948)); and in America, Maxwell Anderson (*Winterset*, 1935) and the poet Archibald MacLeish (whose 1958 *J.B.* won a Pulitzer and a Tony Award). In Ireland, where poetic language has always been tolerated in theater more than in the United States or Britain, Yeats wrote poetic dramas at the Abbey Theatre, followed by poet-dramatists like Austin Clarke. At the same time, poets were increasingly called upon to write librettos for operas and musicals: Auden is well-known for his collaborations with Stravinsky and Benjamin Britten, but Richard Wilbur wrote part of Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*. Among critics verse drama was a heavily trafficked topic for the New Critics in particular, though by 1955, the taste for verse drama that Eliot had described in "Poetic Drama" seems to have evaporated.

Mainstream productions of verse plays were no longer commercially viable.

Among poets, however, interest in poetic drama continued throughout the 20th century, although its dominant mode shifted away from what Eliot meant by “poetic drama.” Closet dramas remained popular among formalists in particular, while something called “poets theater” emerged to replace (as some critics argue) verse drama. A number of non-affiliated groups, communities really, have used “poets theater” in their name, often to mean something very different. *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater* (an excellent book that surveys poetic drama from 1945 to 1985) describes how these eclectic verse play and poets' theaters sprang up wherever poets formed communities. The Cambridge Poets' Theatre, founded in 1951 (and also chronicled in Peter Davison's *The Fading Smile*), included for a time Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Richard Wilbur, Richard Eberhardt, John Ciardi, Alison Lurie, Edward Gorey, Donald Hall, John Ashbery, and Frank O'Hara; it produced works of Lowell, Sexton, and Ashbery, along with Richard Wilbur's translation of Molière's *The Misanthrope*. The New York Poets Theatre, founded in 1961 by Diane di Prima, Amiri Baraka, Alan S. Marlowe, John Herbert McDowell, and James Waring, produced the works of New York City poets from di Prima herself to Baraka and Frank O'Hara.

Many more such theaters have existed and continue to be founded, from San Francisco to Chicago to Providence, including the Nuyorican Poets Cafe/Theater founded in the 70s; the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E-affiliated San Francisco Poets Theater, 1978–84; and the more recent and unrelated San Francisco Poets Theater, founded in 2000 by Kevin Killian, co-editor of *The Kenning Anthology*. Black Poetry Theatre, founded in 2007 by Joseph Churchwell and Dasan Ahanu in Durham, North Carolina, uses a variation on the name, and incorporates poetry and spoken word into theater performances. Poetic Theater Productions in NYC sponsors a festival that promotes “Social Justice through Spoken Word, Hip Hop, & Slam.” Some current groups producing theater grounded in more traditional poetry include Verse Theater Manhattan, Caffeine Theatre, founded 2002 in Chicago, and Poets Theater of Maine, founded by formalist poet Annie Finch. (PTM has produced one verse play so far, *Wolf Song*, 2011, conceived at Wisconsin's Black Earth Institute, where Finch met biologist/collaborator Christina Eisenberg.) Although our list is by no means complete, everywhere, it seems, poets are collaborating with performance artists, actors, and musicians to create eclectic and often experimental performances.

While poets' interest in poetic drama, by whatever name, has remained significant in the past thirty years, interest in the verse drama, per se, has risen once again. In 2007, the Poetry Foundation under John Barr (who writes verse dramas as well as poetry) established a Verse Drama Prize (whose first award went to John Surowiecki for *My Nose and Me*). Many poet-critics, influenced, perhaps, by Eliot, talk about verse drama in terms of revival and being able (or not) to re-create a dead form. Joel Brouwer posted a short piece on *Harriet*, the Poetry Foundation's blog in 2009, in which he pronounced both verse drama and theater dead. (“The Possibility of a Poetic Drama,” poetryfoundation.org.) A parallel post on *The Guardian's* theater blog (November 2011), also takes a narrow view of poetry drama and a dim view of its viability. Glyn Maxwell, possibly the most successful traditional verse dramatist, said in an interview last

year: “I’m aware that ‘verse drama’ barely exists now beyond myself and a couple of other eccentrics, and has a unique burden to bear—the weight of the great ones and the almost total failure of everyone since ... All I can do is keep trying to show that verse on stage can make the sound we make now on the street, in the pub, in the bedroom, in Parliament” (cherwell.org/culturestage/2011/03/03/interview-glyn-maxwell).

A verse-drama session at the Association of Writers & Writing Programs in 2011 featured poet-playwrights, such as Barr and David Yezzi (who appears in this issue of *VW*), reading from their verse dramas and discussing the form—past, present, and future. The session, “Writing Plays with Poetry: The Place of Verse Drama in Contemporary Literature and Theater,” left us with possibly more questions than when we arrived: Is this really what contemporary poetry drama looks like? Are we asking the right questions? Are we defining ourselves into a corner? Are we trying to confect/resurrect a verse drama that is less than it could be for writers, performers, and audiences, at the same time that we fail to recognize the verse drama that is happening already, in other places and spaces, in other forms, and by other measures?

Shakespeare himself didn’t write exclusively in blank verse. In the same play, he might incorporate rhymed tetrameter quatrains, prose, rhymed iambic pentameter, even sonnets, and, of course, songs and dance. His iambic pentameter, for that matter, includes an enormous amount of complex variation. The dramatic reasons for doing so—from keeping the reader awake, to characterization, have been widely written about, but are often simplified, even by very educated critics. The prose/blank-verse dichotomy, for instance, isn’t simplistically about differentiating low and high characters, a common assertion, but also about marking departures from particular states of mind within the same character’s speech (e.g., Hamlet, Prince Hal), and sometimes different interactions between the same pair of characters, and sometimes madness, and sometimes business communications, and sometimes turning points in action and thought (Richard DiPrima, *The Actor’s (and Intelligent Reader’s) Guide to the Language of Shakespeare*, The Young Shakespeare Players, 2010). When contemporary critics and writers consider the verse drama, the very form they want to revive is one they have a flattened understanding of.

Would Shakespeare, alive today and writing *contemporary* verse drama, insist on writing either in Elizabethan language or using only the tools available to an Elizabethan poet and playwright? We very much doubt it, although the subjects he wrote about then, the sentiments he expressed about many of them, his techniques for constructing a drama and for holding an audience, and the components of his poetry, his verse drama, are all incredibly vital. But the poetic tools, as well as the dramatic modes and the narrative strategies, available to a 21st-century poet are vastly different than those available to a 16th-century one. These include, to mention just a handful, free verse, the prose poem, collage, syllabic forms from haiku to Fibonacci to invented, sound poetry, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, projectivism, objectivism, spoken word, hip hop, polyphony, unreliable narrators, multiple perspectives, the choreopoem, and yes, all the tools also available to Shakespeare—those don’t need to be thrown out just because they are “old,” as the recent work of formalists and playwrights

working in blank verse reminds us.

What might contemporary verse drama look like if it incorporated an array of contemporary poetic strategies?

The same 2011 AWP conference included some fascinating women's collaborations between poetry and performance arts—poetry and dance, poetry and theater, music and art and poetry—including a clip from the staging of Patricia Smith's *Blood Dazzler* (youtube.com/watch?v=luWEmr_F6rE).

An inquiry to the Women's Poetry Listserv produced a wealth of leads on women currently working in hybrid poetry/performance forms, from experimental to, well, *experimental*—jazz operas, choreopoems, one-woman performance pieces (e.g., Anne Carson's "Lots of Guns: An Oratorio for Five Voices" in *Decreation*; Heather Raffo's *Nine Parts of Desire*; Ntozake Shange, of course, whose groundbreaking *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* created the choreopoem; Virginia Grise's recent, award-winning *Blu*; Caridad Svich; Lois Roma-Deeley's *High Notes*; Wendy Brown-Baez; Karren L. Alenier; Sharon Bridgforth's *Theatrical Jazz*; and some of the authors who appear in this issue of *VW*). Rather than writing iambic-pentameter verse plays, these women seem more inclined to include a little of this, a little of that, including blank verse, into their poetry drama.

The story among multi-ethnic writers—and there are many—who write poetry drama is, not surprisingly, also complex. Verse plays by well-established African American authors, like Smith (*Blood Dazzler*), Rita Dove (*The Darker Face of the Earth*), Derek Walcott (most recently, *Moon-Child*, a rhyming verse drama), Toni Morrison (*Desdemona*), Yusef Komunyakaa (*Gilgamesh*), are literary and well-crafted, at the same time that they're intended for performance. We imagine there are also dynamic verse plays coming from younger fellows of Cave Canem, which supports African American poets and promotes a deep knowledge of traditional verse forms—Komunyakaa, Dove, and Smith have all been teachers there, and co-founder Cornelius Eady writes plays as well as poetry. In general these poets seem very invested in creating performable poetry, whether or not they're writing poetic drama or dramatic poetry, invested in the voices of others and those unable to speak for themselves, and willing and capable of producing work that employs techniques from 16th-century poetry alongside those from the 21st. Willing to risk dramatic language.

Dramatic, poetic language is also abundant in hip-hop and spoken-word theater. Holly Bass, a Cave Canem fellow, journalist and performance artist, was the first person to use the term hip-hop theater in print in 1999, though the forms originate in 1970s/80s urban youth culture. As a wider art form, hip hop is a global movement located in the power of words, community, and social justice. With respect to theatrical performances, spoken-word and hip-hop theater are multidisciplinary and multicultural, with contributions, especially, from African American and Latino artists. Considering these forms only briefly, as represented in anthologies like *Plays from the Boom Box Galaxy* (ed. Kim Euell with Robert Alexander) or *Say Word! Voices from Hip Hop Theater* (ed. Daniel Banks), opens up a range of new language and new approaches to poetry dramas: from the agile

mix of rap, rhymed poetry, and remixed/sampled Shakespeare (*Deep Azure*, Chadwick Boseman), to plays that include prose, DJs, and MCs who rap (Kristoffer Diaz's *Welcome to Arroyo's*), to choreopoems and solo performance poetry pieces in the tradition of Shange and others. The amount and use of poetry varies, and the aesthetics are often very different than those of "literary" verse drama, but these are compelling pieces written by well-educated, well-trained poets/performers making deliberate and considered choices. Commercial productions, from Broadway shows to new takes on classic verse, like the Q Brothers' *Funk It Up About Nothin'* (2011) at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, bring a probably more palatable version of this kind of poetic drama to an older, whiter, wealthier audience, but raise questions about commodification, co-option, and dilution of the form, if it is the same form. A good list of "Hip Hop Activist and Educational Organizations and Programs" is available at press.umich.edu/script/press/special/hiphop/programs.

We turn from a description of contemporary verse drama to its purpose: What does drama offer poetry? Do we even need verse drama? What is it about Shakespearean drama—or any good dramatic verse—that is so compelling? Historically, verse drama has existed in situations where drama required portability. (We might note that portability was also key to the development of hip hop, with its boom boxes and cardboard and scavenged linoleum stages.) In Elizabethan theater, there were no sets, no lights, and only minimal contemporary costumes. They staked everything on words and actors. Without spectacular images or effects, what did Shakespeare have that made him one of the most popular writers of his generation? Words. And because there were no extras in his productions—no flashing lights, no explosions—he had to decorate his stories using verse. In doing that he engages the audience more than is possible in any other form of entertainment. Shakespeare's verse, and any good dramatic poetry, subconsciously engages the imagination. (Neurological research around this topic has been in the news a good deal recently; Philip Davis's *Shakespeare Thinking* is one recent book.) Compelling words enter our brains, where we see images: "But look, the morn, in russet mantle clad/ walks o'er the dew of yond high-eastward hill." That's an image of dawn that we'll remember much better than colored lights illuminating a backdrop. And Shakespeare is, of course, not just using visual imagery, but sound, rhythm, repetition, and other poetic tools in nuanced combination for his effects: "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad:/ It wearies me; you say it wearies you." In the simplicity of this statement, in the sighing through the *s* sounds, and the repetition of *weary* and *you*, who doesn't instantly get an impression of this character's state of mind?

No literature is as potent as the imagination itself. A good playwright's job is to suggest a story, and a good actor's job is to suggest a character. But the audience must be free to fill in other elements with imagination. This is exactly what makes verse drama so ideal. It combines the most suggestive language—poetry—with the most suggestive form of communication—live speech and movement by a group of actors or an individual actor—and shares it with an actively imagining audience. Verse drama's unique power to engage groups of people has been understood for thousands of years. We believe, as playwright/actor Ellen McLaughlin argues in a 2009 commencement address, "Theatre and Democracy" (fluxtheatre.org), that the co-founding of Greek theater and

democracy is no coincidence. Democracy depends on active, engaged citizens, who fill in the story behind a politician's speech.

Verse drama isn't just important because Shakespeare did it. Poetry is drama's native language. Performance is poetry's native state. Besides our belief in the power of poetry and drama, singly and in unison, to activate the imagination and to help us to make meaning, a belief also at work in hip hop, there are a host of practical, artistic contributions that drama can make to poetry. The contemporary poetry reading emerges largely out of its use among Beat poets, as do the beginnings of performance poetry. It may have been fresh air in the poetry room at one point, but let's confess: aren't we all feeling a bit weary of poets in single-file, ourselves included, reciting our work out loud to small groups of fellow poets, whether or not we have performance competence? If it helps our writing to hear the poem read aloud, fine: maybe we should do that more within the context of a writing group than a public performance. But if we're looking to engage and to increase the audience, then we need to think about how to perform more effectively. That's one of the things drama might offer poetry.

Other contributions include collaboration, voice production, gesture, facial and vocal expression, performance that occurs after rehearsal, a deepened understanding of audience, timing, and the creation, even in a one-person show, of other voices/personae. David Yezzi's essay "The Dramatic Element" (newcriterion.com), provides a good discussion of the techniques even "lyric" poets with no interest in the stage have borrowed and should continue to borrow from dramatists: character, voice, and dialogue or talk, which more poets would do well to pay more attention to. Glyn Maxwell, a poet-playwright, has this to say about what drama offers poetry:

Above all it has actors, who understand rhythm, coherence, balance, breath. Breath is the key to everything. A poem that doesn't acknowledge the limitations and strictures of the breath will fail because it is failing to make a human sound (where human can be both adjective and noun, sound both noun and verb). Most new poetry is unmemorable not because it's obscure, or self-absorbed, or trivial—terrific poems can be written in all those ways—but because most young poets have lost their sense of human sound. Or they know what it is, but can't write the shape of it. All the wit and learning in the world can't compensate for an inability to render persuasively the distinct voice of an actual breathing person.

And what does poetry do for drama? Poetry focuses on language. Not only its sounds, but its images, rhythms, diction, meanings, metaphors. It has the capacity to take the black and white, flattened prose of contemporary speech, and make it colorful and three-dimensional. It can focus attention on the hyperbole of the marketing world, the lies of politics and the part-truths of journalism, and invite scrutiny. It requires our attention. It fires our imaginations, or to use a 21st-century metaphor, our synapses. It provides a mode, non-visual, where theater has it all over movies. Instead of seeing more productions that employ cinematic effects, we prefer theater that opposes passive "viewing" and engages the active participation of its audience through surprising, and sometimes challenging, language. Verse drama doesn't insist on a political or social purpose, but it carries

one, naturally, both by requiring its audiences to be present and engaged, and by creating a product that, with just a few exceptions, is pretty much designed and guaranteed to be, whatever the size of its audience, noncommercial.

Is “who is writing contemporary (Shakespearean blank) verse drama?” or “why isn’t there more (Shakespearean blank) verse drama?” the right question? We don’t believe it is. Does that mean that blank verse is unavailable to contemporary poet-playwrights? A resounding no! Metered verse, iambic or not, rhymed or not, is one poetic tool that contemporary poet dramatists would do well to master and to consider using sometimes—either as a way to write an entire drama, or as a way to write particular characters/voices, or as a means to mark a departure from the ordinary or for some other dramatic purpose in a play. The flat and sometimes slack language of much contemporary drama (and poetry, for that matter) could benefit from a more eclectic, and riskier, aesthetic. And be one way to differentiate poetry drama from the movies and build an audience for poetry and theater.

When was the last time we went to the theater? When was the last time we saw a verse drama? When did we last see a verse play by a living writer? Between the two of us, we go to a lot of readings and a lot of performances. And a lot of the performances we attend are verse dramas, old and new. Of the many productions that we attended in 2011 [and wonderfully restaged in 2013], the most satisfying piece—prose or verse—was most definitely a contemporary poetry drama, *An Illiad*, at The Court Theatre in Chicago. Adapted from Homer by Lisa Peterson and Denis O’Hare, *An Illiad* is a one-person show in which the writers and performer brought the poetic text to life, with polyphonic, chaotic, and sometimes discordant elements that include Homer’s verse—in Greek and in translation, sound poetry, list and litany, stand-up comedy, performance poetry, and echoes of the play’s origin in improv, among others: in other words, a contemporary poetic idiom, asking contemporary and eternal questions about war and gender, among others. *An Illiad* unites contemporary and ancient poetry and drama, which comes, after all, from the Greek word meaning to do, to act. (View the poetic/spoken-word sequence “War” at youtube.com/watch?v=6veWKP6PIuE.)

What’s in a name? *Poetry drama, verse play, dramatic poetry, closet drama, choreopoem, spoken word, hip-hop theater, poets/poetry theater/theatre, dramatic monologue*... Can’t we give the whole amazing range of possibilities, on occasion, an umbrella term, with the knowledge that what *verse* and *drama* mean has changed since 1600, and will continue to change, though what was wonderful then, poetically and dramatically, is still available? Let the practice of 21st-century verse drama be about appreciating different forms of each and different aesthetics; about learning/discerning what poetry and drama can still offer each other, as well as their audience; about transcending false divides between high and low, page and stage, elite and folk, us and them; about bringing what was once whole together again; about remembering that poetry, like the world, isn’t flat, and that the *dramaverse*, if not infinite, is at least bigger than we thought it was.

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✿ The Making of the *Latina Monologues*

BY ANGELA C. TRUDELL VASQUEZ

In the Beginning

How can I say this? Sometimes the impossible happens and you achieve something that wasn't even on your horizon and it's terrific even to unbiased folks who don't already love you, and it surprises you and you didn't even know you had it in you to be this great, amazing even, and it's a complete change because you can never go back to who you were before and that's what happened to me with the *Latina Monologues*. I will never be the same.

In late 2008 a friend told me the Latino Student Union at UW–Milwaukee was putting together a production called the *Latina Monologues* and was seeking material. I sent them several poems I had written and when they asked me to become part of the cast I said yes without hesitation. And so it began; little did I know I would forever be changed by the experience, gain new friends, skills and a voice I did not yet know that lived inside me waiting to come out.

How It Came to Be

Veronica Sotelo was our young director and the driving force behind the production, then and now. At the time she was also president of the Latino Student Union and a full-time college student. She selected the pieces and arranged them, and her vision of what it should look like on stage became a reality. We all had a hand in the production from our acting, to accessing our deepest emotions, so we could accurately depict the struggles of our families, our ancestors and our people who had been much maligned as of late. Never before in my experience had all the pieces in a play been written by Latinos/as and performed by primarily Latinas. This was not only new territory, it was a test of my own skills as an artist. Right away some of us were chosen to work with a voice coach at the university, Assistant Professor Michelle Lopez-Rios.

In the one session I had with her, Michelle changed how I read/perform my poems in public. I was reborn by the experience into something else: a performing poet where delivery is an art in and of itself. Lyrical or loud, breath matters, body language matters, and so does your expression and evocation of the vowel, verb and consonant, every syllable matters; it's different, more all-encompassing as an artist and all-consuming, too, when you are in it and on stage.

Now when I perform I think this may be the only chance I have with this person, this audience, and I want to be as strong and effective as I can. It's all about connecting at that moment. Can you see, feel, or hear it? And that's it. Reading poems aloud has become something else and I like it. Michelle planted the seed and taught me what was possible, and Veronica enforced it in the many hours of practice, after work during the week and on weekends. And I worked on it alone in my house, while doing the plank position or while biking to work

along Lake Michigan. I practiced my new big voice everywhere—in the shower, under my breath at the bus stop and while walking around. My voice is stronger now.

Where We and the Community Are Now

The *Latina Monologues* has had three lives as of this writing and there may well be a fourth incarnation this spring in 2012. The first version was less than an hour, and now we actually need an intermission. Hundreds of people have seen it in Milwaukee and Madison. We added a show in Madison at Edgewood College in spring of 2011 with the help of my friend Andrea Potter and her colleagues at Edgewood College.

The *Latina Monologues* has grown but remains the same in its mission, which is to depict the various lives of Latinos/as in the United States and in other countries, our struggles, our victories, our diversity, and our day-to-day lives then and now. This is us telling our own stories, not someone else writing them for us. We are defining ourselves, and not being defined by someone else. We are creating our own history.

There are several parts/themes to the play currently: growing up, memories, ancestry, identity, roots, generations, leaving homeland, inheriting the earth, under our skin and woman. There are many authors whose writings are represented and vital to the script such as: Ximena Soza, Demetria Martinez, Aurora Levins Morales, Maritza Zapata, José Rivera, Elias Miguel Muñoz, Sandra Cisneros, Ernesto Galarza, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Alvaro Saar Rios, Marisel Herrera-Anderson, Esmeralda Santiago and Paul Martinez.

Sharing space in the script with these writers was an honor, and the multitude of voices helps depict the many varied lives of Latinos in this country. We cannot be stereotyped and pigeonholed, as we do not fit easily into any category. In the clip from 2009, you will see my sister, Tricia Young, interviewed about how she would like all her students to see this production and we did just that in 2011. We took the community show to Bay View High School, and the students, under the direction of their art teacher, Angelo Ruiz, who goes by “sensei,” worked the stage, and the Latino Club and their teacher, Ira Garcia, sponsored us.

Prior to the show at Bay View High School, I went and spoke to the kids about the need for them to become aware of the struggles our people were facing in Arizona and in the United States, how if some people had their way the children of undocumented people would no longer be allowed to attend public schools even though this was written into the United States Constitution. At the time this was one of the new provisions being touted in Arizona’s SB 1070 law though I believe later it was dropped. I went to Bay View High School as a writer, an activist and as an ambassador for the *Latina Monologues* show. I encouraged them to come and to bring their parents to our free event.

The *Latina Monologues* is a group effort and every member is essential to the show’s continued success, all actors and volunteers, past and present. We have also been fortunate to have friends who agreed to help promote us and

share our story, for example, our good friend, independent film producer and documentary filmmaker, Salvador Gómez, has made two mini-documentaries about the making of the *Latina Monologues*. One appeared on Milwaukee Public Television, MPTV's show *¡Adelante!* in 2009, <http://www.mptv.org/video/watch/?id=247> and another for Telemundo in 2011, [facebook.com/video/video.php?v=527211109678&saved](https://www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=527211109678&saved).

Why It Matters to Me and My History

The *Latina Monologues* is especially important to me because I myself am a third generation Mexican American on my mother's side and second generation on my father's side. My father was the first one in the family to go to college. He went on the GI bill and our early years in Iowa City in family student housing impacted me and my work just as much as the stories my mother told me about her family's struggles growing up in Newton, Iowa, in the 50s and how they persevered.

Little known fact: the cemeteries in Iowa are full of dead Mexicans from fighting in all the wars the United States has been involved in, beginning with the late 1800s to the present. My father is named for a half brother who was plucked out of his high school classroom in Newton and told he was going to the front in World War II. Two brothers were sent and only one came back. This is a common theme. My maternal grandmother remarked that before World War II there were plenty of boys to dance with at the Mexican dances in Des Moines and after not so many.

One poem of mine included in the *Latina Monologues*, is a poem I wrote years ago called "Dark Man." It depicts my dad's experience and my grandmother's experience of entering him into the public school system in Newton for the first time:

pushing back with
the strength your mother did when
she enrolled you in
primary school, walking down
the cold hallways,
not speaking any English
yet, neither do you,

In another poem I wrote that is included in the script, "Human Maze," I attempt to show the mixing of the Spanish Conquistadors and the indigenous people of Mexico, the infiltration of religion and language and how we as a people survived new rulers. It is my attempt at a historical poem, not just from a conquered people's point of view, but also from a female point of view and a feminist perspective, and it decries at the end victory, too:

and lifting their
lily white bodies up from earth just
like our language and food infiltrates English.

Iowa, Washington, and Wisconsin Influences

I wrote “We Dream” while living in Seattle. I was teaching English as a Second Language as a volunteer teacher for Casa Latina, an immigrants’ rights organization. I wrote it during a strategic planning session/retreat, and we were trying to figure out how the organization would grow and prosper in the future. It was part of the first and second *LM* productions:

We Dream

We dream of one house
one edificio where Latinos’
dreams can come true,
where there is daily work
for every man and
support for every woman
who needs an ear to share
their troubles and tongues
to teach
how to take care of her
children, her man,
herself, where there’s
a chair to rest,
a bed to sleep,
a shower to clean,
a place to grow
strong
where one can seek shelter
from the storm
and learn to conquer the
American Dream.

My students were often homeless, hungry and tired from sleeping in the streets, but still they came to learn English and I taught them as best I could for five years. They advanced my education further and made me more aware of how our society impacts the world more than any lesson plan.

My poem “Lessons” was also part of *LM* productions 1 and 2. In it I examine the lives of Latina women not just in this country but also in other countries around the world. I talk about the “disappeared” in Chile and the many hands that provide us in this country with our creature comforts, like coffee, chocolate and the clothes on our back. We often don’t think about this on a daily basis, but other people suffer so that we can live in ease. Once you learn this it is something hard to forget. I do not let myself off the hook, either. I too live a privileged life:

Lessons

She walks through yellow fields, migrant worker
bronze goddess, reaper of corn, not worthy

of our scorn, as we mourn her calloused hands
and turn away afraid it might be catching.

She weaves a web protecting her dead children
from memory loss, preserving the story
of their demise in rich red cloth
woven by hand, washed with tears, soaked
in blood, then sold to western tourists who
can't understand how a son or daughter disappears.

She works at a factory sweating
for fifty cents an hour, pressing the clothes
rich women will buy to hang in their closets
and not on their slim well fed tan bodies
as they stroll on easy street never breaking a nail.

She buys café mochas for \$2.50
from the man in the stand
by the corner before driving
through rush hour to work downtown
not savoring the aroma of brown backs
burning in the sun bending to pick
beans one by one, selecting only
the choicest ones to sell on the
American slave market.

These two preceding poems, “We Dream” and “Lessons,” were not included in the third incarnation of the *Latina Monologues*, but two other new ones were, “Dream Act Poem” and my latest Milwaukee poem. I wrote the “Dream Act Poem” shortly after the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act died once again in the US legislature. I did not think it to be a very good bill and was surprised how upset I was at it not passing. It's the first poem I ever wrote for the stage and I wrote it specifically for the *Latina Monologues*. It's to be performed in three voices, and when I perform it solo, I change the voices so it is clear there are three voices speaking:

Dream Act Poem

Is a dream deferred any less bright?
Does it shine brilliant over an ebony night?
Does its hair lie kinky or smooth upon its head?
Does it matter if or when it's dead?

Yes.

Children vie for crumbs at the table
and bright minds scramble for their piece of the pie.
It's not right they were children people say and I agree
we all know children have little (say) control on their
environment or destiny.

They were not the decision makers.

*But some, learn the hard way—
a Mother detained,
the 11-year-old stands up,
becomes an adult,
weans the baby on condensed milk,
takes siblings to school
on an old bike in cold temps,
cooks, cleans, keeps
up with homework,
prays for their Mom
to come home
before bed.*

*These children
have been abandoned
by us Americans.
Some stand up
but we need more,
children belong to parents
who love and care for them
not on their own struggling
because of ICE in our veins
or economic discontent.*

*So what about forgiveness without strings attached?
Complete amnesty I say.*

Let all come forward and register.

*The Dream Act was never enough but it was something.
I know adults who worked the fields as little kids
with their families and it was hard, no schooling,
no chance for education as a child,
and I could see it in his eyes (my student's eyes)
his memory hurt him—the boy that he was bending.*

And don't we all pity ourselves sometimes?
Is it not part of the human condition?

*But then I remember what's good
and forget what's painful and am thankful,
for the sun, the water, the good earth at my feet,
say a prayer, move on pledging to fight
for my brothers' and sisters' right,
for peace and full citizenship in this country.
A dream dimmed for the moment no less bright.*

My “Milwaukee Poem #2” is my tribute to all the good people who work for social justice day in and day out with little reward. Howard Zinn said you could only see progress from a long way away or 100 years or something along those lines. I remember him now that he has left this earthly world, and it gives me hope. I am currently working on a new series of poems called, “standing on the shoulders of our ancestors,” I hope to complete it in 2012. We’ll see.

there is an energy here,
 a rustling of wings,
 ideas and solutions
 to problems
 that plague us,

Finale

All three *LM* productions have concluded with my poem “Who Am I.” It is performed with me in the lead and support from the cast. It was partly inspired by a fellow poet from Seattle, Raúl Sánchez. We were both members of Los Norteños in Seattle, Washington, and became friends and colleagues. This poem also closes my second collection of poetry, *Love in War Time*.

“Who Am I” tells my own story and in part that of my ancestors who settled in the Midwest. We came with the railroads. My family was recruited from Mexico to work on the railroads like many other families. I cannot tell you how often people will come to me after a show or a reading of this poem and say, me too, my family also worked on the railroads, and they are often white and German, Irish and/or Polish. This is a poem/story of many immigrants who came to this country: it’s not just mine or unique to my family’s history.

Years ago the State of Iowa used one of my first poems, “One Brown Face,” for a diversity workshop piece, and they used a photo from their collection that depicted the railroad workers from the time: African Americans, Mexicans, Irish, and Chinese. The poem “Who Am I” also shows the strength of the women who came with their men to this country and established a home for their families. I have met people in Washington and Oregon who also share this lineage, and in some cases, the railroad car they lived in was what they built their home around. It provided the base, I was told by a fellow poet. They moved it off the railroad tracks, placed it beside the tracks and built additions off its structure. It’s still there today he told me.

“Who Am I,” is also my story of growing up in an Iowa that was 98% white at the time we lived there. It is less so today but not by all that much. I was aware of class at a very early age, having a big family with varying levels of education and money. This poem is also influenced by knowledge of my privileged status and my awareness of this privilege amidst everything else that was happening between 1967 and the present. I go into my activism influenced early on by the Civil Rights Movement and later the fight against AIDS, and ongoing wars the US was involved in from Vietnam to the present. It was born out of Seattle, too, and the WTO riots and anti-war marches, and from my experience here in Wisconsin.

Who Am I

I am the woman of cinnamon skin and high arches
 who emerged safe third generation
 and scored in the 99th percentile all through school.
 I am the woman who quit poetry during the years she separated from God
 and wrote fiction when reality was too strong to take.
 I am the woman who fought back the man she loved
 and left the first time
 who had the courage to love and remarry the next.
 I am the woman who writes down her inner most feelings
 and then is surprised
 who keeps notes on everything and measures her success against time.
 I am the woman who dances for joy when a good song is played,
 who reads the paper and cries inside for days.
 I am the woman who stood on stage and read her lines
 before she knew them to be true
 who knew she was a writer at seven
 but learned she was a Mexican at age ten and two.
 I am the woman who was crowned Miss LULAC at age 18
 a beauty queen who never felt pretty
 among blue eyed dyed blonde bomb shells
 who felt beautiful the moment she went to college.
 I am the woman who used to bake and make nasty kitchen mistakes
 who can now clean out the fridge and make a good meal cheap.
 I am the woman who is the product, the daughter,
 the descendant of Mexican immigrants, whose family built the first railroads,
 fought in many wars and continue to today.
 I am the woman who holds a sign for peace
 and marches in the streets of Seattle
 who chose not to go because she did not agree ever
 who writes what she feels and scratches and bleeds
 inside for what is right,
 who fights the machine
 and sometimes gets published.
 I am the woman whose ancestors worked the fields and built the railroads
 crossing the Midwest towing their families in box cars,
 settling down in the plains to go to school long after
 a young pregnant woman swung in a swing designed by her husband
 to keep her from motion sickness and jarring rattling rails.
 I am the woman who came from the woman
 who scrubbed your floors and suckled your young.
 I am from the working poor. I am from the middle class
 caught in the clutches of a cultural gap neither belonging
 to one or the other, an anomaly of class, alone and yet the same;
 born of egg, sperm and space, gestating in a womb nine months,
 born of flesh, blood and bone into a might makes right ruled world,
 among war in its mad dash for blood and gore in Vietnam.

People are marching in the streets now just like then
 against an illegal war. Maybe it's time
 for me to plant my seed of hope in the world,
 my man his seed, my womb, our genes,
 our bulging need to make a difference
 keep spreading the message of love and peace.

I feel more powerful now after the *Latina Monologues*. When I read poems aloud, I am more conscientious of my delivery and eye contact. I try to memorize my poems so that I do not have to read them. While I may hold the paper in my hand for security, I don't necessarily need to unless it's newer. Poems have more impact if you memorize them so you can interact with your audience. I know this now and I try to look up often if I am reading. I try not to muffle the words on the page. When I am teaching a workshop and kids read their work, I tell them to be loud and clear and to lift their heads up while they are reading so we can hear them better.

Now when I write, it may or may not be for the stage or a theatre piece per se, and I know the difference. There are some poems that I know would be better with multiple voices pitching in, and I can see how maybe we would stand or sit on the stage for greater effect or how we might move across the floor while reciting. I might conjure a lower register for a particular stanza and think about who the speaker is, whose voice it is, and who pipes in with various lines amidst the body of the poem. I may consider the background, what can be included on the stage on a screen, to better tell the story visually too.

As proud as I am to be part of the *Latina Monologues* for artistic purposes, for personal development and fulfillment, and pure joy, I see the importance of the work as a collective. Plays like the *Latina Monologues* are even more necessary today because the war on "illegals" is still being waged in this country; especially in a big election year when candidates are showing how tough they can be on undocumented people and when any hint that they would provide a reasonable path for citizenship or any type of immigration reform without separating long established families is seen as being contrary to the American way of life and its people's desires. This makes productions like the *Latina Monologues* all the more relevant.

When we tell our stories and share our experience people learn about us and it is harder to dismiss an entire group of people when you know something about them or empathize with them and their plight or if they are humanized in the least bit. Poland recently provided a path to citizenship for its undocumented people. It made sense from an economic point of view, according to the article I read. I can only hope the United States learns from the example. The state of Utah has also made some humane immigration reform choices of late, in stark contrast to Arizona, so there is hope.

Unfortunately, this past year Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deported more people than ever in the history of the United States; and other states continue to try and enact their own immigration reform in light of the Federal Government's inability to enact legislation, often with dire consequences.

In Alabama right now farmers' fields are going un-harvested and people are afraid to send their children to school. In some places people are afraid to leave their homes for work, school, or church for fear of getting picked up and being deported far from their loved ones. This culture of fear serves no one but those people who want to build new private prisons with tax dollars to house good people who would otherwise contribute to our society and who are contributing currently.

Perhaps someday I will be able to write a poem about how things used to be when families would become separated for lack of documentation and process or mistaken identity. Until then I will continue to write the truth as I see it, and if it becomes a part of the *Latina Monologues* in the future so much the better. Our stories need to be told by us, for us and for the people who can't speak or stand up for themselves for fear of reprisal.

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✿ The Heartlander Experience & Homeward-bound

BY SIFUNDO AKA BE MANZINI

Willie Ney, executive director and founder of the Office of Multicultural Arts Initiatives and First Wave Program, invited me to come out to Wisconsin for their Hip-Hop in the Heartland institute after First Wave performed as part of the Word Champions finale in celebration of London 2012. Word Champions is a creative writing and performance programme I run for underprivileged young people in the Olympic host borough of Newham. It was just shy of a week before the institute I was given and accepted the invitation.

Looking back: to be invited, to be able to attend and bring my son Jamal with me, to be able to fly to the other side of the world, to be an ambassador for the UK, to meet other artists, educators, teachers was one of the most enriching experiences of my career. The people who attended are committed lovers of community and educational activists, so much so I now refer to us as the 'Heartlanders.' This includes the amazing facilitators that we had: Dr. Chris Emdin, Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, Quraysh Ali Lansana, Taylor Mali, Mahogany Brown, Michael Cirelli, Sam Seidel, Dr. Dawn Elissa Fischer (a.k.a the D.E.F. Professor or Dr. D.E.F.) and Adam Faulkner.

I could indeed write pages on each of them individually, but my newfound obsession is with the way things begin and end and the often cyclical nature of that process, so I will focus on the first and last workshops I had. Adam Faulkner's workshop that week was born out of his Dialogue Arts Project which focuses on using writing to explore social identity and notions of it. To be honest I initially resented having to define myself as Black, as African, as Westernized, as young, as old; to categorise my social class, my economic class, my sexuality, my spirituality and all the other things in between. I resented all the spaces it left for me to feel blessed and inspired and angry and sad and ungrateful; to run my fingers over wounds and badges I didn't even know I had. Although that exploration felt like a tunnel, what it became was a route into a question that Dr D.E.F would ask on the last day of the institute. *What is your emancipation pedagogy?* I had never truly considered what my emancipation pedagogy (EP) was until that point. Nevertheless, like my subconscious notions of privilege and position, my EP had been driving me to do the work that I have been doing as an educator for the last decade. What Dr. D.E.F. gave me was the language to be able to articulate and therefore claim the most empowering parts of my privilege and social positioning. This emancipation pedagogy/EP/extended play underscoring the story of my life and career was one I so took for granted I was no longer actively engaging in its rhythm. I had begun to take for granted that my parents were involved in the emancipation of my country of birth. It was only in 1980 that Zimbabwe, then Rhodesia, gained independence and was one of the last of the African nations to do so. It was sharing that story in Dr. D.E.F.'s workshop that allowed me to understand that my (almost evangelical) passion to share the power of spoken word and performance in education came

from a notion of freedom and equality that I had been hearing about since I was a little girl. Before Dr. D.E.F. my story of spoken word would have begun with my own somewhat muted and repressed adult voice and the first time I liberated it by going to a free-styling cypher. This led to performances on stage, which led to commissions, which led to teaching and eventually forming my own spoken word organization. I had just never traced the dots as far as my father's recounting of personal and political history.

The series of poems that you read here are from thoughts I had after processing some of the intense work we did at the institute, primarily formed from what it means to me to teach and to be a poet. When I use those terms I mean Maya Angelou just as I mean Queen Latifah. I mean Lauryn Hill just as I mean Gwendolyn Brooks alongside KRS-One, Common, Dot Rotten and Monie Love. Just as there are contrasts and political contradictions in using those two terms with that list of people, I'm saying it just as I call myself an African and Londoner with truth and pride.

The poems shared here are my "ruff" musings. My passion and love of poetry began with a cypher, free-styling, free-verse, going with the flow; I am honored to have been asked to share my free-writing with you. There are salutes to my inheritances, my upbringing, my love of poetry, of performance, love of community alongside staying on the educational activist or "Heartlander" path. Even in their humble state I send these words off with the hope that my choice and arrangement of them may inspire or provoke thought, emotion and/or a sense of kindredness. If so, then you, and I have the institute and its facilitators to thank.



Homeward-bound

I

Poets are not made
for a tough world, we happily hold
hands with the curl
of consonants, find verbs
that match our mood or shape/shift
our sentences. We are:
the faithful, the addicted,
the dreamers of the day,
the find-the-way-to-sayers,
the histrionic time travelers.
Home is simply the turning
of a page. Our hearts
pulse to the rhythm of applause.

II

I don't want to be open-

eyed, open-mouthed,
open-hearted, open-eyed
sometimes, but still I read.
But still I write.

I write
I write
I write.

III

Black is my renaissance
so I drink the darkest ink
in celebration. And when
Sylvia's sadness is my ghostly stalker
I claim the page for space
to mark our invisible footfall;
to evoke an Amen or Allelujah.
Are you with me
sisters and brothers?
Are you with me?

IV

Home is the turning of a page.

V

Walk, walk, look back. Walk, walk, look back.
Words fall like rain; minds of Mirropane.
Walk, walk, look back ... almost ... almost home.

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☞ American Players Theatre's *The Potency of Poetry*—A Conversation with David Daniel

BY SARAH BUSSE

American Players Theatre has always had a strong educational component to their mission. In 2008, they received funding to develop and test a new offering in the schools, called "The Potency of Poetry." Through this new program, APT invites students to confront language and discover what it has to offer them. "The Potency of Poetry" goes beyond "decoding" language to make it personal, purposeful, provocative and entertaining for the students. It is a dramatic experience that allows them to explore the printed word's total range of possibilities. "The Potency of Poetry" is offered for students in third grade through high school. The three levels are "The Potency of Words" (elementary), "The Poetry of Me" (middle school), and "The Poetry of Us" (high school). I asked David Daniel to describe the different levels and offerings to me. Learn more about APT, its plays and educational offerings at americanplayers.org.

In "**The Potency of Words**," we talk about the necessity, the need for words—where they come from, how they got here. It's fun to look at the different stories behind where language came from.

Then we get into how words are created—I pick words I think they'll have fun with, like *nausea*, which comes from the Greek word meaning "seasickness." Now if you have a ship full of seasick Greeks, what happens when they're all seasick at the same time? From there you get *noise*, and *noisome*... The kids really reach back to the roots of those words, where they sprang from, and they enjoy grabbing onto that.

So you're getting them to look behind the words?

No. And this is a question of teaching style. I don't get them to look *behind* something. I show them what's in front of something. Does that make sense?

No, it doesn't. Explain it to me.

Okay, take the word "alphabet." I would say, "The Phoenicians! They developed this way of communicating with each other, writing things down. They had this symbol for their ox, that looks like a head with antlers, and they called that an *alph*. They also had a house, and that was their *bet*. It looked like the hump of a camel." All we're doing is drawing pictures. Now look what happens when we turn that symbol around. *Oh*... that looks like a letter A. And the light comes on. But we bring them to that. We show how words grow and grow into what they are now.

Then we get into suffixes and root sounds—so they're finding those parts of the words, playing games, let me see if I can guess what this word is, what that word is. And we have them create words. The first step in creating a word is identifying, what needs a word?

So they're actually creating a new word of their own?

Out of the need—so what *is* the need? The need is ... I'm leaning back in my chair and I fall backwards? How does that feel? Embarrassed ... scared ... hurt ... that needs a word. So they take the suffixes and prefixes, they add things in compound words, they squish them all together and come up with a word. Or ... what about when you're really excited and you know the answer? Or you're at the drinking fountain and water splashes up your nose. These are experiences that they have every week routinely, it's going to happen. So let's make a word for it. A word they can use.

Then we've got these new words. How do we record them? How can we remember them? We need to make something—rather than me telling them “This is a dictionary and this is what it's for,” they come at it out of a need. It's real for them.

So with this age group you're looking at words, more than particular texts?

Yes, and the *potency* of them. After they've made up their own words, they've had fun with that, then we give them some vocabulary words, we try to use the vocabulary they're already working on, and I like to try to throw in some vocabulary that's way advanced for them. The teachers will tell me, that's high school. But these kids can see the pieces of each word, this inside-of-that-inside-of-this. So that's the elementary level.

At the middle school level, we have “**The Poetry of Me,**” about language and poetry as expression of the self.

Which is very relevant at that age.

At that age, that's all there is. And so on the first day, we look at why there is poetry—why is the writer writing about this? I need to get this out, I need to show it to somebody, I need to look around and see, there's someone else like me too.

And then, second day, we look at how we are involved, as readers, inside the word or the image or the idea. This is something we developed six or seven years ago, called *metaphor theater*. It's been a very successful workshop on its own, which we've had the privilege of teaching at the Kennedy Center. We take a very dense piece of poetic text, like a passage of Shakespeare, where just getting clear what it says is tricky.

So we go into the classroom, and we take a dense piece of text and build it:

*Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,
Towards Phoebus' lodging: such a wagoner
As Phaethon would whip you to the west,
And bring in cloudy night immediately.*

(Romeo and Juliet, Act III, scene 2)

So Juliet says, “Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,”—And here I am in the classroom: Don’t tell me what it means. What does it say? Gallop: what is gallop? *It’s running ...* Just running? Can anyone gallop? Can the track team? *No, no, it’s gotta be horses ...* Okay, it’s got to be horses. What is the sound of gallop? *It’s like this* (drums on table). Okay, so now we have gallop great! “Gallop apace ...” What is apace? *It means how fast you’re running.* Great, so we get kids up here, three horses, galloping apace. Now, “fiery-footed”—what is that? *It means fast?* Wrong! That’s what it means! Tell me what it says? *Their ... feet are ... on fire?* Yes! I just want to know what it says!

So you’re keeping them at the level of just what it says on the page?

Exactly what it says. It comes out of my experience as an actor. Anyone can tell you what something means. *To them.* Very few people can tell you what it actually says. In metaphor theater, we actually build metaphors using kids to act out every piece of the text... We’re working towards a physiological connection—

It gets back to the body. You actually want them to see, feel the physicality—

With our words, where we come from. Language is the body, speaking. Then you have this huge thing, you have these people acting—and we’re theater people so we like levels and staging, they’re all around—standing on top of the desks, five people over here doing the galloping horses, and I see this moving, living, breathing, fully rich image all around me. And then I can compare it to Juliet’s “Gallop apace you fiery-footed steeds ...” and they’re being crazy and having so much fun...

And then I say, “Or she could have said, ‘I wish it was night.’ What’s the difference?” *Not* which do you like, or which is easier, but what’s the difference. And every time, the students will say, “This way is more rich, it’s more exciting”—and I’ll catch them and say, “Did you just say this was exciting?”

You actually verbalize that?

Absolutely. It’s not to say which version I prefer. It’s about making that distinction—the need and necessity. We’re always getting at that need. So, then, third day, it’s the teaching artist performing poems. Now, by performing I mean ... (interrupts himself) I believe that classical poetry, and most modern poetry, with maybe the exception of modern spoken word poetry, lives complete and whole on the page. All by itself, without any assistance from anyone else other than the reader. But I also believe that a modern reader, especially younger readers, need assistance, need to hear and feel a connection, to model for them what that could be. So the third day, the artist models the connection to the text. And it could be anything from a poem about being locked in a locker looking out through the slats to a poem about having a crush on a boy in science class but he’s more interested in science and he doesn’t notice me and I feel really weird and then you do a third poem “I can’t breathe and my heart races”—and they love it, asking, who did that one? Sappho. She was writing in BC. And they say, *Wait, what?*

So this moves us from “The Poetry of Me” on to the high school level, “**The Poetry of Us.**” One of my personal missions when I was developing “The Potency of Poetry” was to help kids connect not only with themselves and not only with people like them, or people like them from different places and different countries, but with people like them from different times. That’s the big one for me, being a fan of Shakespeare.

It’s a hurdle to get over.

Youth looks at anything in the past as a stepping stone to where we are now. Not as whole and complete in itself. They think that we’re, now, at the top. Everything now is better than what was yesterday.

I don’t think it’s only youth that have that attitude.

Good point (laughing).

So when you perform these poems, you’re choosing texts by various writers, and you’re reading them in front of the class? With the page in front of you?

Some of them. I try to do a mix because, one, I just memorize them and I enjoy them, and two, part of what we’re doing is modeling good interaction with literature. Part of that interaction is memorization, making it a part of you. It’s really fun to perform the texts—it doesn’t mean we’re jumping up and down. Sometimes we are, but think of Billy Collins’ “The Lanyard.” I love the opportunity to perform that poem. To take time. Students, when they’re reading to themselves, often don’t know how—it doesn’t occur to them—to take time to read it, time to speak it. (He speaks a few lines from the poem, taking plenty of time for emphasis):

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard.

And they just go *Wow ... what was that?* So when we perform a poem, it’s not because the poem needs something. I truly believe the poems are complete and whole. It’s that the reader, the listeners, need something that they don’t know they need.

The way you gave the poem space. If you perform it, then the kids can get it—oh, wait a minute. Just because I moved my eyes down the page doesn’t mean I actually read it. I didn’t give it the time Mr. Collins wanted me to give it.

Right. And then there are some poems that want the opposite of that. They need to be read rhythmically, sped up... And the students, when they hear those rhythms come out, they say, *Wow, when you say it like that, that’s different.* It really is key for me to find those poems that touch students, that engage them that way. Not every poem engages every student, but it is my belief and my guide that I am reaching out, and every one of these poems lands on someone, at some point. That’s all it takes. Just one.

No one ever says, I don't like music. What they mean is, I don't like loud music, or fast music, this music or that music, but there's always a music you like. With poetry, it's not that you don't like poetry, but maybe you don't like this, or that, or this, but you like this one over here. There's always something out there. And like music, there are different genres, different instruments, and like music even within the same genre, the same instrument, there are different performers. And even those performers have their sides ... so you can always find someone something.

So do they get to react, during your day of performance?

No! No—which is torture! They hate it! They get mad because they can't talk about the poems.

And they suddenly want to?

They want to! And I had to make the decision as the education director, do we do that? Or is that an opportunity for the teacher? We try to leave the talking to the teachers.... As an actor, we have that spark, that passion. That's our job! To take texts that people think of as "the fiber cereal of literature." Everyone wants the sugar nuke-em pops. No one wants the fiber cereal. The people who say fiber cereal is good for you are the same people who say Shakespeare is good for you. Not a good connection. So we come in and we try to give expression to the life that we think is in that poem, and we do that from hip-hop all the way to Sappho and everywhere in between. And they hear that every poem has its own life and voice.

The fourth day, now they're coming in, and we tell them, "Okay, we didn't tell you this before, but on Friday, tomorrow, everyone is going to be performing a poem." So Thursday is about me helping them find one. Anything goes. In this particular venue bad poetry is just as wonderful as good poetry, because for us it's about inspiring them to engage with the written word.

Then that last day is a performance, either in the classroom, or in assembly for English Nine section, or it can be a schoolwide assembly, which is the best, because then it's family. And the other students who don't have poetry classes are hearing these students, and so everyone's really engaged. It's great. Because we are applauding—we do the snapping thing—it's goofy, it's fun, and it's not clapping. So we snap after every poem. We don't snap for the poet who wrote the poem, we don't snap for the person speaking the poem. We snap because someone had the courage to get up there and do it. Even if I didn't understand them, it's not a public speaking class. It's not a writing class. It's just a sharing poetry—I've been inspired to share poetry with you. I want to celebrate that.

That act.

That act. Just that act. Yes. Can they speak better? Could be. Should we get a microphone? Maybe. Can you help them enunciate? I sure could. But that's not what I'm here for.

I want to get back to—you said something about doing creative writing exercises. Is that part of this program?

It isn't.

As an actor, you deal with plays ... this is a program about poetry. A poem on a page is different from a script ... I'm wondering—they do two different things? Or maybe they don't? Could you talk about the two different kinds of texts? In your mind, what is a poem doing versus what is a play doing? Is there a difference there or are they more similar than people might think?

It's a great question. I think—a poem is complete and whole. There certainly are poems that are written to be performed, and there are plays that are written to be read. But I believe that poetry as a whole stands by itself on the page. That's it. But a play absolutely needs more people. It needs people to speak it, people to watch it.

But a play, okay, I have all of August Wilson's plays at home on my shelf just because I love his language. And I read them, and I just rock out on the language.

But seeing Levee rip open his shirt to show his scar is very different from reading (flat-toned): "Levee opens his shirt, revealing his scar." (He takes on a deep, resonant voice): "That's why I don't trust the white man." Conviction. Conviction. Hard raw stinking conviction in the air.

Then to get back to poetry, somehow, the poet has to get all of that stinking, sweaty conviction right onto the page?

Yes!

And that's where poetry is self-sufficient?

Yes, and that's why I am not a poet. That's hard.

That's why you break down those texts, making it all physical again for those kids, to help them see that it is all there, in the language.

That's right. If there was a real—not an appreciation, but an absolute knowledge of the necessity and practicality of the need of language, we wouldn't need to do that. But I don't think, for whatever reason, and however many generations forward and back you care to say this is endemic of, I think students don't engage with language. That's why I don't think, finally, that "The Potency of Poetry" is really about "poetry" or "Shakespeare" or "literature." It's about language.

🌀 Interview with Matthea Harvey

BY WENDY VARDAMAN

WV: You spent much of your childhood in Wisconsin, and your husband is, I think, from Fond du Lac, but there's a kind of placeless/everyplace feel to your writing—it's nowhere & everywhere at the same time. What sticks with you, if anything, from your time in Wisconsin?

MH: Yes, from age 8–18, I lived in Whitefish Bay, WI. I think my childhood in England is more apparent in the landscapes that are in my poems, at least “In Defense of Our Overgrown Garden” is based on our house in England, and some of the characters in that poem actually lived in my village (Marnhull). That may be the closest I've come to autobiography in a poem! One recent poem that has a distinct, if hidden, Milwaukee inspiration is the poem “You Never Seemed So Human,” a poem about two people getting married while they're also being abducted by aliens. My husband, Rob (who is indeed from Fond du Lac) and I got married at Calatrava's Milwaukee Art Museum, and there really is a wonderful UFO feeling to that main hall space. You've made me realize that I haven't really mined Milwaukee to the extent I might ... stay tuned for poems including Winkie's (a favorite dime store), rabbits dashing through sprinklers, and walking to school with wet hair and arriving with a headful of icicles.

WV: I love the idea of you being biaccental (English/American), as well as bilingual (German/English). What effect has that had on your poetry? Was it difficult to move from England to Milwaukee?

MH: Is that a real term? If not, how lovely that you invented it. It's really hard to know how my writing might be different if, for example, we had stayed in England, or moved back to Germany. All that doubling though may have affected my interest in hybrids, which really came out in *Modern Life*. I've also recently noticed that my children's books sound more English than my poems. None of us wanted to move to Milwaukee particularly, so yes, it was hard.

WV: Do you still have family in Wisconsin? What, if any place, feels like home to you?

MH: My parents live in Bayside and a large percentage of Rob's immediate and extended family lives in Wisconsin. My parents' house feels like home, because it's where we go for the holidays and because of all the traditions that we play out there (reciting poems in front of the Christmas tree, etc.), but New York felt like home to me the first time I came here.

WV: Is it advantageous for writers to live on the coasts, rather than in the Midwest?

MH: I don't know. It probably depends on your temperament. I think it would be advantageous to live in a tree house or in an old train station, but that's just me.

WV: Do you notice differences between the poetry of different American regions—for example, New England versus West Coast versus Midwest? Do we write “regionally” at all anymore, or has the internet, and greater mobility as a culture, erased those differences or drawn new ones?

MH: I think there are people who do write regionally, because that’s their subject matter—the way the sunset looks over a strip mall, memories of flirting at the ice rink, waking up to a deer at the window.... Up to now, that hasn’t been mine. Until your earlier question, I didn’t think there was much place in my poems, but now I see a bit more of England in them. In recent years, since I moved to an apartment across from Prospect Park, I have written more poems about parks, but, mostly, as is my way, the parks are imaginary, and one poem was written before I moved here. Maybe I was park psychic. I don’t think that you can say by any stretch of the imagination that all Wisconsin or Brooklyn-based poets write in a particular way. Similar sensibilities can spring up next to each other in the flower bed, or across oceans.

WV: How did you become a poet? Did you think about doing other things?

MH: I wrote some poems and then I wrote some more. At an early age I remember telling my mother I was going to move to New York to become a writer and at night I would play in the pit orchestra for plays and musicals. That doesn’t sound too bad, does it?

WV: Have you ever felt uncomfortable identifying yourself as a poet? Did you have any poetic failures along the way? How does poetic success—the Kingsley Tufts Award or being a finalist for the 2008 National Book Critics Circle Award—alter your view of your work, or does it? How would you define poetic success?

MH: It’s an admittedly unusual thing to tell a person that writing poetry is your “profession.” Usually I just say “writer,” and maybe now that I write children’s books too, that’s accurate. I really didn’t know it was possible to be a poet until I got to Harvard, and then it just seemed like the most miraculous thing!

I have poetic failures all the time. Many failed poems. I try not to publish those, though some have slipped into each book, since I can’t always tell they’re failures until later ... or I don’t want to admit that they are. I’m thrilled and amazed by the response to *Modern Life*, but it doesn’t change the fact that I’m already working on other projects. Poetic success is when you write a poem that makes you excited and bewildered and aglow.

WV: Have you done other work besides teaching? Do you advise young poets to get an MFA?

MH: Yes, right after grad school, I was the assistant to the chair of the graduate film program at NYU. After that, I worked in development at BOMB magazine for three years, and started doing some teaching on the side. I don’t think an MFA is a requirement, by any means, for being a writer, but it can be a great way to get exposed to new writers (dead and alive) and to have discussions you

might not have alone at your desk, or with your cat.

WV: In addition to your recent and very successful *Modern Life* (2007), you've just published a children's book, *The Little General and the Giant Snowflake*. What drew you to writing for children? Do you plan to do more work for kids? Is writing and publishing for children substantively different than writing poetry?

MH: I never planned to write a children's book. The first one I wrote, *Cecil the Pet Glacier*, (which will be published by Schwartz and Wade) came out of my writing a silly bio for Volt. I said something like "She has a pet glacier called Cecil," which in turn was inspired by having a friend tell me about having a pet snowball called Horsey when she was little. Then I started thinking about how fun it would be to write about a pet glacier! *The Little General and the Giant Snowflake* originated in a very vivid dream. I think the parameters of picture books and chapter books are a bit stricter than in poetry (I was a bit late in learning the rules), and it's a hard market to crack. I'm still learning. It's really thrilling to work with an illustrator (in the same way that having my poems set to music by Eric Moe has completely knocked my socks off)—your vision expands with the addition of someone else's artwork/artistic vision. I am working on two other children's books—*Sod Story*, a tale about a girl called Celia Greenstreet who lives on a turf farm and a leafcutter ant called Leon, as well as an alphabet book with Elizabeth Zechel, called *These Birds Don't Fly: An Alphabet of Absurd Birds*.

WV: You seem like a globally gifted artist—interested in visual art and music as well as writing. You took the photograph on the cover of *Modern Life*, and I read that you studied the flute but don't play any more. How do you make decisions about how to parcel out your artistic time? Is there other art besides poetry writing that you would like to be doing or plan to do?

MH: I don't know about globally gifted—only if it's a miniature globe. Stopping playing the flute was part deciding to concentrate on poetry, part my cat's hatred for the piccolo, and part having a hard time deciding to be an amateur player. At one point, I wanted to play professionally. Nowadays, I'm pretty lenient with myself about time—if I feel like taking photographs of small things inside ice cubes (a current project) or making animal collages, I just do it. When I want to write, I write. It's all part of the same thing for me. I would love to collaborate on a graphic novel with an artist—I'm terrible at drawing but I really love that genre.

WV: Although you obviously pay attention to sound, your poetry is strikingly visual in nature; the imagery is vivid and often surreal. A poem like "Implications for Modern Life," for example, reads as if it might be describing a fictional painting, or an alternate reality. Does visual art have more influence on your poetry than literature does?

MH: Probably yes. Going to museums or galleries always makes me want to write. I love the imaginary worlds in the work of Amy Cutler, Marcel Dzama, and Julie Morstad, Rebecca Horn's mechanical sculptures, the quiet in Agnes

Martin's paintings, Louise Bourgeois' psychological drawings and sculptures, Tom Friedman's miniatures, Gabriel Orozco's clever photographs and Andrea Dezsö's book art. Those are just a few...

WV: You've mentioned your admiration for the films of Hiyo Miyazaki. What other film makers/animators do you admire?

MH: Michel Gondry, Wes Anderson, Jean Painlevé (his more whimsical science films, excluding the psychologically scarring one I recently saw in which a vampire bat slowly drains a guinea pig of all its blood), Pedro Almodovar, Kimberly Peirce, Spike Jonze, Jane Campion, Sylvain Chomet (*The Triplets of Belleville*), Ang Lee, Sam Mendes, Joss Whedon, Miranda July and Werner Herzog.

WV: You went to college at Harvard & Iowa (MFA). What did you study as an undergrad? I'm especially wondering whether you had an interest in math—the math puns in poems like “You know this too” or the photograph you took for the *Modern Life* cover have made me curious about that.

MH: I studied English at Harvard and wrote a creative thesis (a collection of poems), with Henri Cole as my advisor. I am still attached to my incredibly fat and thin-papered Norton Anthology of Literature. When I was little, apparently I wanted to be a math teacher (or a philosopher named Themistocpholes), but I have very little spatial understanding and doing calculus was like repeating the words to a language without knowing what they meant. Maybe that's why nowadays I seem to be mostly interested in simple division—half cat, half goat or half robot, half boy. I like that dominoes look like they're fractions—even when you've made the dots out of photographs of blackberries submerged in milk (the photograph I took for the cover of my last book *Modern Life*). I keep meaning to actually learn how to play dominoes.

WV: What poets have influenced your work? What contemporary poets do you enjoy reading?

MH: I'm very bad at identifying influence, but some of the greats I adore are Wallace Stevens, Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, Henri Michaux, W. H. Auden, John Berryman... In terms of contemporary poets, I read anything and everything—Russell Edson, Tomas Tranströmer, Claudia Rankine, Anne Carson, Cathy Park Hong, Jen Bervin, Kay Ryan, Mary Ruefle, Timothy Donnelly, Brenda Shaughnessy, Terrance Hayes, Lisa Jarnot...

WV: I think of your poetry as imaginative, whimsical, witty, mysterious, cerebral, and distant or private. Do you make the conscious decision to avoid the personal?

MH: No—it just seems to happen. I guess I'm a bit of a projector—my emotions tend to get translated into different, fanciful situations. I did recently write one very straightforward poem, but I'm not sure it's any good. I'll have to sit with it for a while. I don't find the “autobiographical me” very interesting—I work much more from my ideas than from my actual experiences. On the other

hand, I'm often enthralled by other people's "I's."

WV: Do you see your work as related to a tradition of American women poets or not? If you were teaching yourself to students, who else would you include in the course?

MH: Let's hope I never teach myself to my students! I'm certainly an American woman poet, and many of my favorite writers are from that group, but it's such a large category, I'm not sure it means that much. Umbrellas always miss an elbow or a knee. I'd like to be on the syllabus for an interdisciplinary course which would include Tom Phillips' *A Humument*, artwork by Nina Katchadourian, Kara Walker and Hannah Höch, fiction by Kelly Link, Aimee Bender, Lydia Davis and Etgar Keret, nonfiction by Anne Fadiman, and graphic novels by Shaun Tan, Paul Hornschemeier, Chris Ware and Gabrielle Bell.

WV: Poets like Billy Collins and Ted Kooser have made a conscious decision to write to an audience. What do you think about the notion of "accessible poetry"?

MH: I think all poetry is accessible in a certain sense if you spend enough time with it. Poems tend to have instructions for how to read them embedded in their language. I don't think all poems need to be written in conversational language—those are often great poems but there should also be poems of incoherent bewilderment and muddled mystery.

WV: You're an extremely funny, maybe grimly funny, poet. "The Future of Terror/6," for example, is full of puns and logical non sequiturs. Could you tell me a little about the significance to you of humor in poetry? Do you make an effort to include humor in your poems?

MH: No. I think that's just my sensibility. I do it automatically. I think the humor tends to happen when I'm writing about darker subjects—if one hand plays the black keys the other hand jumps in to press the white keys.

WV: Although your work isn't "formal" in a traditional sense, you clearly have an interest in form. "The Future of Terror" and "Terror of the Future" series in *Modern Life* take the abecedarium/zebecedarium, a type of poem that Wisconsin poet Karl Elder (*Gilgamesh at the Bellagio*) has worked with extensively, but bend the rules considerably. What role does form play in your work?

MH: The "Future of Terror" and "Terror of the Future" series uses a modified abecedarian technique—moving alphabetically between the words terror and future (forwards and backwards). I love when form plots out a path you couldn't have seen before—it's like suddenly having to maneuver through a room full of laser beams—you're suddenly doing a dance you couldn't have invented without those restrictions. Usually form seems to find me in the process of writing a poem, though I have nothing against starting out with the form, as I did with a recent erasure. Erasures are exciting to me because they're another way to let go. You have this one page of text and you have to find your poem in that selection of words. When I have my students do erasures, I'm always amazed by the way their voice comes through, whether they're doing an erasure of a romance novel

or an encyclopedia. Your sensibility will out. We humans have an amazing way of making everything personal.

WV: You're a particularly skilled writer of the prose poem, and I love how that fits into your thematic program—half poem, half fiction. Do you view the prose poem as a form, and has it become more important to you than other kinds of poems? What, if anything, does it allow you to do that other forms don't?

MH: I do love the prose poem because it's such a perverse and provocative little box—always asking to be questioned, never giving a straight or definitive answer. I like how it gives a feeling of containment to the words within. It's a form of sorts, but a pretty loose one. I let my narrative embroidering impulses take over in prose poems.

WV: Many of the poems in *Modern Life* could be characterized as science-fiction. Could you talk about your interest in that genre?

MH: Well, sci-fi television shows like *Battlestar Galactica* and *V* seem to be on the upswing, and I'm all for it. Ditto for vampires. When I was younger, my sci-fi interests tended towards Anne McCaffrey's dragon series. One of my favorite contemporary sci-fi novels is Jonathan Lethem's *Girl in Landscape*, which I often assign to my poetry workshops. That book features creatures called Archbuilders who give themselves inspired names like Hiding Kneel, Truth Renowned, Gelatinous Stand and Lonely Dumptruck as well as little hard-to-see creatures called housedeer.

WV: What are you working on right now? Do you have an interest in hybrid forms?

MH: The last few months I've been obsessed with taking photographs of miniatures inside of ice cubes. I think I've ended up with two series, each of which is titled with an ice cube containing a scrap of paper with text on it. One series is titled "Help" and features tiny people and animals trapped in ice cubes. The other, "Stay," is a series of topsy-turvy chairs frozen into place. I think they may be some kind of ice poem rebuses. So yes, I am pretty interested in hybrid forms. I love graphic novels and I think there should be more graphic poems in the world. I'm also interested in concrete poems—anything that complicates the line between the written and the visual. Some of the poems I'm working on now have photographs as titles and others have cutout silhouette titles—so, for example, a poem called "My Octopus Orphan" is a silhouette of an octopus with those letters cut out of the silhouette. I'm also working on a book called *Of Lamb*, with the artist Amy Jean Porter. It's an erasure of a Charles Lamb biography and Amy is doing these wild and independent drawings to go along with the words. I'm also working on designing a two-sided poster with the artist Adam Shecter for a project called 2-UP, where artists and writers co-create a poster.

WV: What else do you do when you're not writing or teaching?

MH: This fall I've been on a reading tear—three or four books a week. Recently

I read Audrey Niffenegger's *Her Fearful Symmetry*, four novels by Lionel Shriver, and the letters between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell. I'm taking my third photography class at the International Center for Photography, and loving it, though this week we are supposed to do self-portraits and I would rather pull out all my teeth. And lately, I've been planning a book party for *The Little General and the Giant Snowflake*. My illustrator and dear friend has made a giant stuffed lemming, which we're going to raffle off, and I'm working on a lemming cocktail called a "Lemming Fizz." Lastly, I'm trying to write a poem about a kangamouse, for a website called Underwater New York. You pick an item that has been found abandoned on a beach. I love the kangamouse—it's pink and speckled with rust. It has only one ear and a little heart-light. The problem I'm having is that it's already a poem without words.

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ON THE MAP—
ECOPOETICS,
POETICS OF PLACE

✿ Interview with Kimberly Blaeser

BY WENDY VARDAMAN

Kimberly Blaeser, a Professor at University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, teaches Creative Writing, Native American Literature, and American Nature Writing. Her publications include three books of poetry: Trailing You, winner of the first book award from the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas, Absentee Indians and Other Poems, and Apprenticed to Justice. Her scholarly study, Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition, was the first native-authored book-length study of an indigenous author. Of Anishinaabe ancestry and an enrolled member of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe who grew up on the White Earth Reservation, Blaeser is also the editor of Stories Migrating Home: A Collection of Anishinaabe Prose and Traces in Blood, Bone, and Stone: Contemporary Ojibwe Poetry. Blaeser's current mixed genre project, which includes her nature and wildlife photography as well as poetry and creative nonfiction, explores intersecting ideas about Native place, nature, preservation, and spiritual sustenance.

Blaeser's poetry, short fiction, essays, and critical works have been widely anthologized in national and international collections with pieces translated into several languages including Norwegian, Indonesian, Spanish, Hungarian, and French. Translated works have also been included in exhibits and publications around the world, most recently in Norway and Indonesia.

Blaeser, who has lectured or read from her work throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, and Asia, has been the recipient of awards for both writing and speaking. Among these are a Wisconsin Arts Board Fellowship in Poetry and a Writer of the Year Award from Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers. Her poem "Living History" was selected for installation in the Wisconsin Center in Milwaukee, one of her talks was chosen by Writers' Conferences and Festivals for inclusion in the organization's anthology of best lectures, and she was chosen to inaugurate the Western Canada Lecture Series. She is a past vice president of Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers, and currently serves on the advisory board for the Sequoyah Research Center, and on two American Indian Literature series boards for university presses.

A former journalist, Blaeser continues to indulge her interest in nature photography. She lives with her husband and children in the woods and wetlands of rural Lyons Township, Wisconsin, and spends part of her year in a remote cabin in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Other ongoing projects include collaborating with her son and daughter on books for children and a mixed-genre collection, Tinctures of a Family Tree.

WV: Tell me about ecopoetry. How is it different (or is it?) from nature poetry?

KB: For me, what distinguishes ecopoetry from nature poetry is the embedded understanding of responsibility. Or response-ability, as I like to characterize it, so that the word suggests a relationship. That relationship involves a spiritual vision, being responsible by being engaged in the life processes. This aligns with a

Native idea of reciprocity, a give and take relationship. And this active involvement with an alive world space—our responsive action, fuels our growth—our abilities. The more we pay attention to the natural world, the more we understand it; the more we understand it, the better able we are to act appropriately in a fashion that will help sustain all life. As fellow habitants of this world space, we live implicated in the state of the universe. A poetry that proceeds from or reflects this understanding is, in my view, ecopoetry. Now the poetry might be engaged in a simple act of attention or it might be involved in a more activist endeavor—critiquing dangerous practices or inciting involvement in political endeavors, but ecopoetry as I define it arises from an awareness of the entwined nature of all elements in our world, has as philosophical foundation an understanding of the interdependence of universal survival, and carries within it a sense of accountability.

And, of course, it alludes to or embodies this awareness through or within the aesthetically charged language of poetry.

WV: With respect to your own poetry, do you prefer the term ecopoetry, or are you writing nature poems or post-pastoral ones?

KB: Of course, not all my poetic work is of the same tenor, nor do the various pieces succeed to the same degree poetically. But I do strive towards writing that voices respect for the natural world and that attempts to incite a similar response in the reader/listener. Although I don't weigh this in the writing of each poem, overall I think it fair to say I aspire to create poetry of spirit and witness, and many times the focus involves various kinds of survival, including ecological survival. On the journey toward that vision of sustainability, I think the writing wanders through several dimensions, crossing literary boundaries of what is being called post-pastoral, ecopoetry, and spiritual poetry (maybe also sharing some qualities of the contemporary metaphysical tradition).

WV: Do you think of ecopoetry as primarily an artistic/aesthetic movement, an ethical one, neither, or both? Does being an ecopoet require activism?

KB: Both/and. You knew it wouldn't be either/or! Seriously, coming out of a Native literary tradition which includes ceremonial songs and song poems, I always expect poetry to "matter." Indigenous literatures often have what I call "supra-literary intentions." The writers/performers want their works to come off the page and do something in the world. In articulating this aesthetic that involves both art and activism, I often invoke Seamus Heaney's discussion in *The Redress of Poetry* in which he claims a vision of poetry as both affective and effective, seeing it as "joy in being a process for language" as an "agent for proclaiming and correcting injustices." I also love Linda Hogan's expression of this duality in her poem "Neighbors" in which she writes both, "This is the truth and not just a poem," and "This is a poem and not just the truth."

So I do think it involves activism. The range of what this might entail is vast. It could be demonstrating, cleaning up natural sites, doing animal rescue, writing letters, voting. And it is important to remember that in some circumstances even to speak is a revolutionary act. Indeed, writing political poetry in an

environment that sees that as an anachronism might also be considered activism.

WV: Does ecopoetry demand activism from its readers, too?

KB: I think ecopoetry *asks* of its readers/listeners for change. Some works demand more specific or greater activism. Allison Hedge Coke's recent book *Blood Run* asks readers to participate in various ways in protecting a snake effigy mound in South Dakota and a portion of the book proceeds go to the cause. Linda Hogan's work often rhetorically incites the readers in phrases such as "Get Up, Go AWOL!"

On the most basic level, I think all ecopoetry asks for change. Poetically it works to alter the reader's vision or understanding. Such heart change should bear fruit in attitude and action. I remember a poem by Mary Oliver called "Red." The poem is a simple narrative in which the speaker confesses her longing to see a gray fox. In separate incidents she encounters two, each hit by a car, each dying as cars continue to flood by. Hence the gray fox becomes the red of the title, red like the spilled blood of each. As the narrator witnesses the death of the fox, the reader witnesses her soul change—from one who desires to "collect" the experience of seeing a gray fox to one who mourns the callousness with which they are being destroyed.

So perhaps the poet becomes the "seer" (and I mean that in both senses of the word). Through the images and detail of the poetry we can see in all their wondrous beauty places, elements, cycles, and creatures of the natural world. And the poet might also become the vehicle by which we can vicariously learn to see differently; they may become like the prophetic seer of ancient times who reveals, unveils, predicts, or even warns. Ecopoetry asks that readers take heed of the re-visioning they are offered.

WV: Are there particular themes or images that characterize ecopoetry? I'm thinking of the dissolution of boundaries and the permeability of boundaries, for instance, in much of what I've read—there's a lot of transformation, as well as an exploration of human versus non-human.

KB: Thinking of this tradition in poetry, I believe the ideas of transcendence and transformation both play a key role in the philosophy. In my own work, the notion of correspondence is equally important as is the understanding of time as a limited linguistic construction. I think all of these suggest the permeability of boundaries you have alluded to. They suggest a comingling, and invoke or become a strategy or pathway for discovering the eternal, the ephemeral, the immaterial. And, although some works do set up a kind of human/non-human dichotomy, I most admire works that tend to undermine the supremacy of the egocentric and individualistic. I think of a slight poem by Chinese poet Li Po. In the translation I have, the title is "Zazen on the Mountain" and the last two lines read: "We sit together, the mountain and me,/ until only the mountain remains."

WV: Are there any forms, structures, or aesthetic elements that characterize ecopoetry? (The haiku, for instance, seems particularly important.)

KB: Just as in the Li Po poem the ego disappears, in haiku even the language of the poem dissolves into experience, or some would say into enlightenment. I have a great affinity for haiku and I love to write them, but I have to say—and this is not false modesty—I am by no means a master of the form. But because I am so enamored of the practice, I do often write haiku. Poetically, that striving after simple image is a wonderful discipline; and the spiritual discipline of Zen often associated with haiku also enriches the haiku quest.

In regards to other themes and forms, I think the object poem and the ode have also been used to good effect by eco-poets. We find fruitful predecessors in some of Neruda's odes, odes that center on the chestnut or a yellow bird but, in so doing, gesture to much beyond, to the order and chaos and larger beauty and mystery of the world, to the smallness of the chestnut, the bird, and, yes, to our own smallness. Other times (as in the "Red" poem mentioned above) the narrative form is used as the speaker of the poem relates an experience that leads to personal change. And I would point to similarities shared with naturalists or natural history writers. In this vein, the listing poem is sometimes employed, as a catalogue or accumulation of details provides, for example, a feeling for the essence of a particular place.

WV: A few of the names I often see mentioned in connection with eco-poetry nationally include Mary Oliver, Wendell Berry, Joy Harjo, W.S. Merwin, Gary Snyder, Patiann Rogers. Which poets do you think of or particularly enjoy, and who would you recommend to a reader that wants to get an idea of what eco-poetry is?

KB: I'm a bit eclectic in my gathering of poets. I am a great fan of Mary Oliver and Joy Harjo, both of whom you mention and whose styles differ quite dramatically. But I am entranced by both. Oliver's *West Wind*, for example, blends so lovingly the intricacies of nature and the poetic calling, sometimes aching and almost in the ecstatic tradition. Joy Harjo is often a poet of grit and, as she says, of "truth telling." She is one of a handful of Native poets whose work has had an influence on the direction I've taken in my writing over the years. I don't think I could aspire to the wild unfettered range of her imaginative vision, but I love the way she welcomes story and mythic reality into the everyday world, and the vigor with which she carries forth stories of injustice.

Other poets: David Wagoner visited Notre Dame while I was a student there and I have been grateful to follow his fine work. I admire the writing of Linda Hogan in every genre in which she works. Her life and her creative work are both filled with a dedication to the earth and all its inhabitants. There is an attention to detail and an overriding awareness of timelessness that I appreciate in the writing of Robert Hass. Like many people, I am fascinated by Coleman Barks' translations (and performances) of the poetry of Rumi and much of this writing is filled with a kind of spiritual search interwoven with an evocation of the lushness of nature.

Because poets tend to address multiple subjects, in addition to following the work of particular poets, I find it helpful to keep my eye out for thematic anthologies. One that I found and have used in teaching several times is *A Book*

of *Luminous Things* edited by Czeslaw Milosz (who I was also lucky enough to hear at Notre Dame). *Poetry Comes Up Where it Can*, edited by Brian Swann, is an anthology of works published first in *The Amicus Journal* and all the works deal with nature and the environment. Another anthology, *Poems to Live By In Uncertain Times*, edited by Joan Murray, includes among its larger gathering a couple of sections of works we could call ecopoetry.

WV: Does ecopoetry mean the same thing to a Native and a non-Native poet? Perhaps that's a too broad and binary way to frame the question, but I'm curious in general about the extent to which the interest in "eco" right now is driven by Native sensibilities, and whether it is a co-option of them in any way?

KB: I've partially characterized the Native understanding of ecology when I spoke about the philosophy of reciprocity and response-ability. Whether for some practitioners the current literary eco-trend involves any kind of "co-option" of Native sensibility or a stereotypic amalgamation of complex and varied tribally specific systems of beliefs, I think the more interesting tension involves a divergence in origin or function—the crossover between acts of resistance and the literature of resistance.

Let me elaborate. Because historically Native people have faced destruction of homelands, removal, and land theft, I think the undertones in Native works often involve conflict and loss. Also, given the ecological devastation witnessed over the years from clear-cutting of forests to the decimation of animal populations like the buffalo to the pollution caused on tribal lands by mining and industry, the inheritance of oppression has fueled the need to assume a role as defender of the earth and of sacred lands. It might be fair to suggest that the literary eco-tradition in Native communities has arisen largely from political need while the eco-tradition in non-Native communities originated more as an aesthetic movement. I believe the two have come closer together in recent years and that important alliances have formed. A recent multi-genre collection, *Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural World*, explores these separate and overlapping traditions and stories.

The published work of Native writers such as Marilou Awiakta, Haunani-Kay Trask, and Elizabeth Woody includes examples of poetry that had its origin in ecological activism. In this complicated terrain, let me offer a specific instance of a poetic work that explores this eco-warrior stance as it pertains particularly to America, Native America, and the land that is home to both. *Fight Back: For the Sake of the People, For the Sake of the Land*, by Acoma writer Simon Ortiz, was published in commemoration of the Pueblo Revolt that took place 300 years earlier, but it also explicitly deals with uranium mining in the Grants region of New Mexico and the fallout from the atomic bomb detonation at White Sands. Although covering much other ground in these poems, Ortiz underscores the need for Native peoples to "fight/ to show them" and for America to "give back" so "the land will regenerate."

WV: Many of your poems about the natural world have strong narrative and spiritual components, and they tend to include people or animals who are sentient creatures. I'm thinking, for instance, of "Memories of Rock" or

“Seasonal: Blue Winter, Kirkenes Fire.” Is that a fair way to characterize your approach?

KB: Yes, that seems an accurate representation. I admit I find it hard to characterize my own approach, because as artists and spiritual beings, we are always in a process or search for insight. I may ask or imply a similar question across a range of several poems, not only because I want a reader to contemplate the philosophical territory, but because I am treading there beside you, wondering too.

One tack I do recognize is my attempt to break down various classic demarcations. For example, the class line between what is alive and what is supposedly inert matter. Even science no longer backs up the “dumb matter” assumptions.

Sometimes I use narrative in service of defamiliarization. Mythic depth or dimension allows us to imagine or admit an “other” range of realities. Perhaps it turns or changes the hierarchy, the power structure. Perhaps it allows for different ways of knowing, employs alternate languages, or dis-orders sense data. If we come back from such a linguistic journey with one small cog liberated from the “must-be machine” of our everyday, our experience of “reality” will change.

WV: In “Seasonal: Blue Winter, Kirkenes Fire,” you write, “So soul rest comes upon the Nordic land/ and upon its ancient reindeer people./ The tired water sleeps as ice/ and we glide upon its hardened body/ and slowly turn the earth with our prayers.” The notion that we do “turn the earth with our prayers” or that lands and people have souls seems to me one that could be offered sincerely within a Native worldview but would more likely be meant ironically by a non-Native author. Is that a fair distinction to make?

KB: I am not certain the belief, understanding, or possibility implied only exists within a Native context. What is often generalized as a Western worldview might process the meaning differently, but not all non-Western sensibilities would do so. And, of course, poetic language itself is not strictly representational. The figurative ambiguity poetry suggests aligns with the complexity of what we call truth or understanding. Sometimes reality itself belies the dictates of logic.

So how do we or should we read such passages? Of course, we might engage in the fact/fabulism debate. Choctaw Louis Owens greatly objected when the term “magical realism” was applied to certain elements of Native writing, including his own novelistic representations of ghosts. For example, he writes that James Welch’s Blackfoot world was “rendered so completely ... there is no disjuncture between the real and the magical, no sense that the magical is metaphorical.... The sacred and the profane interpenetrate irresistibly, and this is reality.”

I might suggest that a purely cause and effect view in regards to the above passage is too simplistic. The subtle interconnections between forces remain a mystery. We create stories or myth about the visible as a way of approaching understanding and helping us gain access to the invisible or ineffable. The

meaning we garner may not come from a formulaic model of equivalency or logical sequence such as x equals y or x therefore y .

Barre Toelken tells of the questions he raised about the Pueblo tradition of removing the heels of your shoes in the springtime to protect the earth mother who is pregnant. He wondered if he kicked the ground it would mess everything up and keep plants from growing. The reply was inconclusive about the outcome; “I don’t know whether that would happen or not, but,” the speaker declared, “it would just really show what kind of person you are.”

Relationship requires ritual. Is it symbolic or does it have measurable consequences? On one hand, it certainly affects those who engage in ritual or ceremonial practices. Would it be naïve to suggest that in the context of science (as well as story) we affect the fate of the earth? What seems untenable may sometimes be true. Can the Tibetan monks “think” wet towels dry? What of chaos theory and the butterfly effect?

All that is to say, maybe not. Maybe the gesture of that poetic language refuses to finally center on only literal or only metaphorical (or ironic) meaning or belief. Perhaps the outcome is really the question you ask—how might we understand this and what does it mean if we read it in these different ways? Maybe we stay in a state of questioning long enough to feel possibility. That is different than simple refutation of so called “facts.”

WV: Which Native American poets and writers would you recommend (contemporary or otherwise) as a good beginning for someone who hasn’t read much Native literature?

KB: I’ve already mentioned several: Linda Hogan, Simon Ortiz, and Joy Harjo are three internationally recognized contemporary Native poets. I’ve also spoken about Allison Hedge-Coke as a strong eco-writer and she is fast gaining recognition. There are a host of other wonderful poets. Among the well-established are N. Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich, Gerald Vizenor (mainly for haiku), Joe Bruchac, Jim Barnes, Luci Tapahonso, Carter Revard, Sherman Alexie, and Ofelia Zepada. Some strong younger or more regional poets include Heid Erdrich, Mark Turcotte, Margo Tamez, Armand Ruffo, Denise Sweet, Laura Tohe, Gordon Henry, Janet McAdams, LeAnne Howe, Eric Gansworth, and Gloria Bird. Still younger break-out writers right now include Sherwin Bitsui, Santee Frazier, and Brandy McDougall. There are many more whose work I admire, and I’d like to refer you to a longish essay of mine on Native poetry, “Cannons and Canonization: American Indian Poetries Through Autonomy, Colonization, Nationalism, and Decolonization,” in *The Columbia Guide to American Indian Literatures of the United States Since 1945*. It includes a bibliography of Native poets up to about 2005. There is a wonderful rich tradition in Native poetry and almost every writer can be read in conjunction with the tradition of ecology of land, mind, and spirit.

WV: Appreciating the sophistication of writing that isn’t familiar often requires new knowledge and the willingness to move in different directions, even to expand our notions of what poetry can be. I’m thinking for instance of different

aesthetics, the significance of oral tradition, uses of humor, the dividing line between prose and poetry. Are there any differences that would be particularly helpful for readers to be aware of when they first come to Native poetry?

KB: I think it might be accurate to describe the earliest years of Native poetry publishing as a “movement,” or the poets as forming a particular “school” of writing. That is not to say the Native writers were not also aware of or engaged in the larger American or world poetry movements. There were, however, political, literary, cultural, and personal interconnections in their work; and, taken together, the writing of these and subsequent indigenous poets attest to the possibility of a “Native Poetics.” Infused with echoes of the song poems and ceremonial literatures of the tribes, born out of indigenous revolution, filled with the dialogues of intertextuality, sometimes linked to the cadences and constructions of “an-other” language, marked by the symbolism and ethical considerations of “an-other” culture, replete with mythic and intergenerational narrative, frequently self-conscious of expectations placed on Native literature, and often resistant to genre distinctions and formal structures—the works do suggest a certain literary sovereignty and an attempt to create a community-based literature.

Each of these qualities in themselves is more complex. The choice of language—Native, English, mixed—for example clearly impacts sound and structure. Often the intertextuality results in a multi-vocality; the mythic grounding in an implied dual-narrative. Cultural conceptions like those regarding time, dreaming, or ideas of good or bad behavior influence the ontological reality in which a poem exists and also how it “means.”

Perhaps one aspect, the link to oral tradition that you allude to, is most readily understandable. If the work arises out of a performative tradition or the poets are heir to or participants in such a Native tradition, the impacts might include: ultra-sensitivity to the spoken or heard quality of the poem; expectations for the engagement of the reader/listener; and attempts to suggest the layered quality of ritual or ceremony by the inclusion perhaps of vocables, song, drum sounds, etc. Peter Blue Cloud, for example, has several poems that include two parts presented in separate columns on the page, thus suggesting the simultaneous spoken, one score perhaps performing as a chorus. Often poems employ space, absence, and various kinds of gesture to leave room for the participation of the audience in the “making” of the art or the “making” of meaning.

As is true of reading any poetry, the more you bring to the page regarding origin, specialized language, symbolism, etc., the more fulfilling will be the engagement with the piece. Native poetry is often readily accessible on certain levels, and its beauty and complexity grow with our ability to appreciate or understand other levels of performance or meaning.

WV: One difference that’s gotten a fair amount of attention is the relative emphasis on poetry as “original” and “individual” in Western art and literature, as opposed to being the collaborative product of a traditional community. Is this a valid distinction to make? (I sometimes think that Western art is much more collaborative than many of us were taught—I always think, for example, of the

Renaissance studio as a model for artists working together in visual art). Are we starting to appreciate collaboration more than we used to?

KB: I alluded to this a bit in talking about multi-vocality, performativity, and dual narrative. But on a philosophical level the sense of “carrying” the story rather than “creating” it impacts a poet’s stance. This idea of ongoing telling is most readily apparent in works that verbally declare “That’s what she said” or that include the other voices or telling within the current version. One of my own poems I build partly from lines of other contemporary Native poets and in the epilogue of *Absentee Indians* I actually tell the story of one particular collaboration by Native grade school students. Of course, the idea of “authority” is diminished in such practices. Some might find this problematic. But I have seen in Native poetry, not the “anxiety of influence” written about by Harold Bloom but instead a “celebration of influence.”

My own sense is that this community space and the community-based art that ensues from it has experienced a resurgence throughout the US in our lifetime. The eat local, vacation local, and in UW–Milwaukee’s case, read local movement is flourishing.

WV: Cave Canem has been very successful as an organization that promotes and develops poetry within the African American community—is there anything comparable for Native writers/artists?

KB: Since the creation of “Returning the Gift,” an international Native writers’ festival, the first of which was held in 1992, there has been an adjunct organization called Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers. Together these two have fostered Native writing in a variety of ways including through mentorship, an online community, a newsletter, some publications, and regular regional and national gatherings. In conjunction with these two groups, an annual competition is also held for a first collection of poetry and a first collection of fiction, with the awards including publication of the works. Plus there is an informal community of Native writers who work together within the AWP and there are two major Native writing centers: the En’owkin Center in Penticton, British Columbia and the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. Together these organizations and community groups have been largely responsible for fostering a new generation of indigenous writers in the Americas. By the way, plans are underway to hold the 20th anniversary Returning the Gift festival in Wisconsin in 2012.

WV: Are there barriers to Native American poets publishing and finding an audience? What can we do to change that?

KB: Native poets and poetry face many of the same obstacles that plague other “minority” literatures, especially romanticized image and stereotypic expectations. Society at large, influenced by classic westerns, captivity narratives, and familiar images like those popularized by Edward Curtis, has a simplified idea of what “Indian” literature should be. If the works do not fulfill these romantic and often over-generalized expectations, they may not be seen as “authentic.” There are also often special series for publishing Native work and publishing houses may resist

their inclusion in regular releases from the press. Native writers might be included in special issues of journals more readily than in the normal yearly cycle or their submissions might be expected to always arise out of some aspect of their Native identity. Nominations for awards, too, are often for those that include the word “minority.” This pigeonholing happens to poets of every persuasion but perhaps more frequently to poets classified by race.

The question this raises involves tenets of evaluation: what makes “good” poetry and does “beauty” or “goodness” differ significantly in a Native tradition as compared to a Western one? Can the work of Native poets meet standards set by one or another awarding agency? If so, does that mean it acquires the particular patina required by the awarding agency, or that the awarding agency can recognize beauty in different aesthetic traditions?

Regardless of the answers to these questions, I think the tradition in Native poetry is strong and thriving. I am honored to be a part of this movement at this vital point in history.

WV: Are there any trends to watch for in Native American poetry? Are those similar to or different from poetry in general?

KB: There are some interesting thematic trends I have noticed. Among certain younger poets, there is a self-conscious rejection of the verbal kingpins that have signified much about a familiar and influential Native history. For example, the experiences of reservation life, removal, relocation, and boarding schools have informed much of the work by early and contemporary Native poets. Navajo poet Esther Belin employs the acronym URI for Urban Raised Indian, signifying a different experience from her predecessors. Comanche Sy Hoahwah crosses old mythologies with that of the new Indian Mafia.

Sometimes these new experiences have fueled experiments in form as well. The late First Nation poet Marvin Francis, for example, created a unique long poem, *City Treaty*, that includes text boxes, stage directions, a host of textual variations, and symbols from dollar signs to crows’ feet.

In general though, although there are new trends and interesting new voices, some continuities regarding cultural context continue. And these cultural continuities might also link Native poetry communities in the States with global indigenous communities. I have witnessed rich cross pollination internationally among indigenous writers.

WV: Tell me about how you became interested in poetry. Did you write poems as a child, and if you did, who or what inspired you to do that? How and when did you decide to become a “professional poet”?

KB: The love of language is in many ways a gift we inherit. I did write as a child and one of the strong influences on me came from the habit of the oral in my environment, my life within a family that performed story as an everyday act. Both my immediate and extended families at White Earth were filled with talented and colorful storytellers. I grew up amid people who not only made of

the everyday incidents lively accounts but who sang, recited, teased, imitated, read out loud—whose entertainment was often joyful verbal exchanges. Since poetry, especially, depends deeply upon the heard element of language, upon the music of voice, the rhythms of sound, spaces, accents, I think I was drawn to the genre partly by my fascination with the soundings of poems.

Although I wrote and published in various capacities and in different genres throughout my years in school, it wasn't until 1990 when I did a short fundraising tour in Minnesota with Winona LaDuke and Gordon Henry as part of the White Earth Land Recovery Project that I began publishing as a poet. I had performed some creative pieces at our presentations, and was approached after one event about submitting to a small regional publication, *Loonfeather*. With that first publication and my participation in the 1992 Returning the Gift festival, I entered a wonderful network of writers.

WV: How did growing up with mixed Anishinabe and German ancestry affect your poetry?

KB: I have written about my German grandfather in a couple of poems, but my German grandmother died before I was born. Maybe because of her absence, or maybe simply because we lived on the reservation with strong connections to all my Indian relatives, the German heritage did not figure as strongly (as specifically German) in my life. There were certainly influences—German Catholicism, songs and smatterings of language, foods, etc., but my dad didn't think of himself as "German" in the way my mother understood herself as Indian. The language, too, was employed differently. My grandpa used to talk in German to my dad and his siblings about anything he didn't want the grandkids to understand. So it was in some ways a "private" language. But in my Indian family, we were encouraged to learn and use the Ojibwe language.

Of course, the whole dynamic was more complex than those few statements makes it seem. My sense of being a "mixedblood" certainly arises from the circumstances of my family, and perhaps my dad felt his own heritage less welcome in some ways. I do know that as he aged he seemed to remember more, or perhaps he shared more as I encouraged him to tell me more. As he aged, his memory was also fitful. When I was to do a short reading tour in Germany, before I left I asked quite a bit about family origins, and he was hazy. When I returned with stories of encounters around the Blaeser name, his memories seemed to come more clearly.

At any rate, I try to celebrate both. In poems like "Family Tree" that is clear. There is another poem, not yet gathered in a book, that is specifically about the sausage-making tradition that comes from my dad's family but hearkens after a meaning that has more to do with the making of community and memory.

WV: Who are some of your favorite poets or those who have influenced your work?

KB: I've named several of the established writers already in previous answers: Linda Hogan, Simon Ortiz, N. Scott Momaday, Joy Harjo, Pablo Neruda, Mary

Oliver, translations of the haiku masters Basho, Issa, and Buson, translations of the work of Rumi, David Wagoner, Robert Hass. I read quite a bit of Baudelaire in translation and some in French when my language skills were better and certain of his poems have always stayed with me. I also grew up reading, hearing, sometimes memorizing long narrative poems like those by Whitman and Poe as well as work by e. e. cummings, Hopkins, Blake, Frost, and Dickinson. Once the language, cadence, and stance inhabit us, they stick. So that canonical background played together with or against poets on the margin has affected my work on many levels. Others poets include Dylan Thomas, Carolyn Forché, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Adrian Louis, and Louise Erdrich.

I've encountered some writers first by reading their poetry for a class assignment, others in the back room of some bookstore while scanning a stack of obscure small press books with faded covers. I came to the work of certain poets first by hearing them perform in association with particular events or movements. Of course, our affinities may change over time, but we still carry the cacophony of these diverse poems and voices. We never really know how they spill over into our own writing. Sometimes I consciously sit down with a poet or work in mind, quoting or alluding to it in my own poem. But we all know the influences also make themselves known even when we ourselves are unaware. I once received an email from a writer friend, frantic because he had sent a poem off and then worried it contained a line "stolen" from my work. So once again we are back to how we conceive of this intertextuality: anxiety of influence or celebration of influence?

Among my own influences are also some relatively unknown or regional writers—people I've worked with over the years as colleagues or in writing groups. And then, because my writing includes some mixing of genres, the influences, too, come from writers working in other genres. In recent years, I've also had some great opportunities to be a part of international events, and know the writers I have encountered there have had great impact on the way I view my work and sometimes on the subject. One example: When I was in Indonesia, each event included local writers together with the touring international group. One night a poet from Jakarta prefaced his reading of a poem called "Going Home" by explaining that when he wrote it he had returned home after having been away for ten years. What he didn't say was he had been in exile because of his political activism, his work for democracy in Indonesia. A haunting line in the poem has lived in my memory as image: a faded and tattered sign bearing his name and the message "come home whenever." The memory of the poem, the image, the circumstances of the reading, the backstory, etc.—all these now always color my own reading or writing of poems about home places.

WV: Your own career has taken you to poetry, scholarship, fiction, playwriting... Do you have a favorite genre to write in? Do you consider yourself a creative writer or a scholar first?

KB: There has just been a conversation about Native creative writers as scholars or scholars as creative writers on the Studies in American Indian Literatures discussion forum. It reminds me of after I had my children trying to decide if I was a mother/poet or poet/mother. What I decided then and think also about

my public work is the writing is all of a piece. The way I think about things and, therefore, the way I write entails all of what people like to classify as scholarship and what they classify as art. I'm tempted to say they are part of a continuum, but I don't think even that is quite right because it still implies a kind of progressive line. In my own understanding they are both a part of looking deeply at the world. Although at times in order to meet expectations for publication or promotion I may apply myself to follow particular conventions.

Of course audience and impact differ depending upon genre. And then sometimes that elusive quality, inspiration, affects our course. Something feels like a poem or more specifically like a haiku moment. Some other image or experience might in our encounter of it require an-other form. Or we may choose to write about the same experience in different genres. I have written, for example, about the Anza-Borrego Desert in poetry and in creative nonfiction. The pieces each attempt (and I hope achieve) something different.

I love writing in various genres and bringing the genres together. Maybe it is like an athlete doing cross-training. And I am oddly reluctant to declare an affinity for one. It would be too much like a mother naming a child her favorite. Although at this moment I am more accomplished or more recognized as a poet and as a scholar, I still enjoy writing creative nonfiction, dramatic monologues, short fiction, etc.

WV: One of the things I admire about your work is the way you bring together poetry, prose, and scholarship in poems like "Housing Conditions of One Hundred Fifty Chippewa Families," which examines the political content of "facts" and numbers, and the way people's lives are framed in research, or "Dictionary for a New Century," which examines the definition of words in different cultural contexts. This mixture of scholarship and poetry seems to me a more prominent strategy in *Apprenticed to Justice*, as opposed to *Absentee Indians*, though there are some wonderful ethnographic poems there, like "The Last Fish House." Could you comment on how and why you mix scholarship with poetry? Do you include the poetic in your scholarship, too?

KB: Yes, I do mix the poetic and other creative work in my scholarship, too. In general the writing I do as a scholar tends toward accessibility and avoids the competition to string as much jargon as possible in sequence! When you ask why I mix the two, I have to say honestly sometimes I don't really know I am doing it until after the fact or until someone points it out. With the Hilger "Housing Conditions" poem, I felt her text had to be heard as one of the voices, not really thinking of it as "scholarship," but as a speaking entity. Then, of course, the idea was to allow the reader to experience the contrast between these voices, between their perspectives. Juxtaposing the two, visually or verbally letting them rub against one another, creates a spark and this accomplishes a kind of critique. But some of that work has to be done by the reader. There is commentary, but there is also space for the reader to come in and "make" meaning.

I hadn't thought of it in just this way before, but that poem is almost like staging a drama, allowing the reader to visualize two different people speaking. It also offers a kind of filmic dissolve where one image of place recedes into a very

different one, depending upon the speaker. Now all that analysis was prompted by your question. I write in a more intuitive way. I know essentially what I want to achieve and have a strategy for approaching the piece, but eventually, as you know, the poems acquire a life of their own and we end up writing something we didn't know we knew or revealing an insight we are incapable of ninety-eight percent of the time.

Sometimes if something is niggling at me, exploring it in poetry leads me to a better understanding of it as well. I had written an introduction to a new edition of the Inez Hilger book for the Minnesota Historical Society Press. It was the first time I encountered her work. In my short essay, I tried to suggest the layers of story inherent in the text, one of which had to do with the presumptions of ethnographic work done among Native peoples. But the book haunted me and haunts me to this day. Writing that poem helped me begin to come to terms with why. But I don't really think I'm done working with the material.

WV: *Apprenticed to Justice* also mixes prose poems and poetry throughout and sometimes within individual poems, like "Shadow Sisters," "The More I Learn of Men's Plumbing," and "A Boxer Grandfather." What effect are you hoping to create with this mixing? Could you comment on the importance of story to your poetry?

KB: I come from a storytelling people and that narrative stance, the ideas of layers of story almost forming the very ground we stand on, or being "in the blood" as Gerald Vizenor suggests, informs all my work. I simply see the world through the lens of story. I have written recently about the inadvertent "cycle of stories," a telescopic ring or "affiliation of stories" that seems a part of our basic identity. So I think I am approximating that way of being in the world: story as frame of being; story as frame of understanding.

Of course, another attempt that stands behind this focus in my writing is the simple wish to honor the voices and experiences of people overlooked in history or whose account of events have been systematically dismissed by certain people in authority. I am always at work telling an-other story, not the one on the ten o'clock news, not the one in older history texts. And, finally, I think I have the same passion to honor the sacred and the daily in the lives of ordinary people.

Philosophically, I might suggest that the narrative impulse and the poetic come howling from the same ache or hunger, some absence or loss, and therefore they remain entangled for me. Aesthetically, I could say that in Native culture the two always overlap. Sometimes consciously, as in "A Boxer Grandfather" I wanted to show the way story just spills into every spoken, into every daily experience. They come mixed in the world; they remain mixed in art.

WV: Are you also mixing the autobiographical with the fictional when you write poetry?

KB: Yes. I think my early work was more strictly driven by autobiography or community story, but unless a work or a feature of a work is presented as "factual," I am instead always after "truth" and whatever will best serve it. That

means some pieces are simply a work of my imagination. If, however, I am working with historical detail, I try to get it right to the best of my ability.

WV: *Absentee Indians* is written mostly in free verse, along with some haiku. *Apprenticed to Justice* includes prose poems, haiku, and concrete poems. Are there other forms, traditional or otherwise, that appeal to you?

KB: I remember a sweet moment from years back when I discovered that among those in attendance at one of my readings was a group devoted to writing pantoums. I had one in *Absentee Indians* and, when I shared it, I felt like one of the Magi arriving bearing gifts. They were so appreciative. I've played with that form since then as well as with blues poems and odes. Elements of the chant often seep into my work and I write list poems and some found poetry. I have been working on a series of Ojibwe alphabet poems. Many of the formal structures appeal to me as an aficionado of poetry, although I haven't written them myself. Marilyn Taylor, for example, has a crown of sonnets that puts me in awe.

WV: You're also a photographer. How has that interest come together with your writing? Do you ever bring them together or are they separate kinds of work for you?

KB: For some time I have thought particularly of haiku and photos as similar and photographic moments have led to haiku and other imagistic poems in the past. More recently I have begun to work with them together. I have been doing two kinds of ekphrastic work really: creating poems that interact with or accompany my own photographic images, and writing poems in response to older photos, especially family snapshots or stereotypic representations of Native people like those on postcard photos.

One of my projects for this coming year while I am on sabbatical is to learn more about editing software that will allow me to accomplish on the page what I have in my mind's eye. Right now I don't know how to manipulate the text or photo layout to achieve the outcome I want.

Of course, philosophically, there is a lot to be said about the aesthetic differences between text and image, but I do think in certain instances bringing them together can enrich the experience of both.

WV: A number of the poems in *Apprenticed to Justice* are political poems or poems of witness. (I'm thinking of "Red Lake," for example, "Housing Conditions of One Hundred Fifty Chippewa Families," "The Things I Know," and "Who Talks Politics," among others.) What's the relation, for you, of poetry and the political, poetry and activism?

KB: I was in the Kingdom of Bahrain last October when the revolution that came to pass this spring was still festering. I was in Manama, the city where the main protests and crackdowns later took place. The people there talked poetry and politics in the same breath. One of the people jailed this spring for inciting violence and sentenced to a year in prison was a young female poet from that

region. As long as speaking out is still considered a revolutionary act, poetry will have a role to play in politics.

If poetry is “the best words in the best order,” it makes sense that these well-wrought phrases will impact listeners. Poetry can work in service of resistance.

WV: There’s a fairly stubborn strand of contemporary poets (I don’t know if it’s still the mainstream), perhaps more concentrated at universities than out in the community, who argue that poetry and politics don’t mix. Can language, can poetry, ever be “apolitical,” even in the apparent absence of political content? What do you teach your students about that?

KB: Emerson says, “It is not meter, but a meter-making argument that makes a poem.” The beauty of language and the ideas embodied in the language come together to create the poetry and this can be true of poetry on any subject.

This may seem odd, but with my students I talk about New Journalism and the revolutionary discovery writers came to during the Vietnam era that the idea of “objective” journalism was a fallacy, that everything was always written through an “I” and not just through some infallible “eye.” I talk about Norman Mailer’s *Armies of the Night* and do practical exercises in point of view, all aimed at getting them to “see” that we all “see” differently and that anything we write is always already colored by our particular perspective.

We also look at individual words and their connotations. All writing, after all, is inherently persuasive even to its most elemental selection of language.

WV: There’s a consciousness in your work of community and cultural change and what it means in your life—in for example, “Page Proofs.” Or in “Dictionary for a New Century,” when you write “At three my daughter kisses and releases her fish/ at four she asks if chicken is a dead bird.” The title (and final) poem of *Apprenticed to Justice* rehearses a history of community losses, and “Dictionary for a New Century” raises various questions: “Should we use or release our histories?/ Can *education* repay old debts?” How do you answer those questions for yourself? And how do you resist the impulse, in poetry and in life, to nostalgize and monumentalize the past without forgetting it?

KB: That is the one-hundred-thousand-dollar question. I care to remember and to “re-member” or put back together in a fashion that allows or inspires others to do the same in their own lives. I tell my students that the specific will make your work more universal. I try to make my work alive enough that it can go with someone else and have a life I never dreamed of. Like the Indonesian poet Armarzan’s poem has with me.

My own writing about scorched earth campaigns, for example, arises out of a particular history. My hope is that it touches those people who know about or have experienced that specific genocidal moment in America’s past, maybe making it more alive than it had been in their fifth grade text book or helping to heal the inherited memories of those who know that history intimately. But, sadly, scorched earth campaigns are neither an American invention nor a thing

of the past. By poetic gesture, I mean to reach beyond that historic moment and these shores and to suggest something about the inhumanity of these practices in general.

There are ways and ways of writing about the past. Sometimes I might get it right, sometimes not. I keep trying.

WV: It seems to me that for a fairly small state, there's a lot of separation among our poetry communities in Wisconsin—e.g., between university- and community-based poets, between Milwaukee and Madison, between page and stage. Is that your impression? Are some gaps more disturbing than others? Are there things we can do to bridge our differences, to promote communication and common interests?

KB: When I think about it, you are undoubtedly correct about the separate pockets of poets and poetry that exist in the state. But I have been fairly blown away by the sheer mass of poets we have in the different enclaves in Wisconsin and naively, I guess, have not given much thought to the economic, political, geographical, or philosophical circumstances behind the separation of the different organizations. Having been isolated as a Native writer in my years as a student, I now have writerly friends and cyber-writing groups and university colleagues and talented graduate students, and amazing writers I encounter while traveling, so I am fairly feasting in community.

In my early years at UWM though, some of the minority students felt their work was not understood or accepted in the classroom and I became the faculty advisor for a writing group we called Word Warriors. Indeed, during that time I remember once being invited to visit a colleague's class and then having it revealed to me by one of the students that I had been billed as a "street poet." I rather liked that tag, although I know I should have shown proper outrage. My own sense is that things have moved in the right direction since that time period and we have a much more diverse population among our creative writing students.

Word Warriors went on to have a long history, membership fluctuating due to people graduating and moving away and, over time, the focus changed and we became a sort of "alternative" writing group and now have continued as a cyber haiku group. But through my experience with this group and then through the experience of Native writers nationally, I can relate to the comments you make about these almost class-like separations of poets.

One more related memory: being invited as faculty for a week-long poetry program in Ann Arbor and arriving, only to discover, the majority of students there were slam poets. I didn't think what I had prepared would be appropriate and I called a writer friend with a "poetry emergency." I also was a part of an orality conference in Canada where I was able to see some truly innovative performance poets.

So I realize there is a fairly wide divergence in how we all practice poetry. I think some people will remain closed to anything that doesn't fit their idea of

“proper” poetry, but your publication, the poet laureate recognitions in the state and communities, the national Poetry Matters campaign, UWM’s own Eat Local, Read Local and Poetry Everywhere videos, together with other public poetry projects, all go some way toward bringing poetry into the everyday and expanding awareness. There is a One Hundred Thousand Poets for Change about to happen (or will have happened by the time this is printed) that promises to be another way to bring poets together in communities.

WV: Do you think the university is the best place for a poet to be? Does it matter how poets earn their living?

KB: My experience may not match most university poets, since I spend a great deal of time in various non-academic settings. In general, I think writers who have vested interests in something—medicine, whaling, education, whatever—will have more to write about and write with more insight. The best place for one writer might scare another into silence. So we all have to find our places and not be afraid to shake things up if our needs change.

WV: Do you ever feel isolated or at a disadvantage as a writer living in the Midwest? Have you spent time outside the Midwest?

KB: Because I have a sense of belonging to place and take great joy in the natural areas in the Midwest, I do not feel isolated in any way. I realize that the two coasts are seen as more vital in terms of poetry, but I have no desire to move. I travel often, though not for long periods of time. What I like most when I travel are not the great cities but the experience of the rural in other nations.

WV: Do you have any ties to writing communities in Minnesota, where you grew up?

KB: No, I have ties to individuals, some of whom are writers, and I have ties to communities like White Earth, where many people have shown support for my work. I did not really begin to publish until I had already left my hometown, so the opportunity to build those kinds of connections came in other places. I have had the opportunity to publish writers from home though in anthologies I’ve edited and that has been fulfilling.

WV: Who are your favorite Wisconsin or Midwestern authors? Which Midwestern poets do you teach?

KB: Many of the poets I’ve named earlier are Midwestern writers. Other Native writers from the Midwest whose work I admire and teach include Heid Erdrich, Mark Turcotte, Jim Barnes, and Denise Sweet. Denise was one of our past Wisconsin Poets Laureate. Two other past Wisconsin Poets Laureate whose work I admire are Ellen Kort and Marilyn Taylor. I love the work of several of my poet colleagues at Milwaukee: Brenda Cárdenas, Rebecca Dunham, Maurice Kilwein Guevara and Susan Firer. I have taught Bill Holm, Sandra Cisneros, Pam Gemin, Kate Sontag, David Graham, Heather Sellers, Diane Glancy, Robert Bly, Ted Kooser, Lucien Stryk, Sonia Gernes, William Stafford, and—aren’t we rich with wonderful writers—many others. One class I teach includes variations on

poetry of place, so I enjoy being able to introduce students to writers they might bump into in a coffee shop someday.

WV: What poetry or other writing projects are you working on right now?

KB: I am just beginning a sabbatical year and have my head full of possibilities. For one, I plan a mixed genre collection of my creative work arising out of my long preoccupation with nature, Native place, preservation, and spiritual sustenance. The volume will include poetry, creative nonfiction, photographs, and collage. The working title, *The Flame of Your Tongue Gives Light*, comes from an image I took of a great blue heron in which the bird is backlit by the sun and panting with its long pointed tongue clearly visible: “Sun turning the hose of your throat to a vessel of fire.” The title and the longer poem allude to the astonishing moment of encounter with this creature and suggest that these earth moments provide spiritual light. The collection builds from similar transformational experiences a poetic sensibility about nature and place, but attempts to reconcile these beliefs with the practical challenges to such elemental attachments. Especially in addressing the ecological challenges, I draw on my travels to Indonesia, Taiwan, and Bahrain. Some of the work is done, some is still to be written. I am thrilled to finally have something besides snatched moments to work on a writing project. One segment of this work I am particularly excited about are pieces focusing on refraction.

At the same time I am working on a collection of essays and I just received word a couple of weeks ago that my play *The Museum at Red Earth* will be performed as a dinner theatre at the Menominee Casino in December so I look forward to that. My twelve-year-old daughter Amber and I have been writing together as well and she has begun performing with me a bit. In general, I have more ideas than time—and of course, as a poet, more time than money.

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🌀 The Making of an Eco poet

BY JEFF PONIEWAZ

I grew up on the working class South Side of Milwaukee on “a block where the sidewalk ends.” Right across the street from where I lived was a grimy building where trains underwent repair and maintenance. All through my childhood that building and an oil-marred parking lot for semis existed side-by-side with a field that ran along the top of bluffs overlooking what we kids called “the crick.”

I often went to the field alone and looked under rocks for grass snakes while grasshoppers hopped and dragonflies flew around me, and down to “the crick” to look for turtles or mudpuppies. Even then, the good smell of all the green growing from the field on down the bluffs became, as you got close to “the crick,” tainted with the combined smell of sewer gas and gasoline. A few years later I learned “the crick” was the Kinnickinnic River. In 1997 it was formally designated one of America’s most endangered rivers.

I wrote my first poem when I was 14. Titled “Escape,” it began with a series of observations of sad aspects of city life. Inspired by the wilds I glimpsed during my family’s annual August week vacation “up north” near Eagle River, my poem ended:

Distant valley and teeming streams
Pave the way for comely dreams
Of lands untarnished, free of stain,
That vanish thoughts of earthly gain.
In the midst a shout of glee:
“Here at last a place for me!”

This fledgling poem foreshadowed my eventual intense love of wilderness, and of Nature in general. “Pave” was the fledgling poet’s awkward word choice considering its steamroller connotation, but it ironically foreshadowed the fact that a year later my boyhood home was torn down to make way for the I-94 freeway.

Humans are part of Nature, though they tend to overwhelm the non-human part and eclipse it, thus endangering the non-human part that sustains them. When I use the word “Nature” I mean the non-human part of Nature, the part it’s a relief to escape to when we feel oppressed by human hurlyburly. And yes, I capitalize “Nature,” because she really deserves it. As Emerson says in his essay titled “Nature”: “The aspect of Nature is devout. Like the figure of Jesus, she stands with bended head, and hands folded upon the breast.” “Earth,” too, should be capitalized when referring to the planet and not just the soil. And “Nature” is a synonym for “the Earth” when “the Earth” means the planet as a whole or environment in general.

My attraction to wild Nature really took off when I became friends with Antler, who also felt “the call of the wild.” Over the years we explored ever wilder

wilds: from Kettle Moraine to Upper Peninsula Michigan to the Quetico canoe wilderness of Ontario to the mountains of Colorado and California. Our love of Nature grew alongside our love of Poetry. And so it was only natural that Nature figured frequently and prominently in the poems we loved by others as well as in the poems we ourselves came to write.

When we became friends at age 19, a special bond was our love for Whitman, who consoled us during our separate lonely teen years yearning for a camerado before we met each other. And Whitman's visionary Nature poetry made us keen to take, not only the Open Road to cities west and east, but also "paths untrodden ... away from the clank of the world" to where we, too, would be "talk'd to by tongues aromatic." Like Walt we were hot to make love to the Earth, the Night, the Stars and the Sunrise in our lives and in our poetry.

My 1972 poem "Ode to Lake Michigan" is for most of its length a love poem to our inland sea, but it ends as an invocation to restore and preserve her. The poem lovingly and gratefully acknowledges her motherhood over our bioregion and invokes her recovery to optimum health. That poem was written three years after *Time* magazine declared Lake Erie "in danger of dying." And not long after that, Jacques Cousteau was warning the oceans were in danger of dying.

Written in the wake of passage of the Endangered Species Act, my 1975 poem "The Last Endangered Species Glass" recounts the actual gradual one-by-one breaking of my beloved set of such glasses. I did not make this poem up; each line tells the exact way each glass broke. One of the species was the polar bear, endangered even then—and, alas, how much more today. It was subsequently published in *Greenpeace Chronicles* out of Vancouver, accepted personally by its then editor Rex Weyler, one of the founding members of Greenpeace and one of the first to interpose himself bodily between whales and the explosive harpoons of factory ships.

Nature and the environment loomed large in my Poets-in-the-Schools visits to high schools and junior highs across Wisconsin during the 1970s. A surefire way to coax kids into poetry was to read them a variety of animal poems by a variety of poets with a variety of styles and then ask them to write an animal poem of their own and bring it to our next day's class meeting. I carried my poetry books and show-and-tell items from classroom to classroom in the same backpack I used on wilderness adventures.

Nature is a great way to get people into poetry. Anyone who loves Nature can be converted to poetry by poems that vibrantly address Nature. Nature is also a great way to get people into classical music, which is one of the ideas I offer to orchestras struggling to replenish dwindling audiences: stage concerts that present great Nature-inspired music. There certainly are a lot of beautiful scores that pay homage to and take inspiration from Nature. In 1997 the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra and Chorus gave three sold-out and critically acclaimed performances of the "Song of the Rainforest" concert I brainstormed, consisting of dazzling but neglected rainforest-inspired scores by Heitor Villa-Lobos. Now, if only I can get Gustavo Dudamel to perform it with the Los Angeles Phil at the UN and with the Youth Orchestra of Venezuela at the Amazon Opera House in

Manaus and broadcast it via PBS and via satellite to every part of the world!

I'm often referred to as an eco-poet, but I write poems on all the other subjects poets write about and am open to whatever kind of poem wants me to write it. Eco-poems just came to me with increasing frequency. All poets write about what they love and what interests them. Well, I dearly love and am completely fascinated by this planet and its plethora of life-sustaining biodiversity. The more I learned about the environment, the more I became concerned about and focused on it—and the more eco-poems I found myself writing, realizing this isn't just another subject in the spectrum of subjects but rather an urgent planetary emergency situation.

By “eco-poem” I mean any poem that honors, praises, celebrates, explores or enhances our appreciation of some aspect(s) of the natural world or the natural world in general. “Eco-poem” can also mean a poem that confronts some environmental problem or comes to the defense of some part of the natural world or the natural world in general. A good example of the first kind would be Wendell Berry's “The Peace of Wild Things.” A good example of the second kind would be Allen Ginsberg's “Friday the Thirteenth,” written a month before the first Earth Day:

What prayer restores freshness to eastern meadow, soil to
cindered acres, hemlock to rusty hillside,
transparency to Passaic streambed, Blue whale multitudes
to coral gulfs ...
Earth pollution identical with Mind pollution,
consciousness pollution identical with filthy sky ...
What can Poetry do ... when 60% State Money goes to heaven
on gas clouds burning off War Machine Smokestacks?

Some poetry aficionados begrudge the acceptability of the second kind of eco-poem, dismiss such poems as polemical or, worse, sermonizing. Some of Allen's poems are sutras—the Buddhist word for sermon—as in his “Sunflower Sutra.” As someone who sat through countless horribly boring sermons when I was growing up Catholic, I wish I had ever heard sermons as moving and beautiful as “Sunflower Sutra” and “Who Be Kind To.”

Now it's time to expand the panoramic embrace of “Who Be Kind To” to encompass not only all humans, but all sentient beings—and, most urgently, all sentient endangered species, all priceless precious life forms on the verge of extinction—not only for their own sake but for the sake of future humans, because the healthiest condition for a planet is an abundance of healthy biodiversity (a.k.a. Nature). This needed expansion of compassion parallels Aldo Leopold having extended ethics from strictly inter-human relations to the relations between the human species and all other species and “the land” or the environment in general.

Some poets have a definite bias against what they call “political poetry.” Antler and I were in James Merrill's poetry writing class at UW–Madison in the spring of '67, the only semester he ever taught anywhere. We didn't know his work, but

heard he had just won the National Book Award for a book titled *Nights and Days*, which had a nice Whitmanic ring for us, since in the first of his “Calamus” poems Walt resolved “To tell the secret of my nights and days.” We also heard he’d written a previous poem book whose title, *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace*, sounded pretty good amid the Vietnam War.

A month into his semester Merrill assigned his students to choose a poem and read it aloud in class. I read Ginsberg’s “Who Be Kind To,” which I had just been bowled over by when Antler and I heard Allen read it a few days earlier at UW–Milwaukee, the first time we heard/saw Allen in the flesh. Merrill dismissed the poem as sermonizing. I defended it as heartfelt heart talk projecting a voice of compassionate sanity, especially good to hear amid the growing madness of the war.

In the summer of ’68 we received the blessing of being in a class James Wright guest-taught at UW–Milwaukee. He had no problem whatsoever with political poetry. This was one of our all-time greatest experiences of being able to hang out with a great poetry teacher. One day, after the latest body count hit the news, James began his class by describing Goya’s grisly painting *Saturn Devouring His Children* and then declared it should be hung in the rotunda of Congress. The books he chose for class discussion that summer included Wilfred Owen’s powerful World War I poems, D.H. Lawrence poems (selected and with a great introduction by Rexroth), Kinnell’s *Body Rags* and Ginsberg’s *Howl & Other Poems*.

In 1989 Antler and I found ourselves featured along with James Merrill and some others at a poetry festival in Detroit during which I gave a talk on “political poetry.” Surprisingly, Merrill, there with his camerado the actor Peter Hooten, who assisted his presentation of his late Ouija board poetry, remembered us from Madison and took a liking to us. As a result, a year or two later he gave Antler a grant out of his own pocket after his Ingram Merrill Foundation failed to do so.

Even some nature lovers and nature poem-writing poets begrudge eco-poems that tackle environmental issues. They seem to believe that should only be done in expository prose and letters-to-the-editor. Few if any, however, are the newspapers that would still publish a poem in their op/ed pages. Poetry is the first item the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* lists under “We do not publish” in their “Letters guidelines.” Except for a rare piece in the A&E section, that daily negative mention in the “Letters guidelines” is about the only time the word “poetry” does appear in newspapers anymore. But there was a time when poems did get published in newspapers, and there may still be some rare exceptions. My poem about the annual baby harp seal massacre appeared on the *Los Angeles Times* op/ed page on Good Friday 1980.

Some object to ecopoetry that tackles environmental issues on the grounds that poetry should be a process of discovering what words come through you, not of putting preconceived sentiments into words. Some even dismiss it as a form of propaganda, even though they may agree with the sentiments expressed. All I can say is: I don’t start out wanting to write a poem on a particular aspect of the environmental crisis and then try to come up with words to express my feelings

about it. I'm just intensely focused on environmental matters, and therefore such poems just come to me. When I write them down, I feel as much a rush of spontaneous inspiration as any poet feels writing about any other subject.

Then there's the charge of "preaching to the choir." Of course, ideally Nature poems would be heard/read by and beneficially affect those who don't love Nature, just as ideally poems in general would be heard/read by and beneficially affect those who don't love poetry. You just have to beam what you have to say in the best poetry the muses deign to bless you with and let those beams fall where they may. Besides, even if eco-poems were only "preaching to the choir" (and I do think they're more than that), that's important too, because the choir needs its spirits lifted—needs anything that can cheer them up when they get discouraged because the transformation to an eco-friendly civilization isn't happening fast enough or sufficiently enough.

Poets have been in the vanguard of every compassionate progressive enlightenment cause. They are catalysts of the positive evolution of human consciousness. Shelley said poets were the "unacknowledged legislators of the world," and I'd say they're doing a better job than the *official* legislators who court the bribes of lobbyists. Poets were in the vanguard of opposition to the Vietnam War. Any poem against war is an eco-poem when you consider that war inflicts many of the most drastic environmental impacts. Poets were in the vanguard of eco-consciousness, and still are.

Beat poets were in the vanguard of cetacean appreciation. At the legendary 1955 Six Gallery reading at which Ginsberg read "Howl" for the first time, Michael McClure read his poem denouncing the machine-gunning of a hundred orcas by bored GIs stationed off the coast of Iceland. And amid his zany poem "Marriage," in his 1960 book *The Happy Birthday of Death*, Gregory Corso tossed off these lines:

And when the mayor comes to get my vote tell him
When are you going to stop people killing whales!

In 1974 Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island* came out with many now classic eco-poems, including "Prayer for the Great Family" and "Mother Earth, Her Whales." The latter, written while attending the UN Environmental Conference in Sweden in 1972, praised the whales:

The whales turn and glisten, plunge
and sound and rise again, ...
Flowing like breathing planets
in the sparkling whorls of
living light

but also indicted the rampaging human impact, not only on the whales but on the environment in general. He alluded to the mercury poisoning via fish eaten in the city of Minamata, which hit the news that same year, 1972:

And Japan quibbles for words on

what kinds of whales they can kill?

A once-great Buddhist nation
dribbles methyl mercury
like gonorrhea
in the sea.

In 1975 Antler and I were present when, after *Turtle Island* won the Pulitzer for poetry, Gary Snyder and Jerome Rothenberg presided over an “Ethnopoetics Conference” at UW–Milwaukee. From the late ’70s onward I kept urging the Kerouac Poetics School in Boulder to host an Ecopoetics Conference. It finally happened in 1990 when during a special “EcoGlasnost Week,” as Allen dubbed it, Antler and I gave a reading at which Allen introduced me and Gary introduced Antler.

My innate cetacean fascination intensified when Antler and I went to study with Galway Kinnell during the Fall ’70 semester he guest-taught at the Iowa Workshop. Impressed with the “Poets Against the War” reading Kinnell gave with Bly, Creeley, Muriel Rukeyser, Robert Duncan, Ed Sanders and our UWM mentors Morgan and Barbara Gibson during the spring of ’69, I wrote the letters to Vermont that brought him to give his first solo Milwaukee reading, at UWM during Fall ’69. Antler and I were bowled over this time when he read his entire *Book of Nightmares* in progress. That was four years before Kerouac School existed; if it had, we’d more likely have gone to study with Ginsberg in Boulder. Kinnell in Iowa City during the Fall of ’70 was our only chance at that point to study with a formidable poet whose work we liked. The following school year we returned to UWM because we were both offered TA-ships to complete our master’s degrees there.

Getting back to Fall ’70: One afternoon in the lounge of the English/Philosophy building Kinnell played his class a recording of humpback whale songs. The first such recording had just come out and humans were hearing those haunting whale songs for the first time. Those whale songs took me so deep I’ve never stopped hearing them, from time to time in my mind, amid an ocean often dominated by human cacophony.

In late 1975, soon after it came out, I read *Mind in the Waters—a Celebration of Cetacean Consciousness*, edited by Joan McIntyre. This was one of the major book finds of my life. It gave me joy by confirming my own cetacean intimations. It combined poems like D.H. Lawrence’s “Whales Weep Not” and W.S. Merwin’s “For a Coming Extinction” with scientific essays documenting whales’ and dolphins’ high intelligence in a way that called into question the arrogant assumption that humans possess the highest intelligence on the planet. Lacking opposable thumbs with which to manipulate their environment, the cetaceans live in harmony with it. Clearly, there was much we humans could learn from the whales’ and dolphins’ form of intelligence.

In 1975 I began assembling an eco-poem anthology titled *On What Planet—Poems in Praise and Defense of the Earth* after Rexroth’s 1956 poem book *In Defense of the Earth* and his great Nature poem “On What Planet.” The title

covers the two kinds of poems in it: poems that praise Nature and poems that defend it. Over the years it's grown to be quite a tome and it may be the best anthology of its kind, as it includes so many great Nature/eco-poems by such a large variety of poets. But I've never been able to take on the hassle of trying to get permissions from all the poets in it. I hope someone will come along to midwife its publication, as I do believe it's a luminous and much needed book of eco-scriptures that could help save the world.

Amid an old-age love poem he wrote to his wife titled "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," William Carlos Williams held a flower up to the atom bomb and later in the poem declared:

Every drill
driven into the earth
for oil enters my side
also.

How powerful and prophetic those words in aftermath of the BP Gulf oil disaster, as they were after the *Exxon-Valdez*. Dr. Williams felt the wounds being inflicted on the planet, which were and still are far worse than the "pain at the pump" so bemoaned in the news nowadays. His empathy with the Earth foreshadowed a "Deep Ecology" concept expressed by Gary Snyder and others: the need to identify so closely with some wild place or species that one feels its suffering and becomes the voice of what is unable to speak on its own behalf in our legislatures and courts.

Williams' "Asphodel" poem was published in 1955, the year before Ginsberg's "Howl" was published with its comparable confrontation of The Bomb and lines such as:

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood
is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! ...
Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul
is electricity and banks! ...
Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen!

To those who deny that rants can be great poetry, I say: tell it to Ginsberg's "Howl" and "America." "Howl" is the cry of our mammal soul caught in the steel-jaw trap of the military-industrial complex. Poets sometimes need to express themselves in outcries of outrage and not just in psalms of praise.

As Czeslaw Milosz said in a poem he wrote in Poland after World War II:

What is poetry which does not save
Nations or people?
A connivance with official lies ...

Somebody said that poetry doesn't save the world. I disagree. I think every poem saves the world to some extent. Milosz meant that among all the poems that all a nation's poets are writing, there ought to be some that respond to war and

injustice in all their forms, whether between peoples or between humans and the rest of the natural world. If it's okay for some poems to be frivolous or totally unintelligible, it's certainly okay for some poems to spring eloquently to the defense of what needs to be defended.

This genre spans from before Milton's sonnet denouncing the massacre in Piedmont to the present. Not every poet has to write such poems, but those who don't should be glad that some poets are covering that base. Often it's those who feel unable to write such poems who begrudge others doing so. Neruda's poem socking it to the United Fruit Co. is no less necessary or valid than his odes to his socks and a watermelon.

To those who object to "political poetry," I say: tell it to Lorca weeping over New York from the top of the Chrysler Building, lamenting the Hudson River "drunk on oil" seven decades before a hijacked plane full of jet fuel followed the Hudson to the World Trade Center. To those who'd deny that eco-poems that tackle environmental issues are truly poems, I say: okay then, don't call them "poems." Maybe they're a new genre: ecopoetic wake-up calls. Whether you grant they're poems or not, they're saying something that urgently needs to be said: clearly, eloquently, powerfully, poetically. Such poems can be poorly or well-written, inspired or not, just like poems on any other subject or in any other mode.

Ed Sanders' *Investigative Poetry* came out in 1976. That was the same year Allen Ginsberg read and was bowled over by a manuscript titled *Last Words* he received out of the blue from some unknown poet named Antler in Milwaukee. Its central poem, "Factory," written while working in a can factory along the Milwaukee River, is an eco-epic. Allen wrote it was "the most enlightening & magnanimous American poem I've seen of '60s and '70s decades" and asked Antler to be his assistant at Kerouac School during the summer of '77. That's how he and I got to sit in on Ed Sanders' "Investigative Poetry" class there that summer.

Ed's idea is that besides being singers of lyric poetry, poets can also be reporters of investigative poetry—anchor men and women more oracular regarding what's going on than the morning paper or the evening news. It's an approach very much in the spirit of Allen's 1968 book *Planet News*. I kept urging Ed and Allen that we should investigate the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons plant (not far from Boulder) and stage a poetry protest outside its gates, but Ed's students voted a different subject for our class project and Allen was too preoccupied with other matters.

In July '78 Antler and I went out to San Francisco to check out the poetry scene and explore the wilderness scene while waiting for Ferlinghetti to publish Antler's *Last Words* book, which the Spring '78 *City Lights Journal* (which included several Antler poems) said would take place before the end of the year. On our way to SF we stopped to say hello to Allen in Boulder. He greeted us with his "Plutonian Ode," which he'd just written to protest mega-deadly plutonium and had just gotten arrested while declaiming it outside the Rocky Flats plant. After the Voice of the Bard unfurled his "Plutonian Ode" for us, he surprised Antler by saying he was just in time to fill in for William Burroughs, Jr.

(who'd taken ill) at a reading with Gregory Corso the following night.

I was living in the San Francisco Bay area in 1979 when, in the wake of Three Mile Island, Rex Weyler came down from Vancouver to organize a No Nukes concert in Sacramento with Jackson Brown and Bonnie Raitt. That was the first time I met Rex in person. In 1981, then the editor of *New Age* magazine, Rex published the "Reagan vs. Thoreau Debate" I assembled using dueling verbatim quotes on the subject of economy from the anti-environment president and the pro-environment prophet who titled the opening chapter of his *Walden* "Economy." Economy and ecology have the same root, eco-, and so one would expect them to be in harmony rather than at odds. Thoreau saw through the sham system of economy that runs the human world.

During my four and a half year sojourn in the Bay area, I fell in with a band of poets who gathered for a weekly open reading in a storefront devoted to poetry and ecology in San Francisco's Mission district. The signs over the door said "Cloud House" and, under that, "Walt Whitman Breathes Here." Kush (who went by a single name) was the custodian of Cloud House and slept and cooked in a nook in the back. A well-known poet passing through might show up for the weekly round-robin and wait his turn to read alongside a cleaning lady who dashed off a poem before getting out of work. I heard many terrific poems there by well-known and unknown poets. Because there's so much eco-awareness in San Francisco (where the Sierra Club, for instance, has its headquarters), many strong eco-poems—political poems in general—got written there.

After I returned from my West Coast sojourn in early 1983, I gradually began to notice some impressive Milwaukee poets who had emerged during my absence and had strong Nature or eco-poems among their output. I thought how exciting if these poets, with their wonderfully various styles of writing and performing, could be brought together in a kaleidoscopic way, with each getting eight minutes to sound out his or her best work in that vein. The result, in April 1988, was the first Earth Poets & Musicians Performance—or Earth Day Poetry Celebration, as it was called when it was entirely spoken word and hadn't yet acquired its music dimension.

Kush, on a visit from San Francisco, opened the very first Earth Poets event with two of his street chants. I was proud of this eco bunch of Milwaukee poets I'd brought together and was glad that Kush could witness how well they compared to their counterparts in San Francisco. How appropriate, considering that Poetry and Nature are so intimately connected, that Earth Day Month coincides with Poetry Month. And what better way to observe both simultaneously than at the Earth Poetry event that has taken place every April since 1988? The 25th annual will take place in April 2012.

I consider myself an "environmentor" (a word I invented). Between 1989 and 2009 I taught a course I devised called "Literature of Ecological Vision" as a UW-Milwaukee off-campus course, first at Woodland Pattern and later at the Urban Ecology Center. I loved this course and never got tired of teaching it year after year: sharing writings so dear to my heart with the eco-curious young who would have to deal with the spectrum of environmental problems

touched on in the course. When I began teaching it in '89, it was one of the few courses of its kind offered on the college level nationwide and it filled a glaring gap in the literature curriculum, though such courses are now more common. Mine was a sophomore survey that covered as much of the greatest Nature and environmental writing as could be reasonably assigned during a single semester.

My Eco Lit course began and ended with American Indian texts: simple, beautiful, timeless utterances of oneness with Nature, some of which may have been passed down via the oral tradition for centuries before someone finally wrote them down. I then asked my students to compare those Indian poems with Wordsworth's "The World Is Too Much With Us," in which the highly civilized Englishman laments

Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours

and envies the "pagan suckled in a creed outworn" but close to Nature. From there to Coleridge's eco-prophetic allegory, "Rime of the Ancient Mariner":

Water, Water everywhere, nor any drop to drink!

My course syllabus proceeded chronologically to the present. Students who began the semester admitting they weren't into poetry wound up admitting they had breakthroughs of appreciation by semester end—all because the poems paid such magnificent tribute to the Nature they loved. And that became for them a key to appreciating poetry in general on into the future.

Coming right after the poems in *Turtle Island* is Snyder's seminal eco-essay "Four Changes," which he had first published anonymously in 1969. In it he called for a "revolution of consciousness" which "will be won not by guns but by seizing the key images, myths, archetypes, eschatologies, and ecstasies so that life won't seem worth living unless one's on the transforming energy's side." What he invoked was a nonviolent Ecological Revolution that could provide an antidote to the malignant aspects of the Industrial Revolution. Thoreau fired the first nonviolent, non-gun shot of the Ecological Revolution, not on Concord Bridge but at Walden Pond. It burst into full flower with the first Earth Day in 1970, in the wake of which many dynamic environmental groups were formed.

John Muir, Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson were catalysts of that revolutionary love of the Earth that could save the world. And so were many poets. May more and more poets help inspire the love of the Earth that could save the world! It was never more "now or never" than it is now, and it gets more "Now or Never!" with each passing day.



The Last Endangered Species Glass

Three years ago two friends gave me
a set of six Endangered Species Glasses,

each glass etched with the picture and name
of one of the species near extinction.
The Oryx was the first to bite the dust—
a friend laughed so hard at something I said
it slipped full of wine from her fingers.
A few months later the Cheetah fled
faster than my reflex to catch it.
The Polar Bear was the loser
in a battle with an ice-cube tray.
The Whooping Crane flew out of my hand
as I wildly gestured a poem.
The Eagle was the last to go.
I broke it against the faucet
while doing the dishes.
Each time one of those glasses broke
I got a lesson in fragility,
a shattered metaphor for
what extinction means. Now
only the Tiger remains ...
and it's chipped.

—JEFF PONIEWAZ (1975)

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✿ I Gave my Heart to Poetry When I was Young and Vowed to Give It My All: An Interview with Antler

BY CHARLES ROSSITER

CR: You've been a poet since at least the 1970s—as long as I've known you. What does poetry mean to you—and do for you?

Antler: Actually I started writing rhyme and meter poetry in junior high school, sparked by the English Romantics and early American poets before I encountered Whitman and free verse. My inspiration was unrequited love causing me to flirt with death and suicide. Reading and writing poetry saved my life before I met my true love in my late teens—poet Jeff Poniewaz. We've been pals now for 47 years.

For me poetry is a spiritual path as much as any major faith tradition of the last 3000 years and predates those, going back 60,000 years to when the Neanderthal buried their dead with flower offerings in Shanidar, Iraq. And before that to the Source of All. I like the idea that cosmic consciousness shines through many lamps, not just one—Jesus. So it flows through Krishna, Buddha, Mohammed, Jesus, etc. It also shines through the hearts and minds and souls of those open to it. So, for example, poets like Whitman or Mary Oliver have divine light flowing through. Walt Whitman wrote: “Dazzling and tremendous how quickly the sunrise would kill me if I could not now and always send sunrise out of me.”

CR: So you found poetry early?

Antler: I gave my heart to poetry when I was young and vowed to give it my all. I tried to maximize free time to read great poetry aloud and to make myself open to it flowing through. I was especially open to poems coming to me that broke new ground, capturing what hadn't been captured before and honoring our human mortal forms and desires before the curtain drops. Poetry means healing energy flowing into me and for the Tribe—just like music, just like art. I never met anyone who didn't like music but met a lot who hated poetry. What's happening now is an ever-increasing realization of the power and grace of poetry worldwide and an ever-increasing number choosing to follow the poet path no matter what. It is a hopeful gesture to the future, one that makes it seem a future is possible. Vivekananda wrote—“Thinking you're sick all the time won't cure you.” Poetry can help us go beyond illness, physical and mental, to a space of transcendence.

CR: What motivates you to write poetry?

Antler: Love. Death. Nature. Human kindness and inhuman cruelty. Unjust war. Ruthless capitalism and genocide, ecocide, suicide. Wilderness Epiphanies in expanded mind-state. The Milky Way. The mystery and poignancy of our

reproductive organs. The arc of life from conception to death and the transformation of corpses into fresh new life. The web of life in all its particulars. Fascination with other creatures. How we go from a zygote to a 26-trillion-celled baby being born to a 10-quadrillion-celled adult to a vanished being.

CR: Allen Ginsberg had high praise for your book *Factory*. Can you tell me about how you know him and any influence he may have had on your work?

Antler: I first learned about Ginsberg from Jeff when we were teenagers. He urged me to check out *Howl* and I went to the library and asked if they had *How Well*—that’s what I thought he said! When Allen first read in Milwaukee in February 1967, we came from Madison, where we were students at the time, to hear him. It was a life-changing experience. When he read in Madison a couple months later, he ended up staying overnight in our place where Jeff played him the last movement of Mahler’s 3rd and we watched him while he slept. While in San Francisco in the summer of ’71 we again heard him read. Jeff urged shy me to give Allen some of my poems as he was leaving after that reading, and when he read again in Milwaukee later that fall he was glad to see me and said he liked my poems a lot. When I felt I had enough poems for a book manuscript, I sent it to him. That was the mid-’70s and it was my *Last Words* book. Turns out he loved it and began urging Ferlinghetti to publish it via City Lights. Allen and his camerado Peter Orlovsky visited me and Jeff in Milwaukee on their way back to New York from a Buddhist retreat in northern Wisconsin. Allen went through my *Last Words* MS with me line-by-line while Jeff and Peter looked on. Between his enthusiasm and Ferlinghetti’s, who also liked my stuff, *Factory* was published by City Lights in 1980. Over the years I got to hang out with Allen quite a few times and read with him in San Francisco, Chicago, New York City, Boulder and in Rome at the 2nd International Festival of the Poet. When I suffered a double inguinal hernia while working as a housepainter in San Francisco, he let me recover after my operation for several months alone in his Sierra Foothills cabin that he and Peter built near Gary Snyder’s homestead Kitkitdizze. It was great to have Allen as an actual friend. Before he died, Jeff and I were among the friends he called to let know he didn’t have long to live. For me he will always be still alive.

CR: Did knowing Allen advance your work?

Antler: His main influence on me was as “courage teacher” (what he called Whitman) inspiring me to express my inner self without fear in total openness. I felt free to celebrate, honor and bless my innermost gay feelings, my anti-war convictions, my fervent Nature love and environmentalism, my sacramental use of marijuana, my wanting to free the human tribe from urban-industrial wage-slavery. The Emancipation Proclamation took place, but it didn’t go far enough. Like Whitman, Allen encouraged candor. I was no longer afraid. The more I expressed my heart, the freer and wilder I became and I loved feeling that as a young fellow, and so did Jeff. Wild stallions with long hair running in the moonlight. What else is poetry for? Look what it can really do and say!

So part of it was going forth with my pal as young poets to fulfill our promise, no matter what. Although I didn’t become a Buddhist like Allen, I do respect

that spiritual path. But the tree Buddha sat under and achieved enlightenment didn't need to sit under Buddha to achieve enlightenment. That's why I went to the trees and the poet-tree. I couldn't believe in a Christianity that maintained if you played with yourself as a boy it made Christ hurt more on the cross. Or that Jesus would be upset that when I was 8 years old I pretended my erection in the bathtub was an iceberg that my toy *Titanic* struck and sank. Yet I still remained open to the benevolent and compassionate aspects of humancentric spiritual traditions. I loved rhapsodic chant perorations of free verse like those of Ginsberg and Whitman and sensed that that was the lineage I was part of. I believed the poet tribe could help save the world. Allen's strong eco-awareness spurred me to widen mine. "Earth pollution identical to mind pollution," he wrote. The secret was to heal and transform the mind. Allen gave birth to many poets around the world. I am thankful to be one of them. He showed how you could heal the nation with poetry and heal yourself with it as well. American poetry is one of the benevolent and tender gifts to the world from America—not nerve gas, nuclear bombs, assault weapons, oil spills, global warming and fundamentalism.

CR: What about Gary Snyder?

Antler: Snyder is one of my other all-time inspirers. I was drawn to his Wilderness know-how and sheer aura. It was special to be with Gary and Allen together around a campfire under the stars and ponderosa pines in the Sierra Nevada foothills. Being in Snyder's presence was like being in a wilderness in human form. I memorized something Snyder said in *Earth House Hold* so I'd never forget it—"The nub of the problem now is how to flip over the magnificent growth energy of modern industrial civilization toward a deeper sense of self in nature, and this continuing revolution of consciousness will be won not by guns or bombs, but by seizing the key images, myths, archetypes, ecstasies and eschatologies so that life won't seem worth living unless you're on the transforming energy's side."

CR: In your poetry you wonder many things such as what we might have experienced before we were born and what it might be like after we're dead. Could you tell me something about yourself as a poet of wonder?

Antler: Wonder is the word. Rachel Carson knew how important it is, and wrote a book titled *A Sense of Wonder*. Not a Sense of Plunder or a Sense of Blunder or a Sense of Squander. Wonder is as much a sense as a sense of smell, taste, sight, hearing, touch and balance and involves all of them. In Bellini's painting *St. Francis in Ecstasy*, painted the same year Columbus set sail for the New World, St. Francis is seen emerging from his hermit cave turning away from the closed Bible on his desk resting next to a human skull. As he extends his arms to the trees and birds and animals as the sunrise engulfs the landscape before him, he stands in awe of the Creation. He's enraptured in awe and wonder. That's why that image came to me at the ending of my 9/11 poem: after all the horror, this centuries-old painting reminds us of the visionary moment of rapport with Nature. Viewing this painting, we too emerge from our hermit cave to behold the birth of a new day in Eternity. "Every day is in Eternity," wrote Ginsberg in "Footnote to Howl" and he was right!

CR: You retreat to the woods for a period each year. How is that solitude important for you and your poetry?

Antler: Until recently when I became caregiver for my mother so she could die at home and not have to go to a nursing home and also became caregiver for Jeff when he came down with cancer, for 35 years I went into Wildernesses alone in spring and fall for 30 to 40 to 60 days (once 100 days) hiking or canoeing miles from any trailhead and having wild lakes to myself in the Quetico-Superior or northern California mountain splendors of solitude peaks and vistas, or Upper Peninsula Michigan deep old-growth eastern hemlock sugar maple forest valleys with primordial creeks and ancient overlooks off the trail where I would see no one. Going off the trail was my destination. I felt as if I were the only person left on Earth.

CR: Tell me more about the importance of being alone.

Antler: Alone with the Alone. I spent more time alone in the Wilderness than I did in my mother's womb. I became obsessed with the solitude wilderness vision quest experience more than seeking visionary human lovers or fame. Although I had many close calls—bears stole my food, stole my packs, ripped up my tents, confronted me standing, approaching me, 6-foot snows and weeklong downpours, being lost, hypothermia, sunstroke, heatstroke, hundreds of infuriated yellow-jacket wasps engulfing me, stinging me, giardia, falling through ice, hurting myself so I couldn't walk—but it was worth it. It was always hard to return to civilization. Something in me never returned and is running around on all fours in the dark right now. Nancy Newhall said, "Wilderness has answers to questions we don't even know how to ask yet." Sometimes silence was the answer, sometimes waterfalls, sometimes meteor showers, sometimes wind, sometimes a Jack-in-the-Pulpit, sometimes an eagle flying close, eyeing me with its yellow eyes, sometimes a perfect double rainbow. At times I became a nocturnal being and spent many nights under the stars. Commodore Fanning in *Planets, Stars and Galaxies* wrote that when you learn a constellation you make a friend for life. Human friends come and go, but the Orion you learned as a child will be there for you when you're an old man. That's why [poet Kenneth] Rexroth said, "Believe in Orion." Like John Muir, I left the University of Wisconsin for the University of the Wilderness.

CR: You obviously get a great deal out of being in nature.

Antler: Most of all for me it was the healing energy I felt living a primitive life, the physical challenge and joy, the connection with the timeless Source that preceded the human drama and trauma, the vow to fulfill the promise of boyhood till death do me part or till immortality do me never part. Thoreau was and is as much an inspiration to me as Whitman was: "I went to the woods to see if I could not learn what life had to teach and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

CR: Do you do anything specific beyond spending solitary time in the wilderness to cultivate your self and your consciousness?

Antler: Outside my time alone in Nature or working on poetry, my main focus is caregiving—for my pal Jeff and also for a woman friend who has a disability. I've been assisting her for 25 years—helping with shopping, cooking, cleaning, meds, appointments, counseling, etc. Since Jeff's health crisis began in late 2005 I've done the same for him, including taking over his classes during his first couple of surgeries and recovery times after he was first diagnosed and then co-teaching with him for a couple of semesters. I must admit that was caregiving for me as well as for Jeff, because I enjoy teaching and we had a lot of fun doing it together, and so did the students. Caregiving involves a major part of each day. As I mentioned, I also did this for my mother during her final years.

CR: Beyond the caregiving, how else do you spend your time?

Antler: I do a lot of reading and reciting poems aloud, also play Scarlatti, Debussy, Ravel, Beethoven, Chopin, Grieg, Scriabin on a piano Jeff won for me when Liberace picked his name out of a barrel (that actually happened, Jeff has a funny poem about it). I'm secretary of the housing co-op we live in, taking minutes at our meetings. Also, involved in eco-activism with Jeff helping preserve natural greenway along the Milwaukee River where we live. Take part in poetry community here—have been a part of the Milwaukee poetry scene since the late '60s. I'm a long-time supporter of Woodland Pattern Literary Center and Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets. Jeff and I were the featured keynote poets at WFOP's November 2012 annual fall gathering, this one's theme being "Rethinking Nature Poetry."

CR: I know you're also busy outside of Milwaukee and Wisconsin.

Antler: Yes, I've done recent readings at Sarah Lawrence, Texas A&M, also with Robert Bly in Minneapolis as part of the Poetry Society of America's 100th anniversary celebration. Gave presentations with Jeff of poems by Whitman, Thoreau, Jeffers, John Muir, eco/nature poetry by many poets. Had brief teaching stints at Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Esalen Institute, Omega Institute, and The Clearing. I also conduct workshops at a high school creative writing festival that's held each November on the UW–Whitewater campus. For many years I've made a living from grass cutting, snowshoveling, factory work, housepainting. In a zen sort of way everything I do cultivates my consciousness and feeds my poems.

CR: Thanks so much for taking time for this interview. It's good to learn more about you and what's behind your poetry.

Antler: Thanks, Charlie. I'm happy to do it.

An earlier, briefer version of this interview appeared in the National Association for Poetry Therapy newsletter.

✂ Interview with Moisés Villavicencio Barras

BY SARAH BUSSE

SB: *Luz de Todos los Tiempos / Light of All Times* (Cowfeather Press, 2013) is a bilingual book, but I hesitate to use the word “translations” to describe it. Your project seems less about simply translating a poem from Spanish into English (or vice versa) and more about how one individual poet can explore the potential of material in two different languages, simultaneously. Would you agree? And what would you like to say about this process, as a poet?

MVB: Thank you, Sarah. Although the majority of the poems in *Light of All Times* were written first in Spanish, you are right that working with two languages—English and Spanish—changed my approach to writing and also has influenced me beyond just writing.

Upon arriving in the US, my work as a poet became a verbal experiment and an experiment into the ways of seeing my reality. While I wrote the poems that appear in *Light of All Times*, I kept pausing to ponder how a certain verse or an entire poem would work in English. As such, I have many poems that didn’t make it into the book because they didn’t work in both languages. Sometimes, it was not only the translation but also the cultural references that limited the poem. This is to say that the context of the poem was relatively closed. As a translator of the works of poets such as Roberta Hill, Simon Ortiz and Neeli Cherkovski, something that I learned from them is that their poems were not circumscribed by only local topics but rather universal themes such as love, family and death.

When I began to write my first poems for *Light of All Times* I also made a clear decision to distance myself from my orientation to my first book, *Mayo entre Voces* (*May Among Voices*), and one of those decisions was to write in a direct manner about one topic. I discovered that many of my verbal resources, such as overly elaborate metaphors, did not work in English. I decided to construct clear and powerful metaphors; for example, you’ll find references to buffalos and jaguars.

I definitely believe that to read, write and “live” in two languages and realities is an advantage I make use of in my poetic work.

SB: “Crossing” is a theme on many levels in this collection. Share a little about what this concept means for you, considering your many journeys, both physical (moving from Mexico to the US, for instance, or traveling each morning to work) and also other ways (moving between being a teacher and being a writer and being a father, or moving between cultures). Does this also affect how you move from one image to another, one line to the next, in your poems?

MVB: The idea of crossing, or of passing physically and mentally from one place to another is very present in the entire book. To cite a saying that I’ve always liked from poet Arthur Rimbaud: “I am another.” I would add, “I am others.” This phrase has always been part of my consciousness and being as a poet. I

believe that everyone travels and crosses from one place to another on different levels; this includes, as you say, assuming different personalities such as to be a father, a mother, a writer. I believe we do this traveling without awareness of its significance.

Sarah, I would like to talk a little bit about my physical travels because I think they are the basis for other aspects of my poetic work and my being as a poet. I remember that when I was young I loved to travel with my mother. My brother and I traveled every week by train from my birth city, Oaxaca, to my mother's town, Cuicatlán. The train trip to my mother's town took about five hours, and this trip was always fascinating and full of the unknown for me. In every town along the way, the train would stop, and people would be selling something to eat and things they made with their hands. For example, in the first town the train would stop in, people offered cheese. In the next town they sold hats made with palm leaves, and it was cheese in the following town. Every smell, sound, taste and image has the capacity to transport me elsewhere.

Also when I was a child there was born in me a fascination for observing people carefully, such as my Aunt Estela, who, as I mention in a poem, never wore shoes. It fascinated me to listen to her voice, and to observe my Aunt Estela's face and feet. I always asked questions about her, because she was a strong woman who lived alone. Since that age, I've been a traveler not only of the real world but also of the imagination. Some of the places I liked to visit in my imagination were from the stories that my mother told me. She was the first person to tell me that the name of her town, Cuicatlán, meant land of the song in the Mazatec indigenous language. My mother told me that our ancestors sang in palaces of the Aztec emperors. I mention this in the first poem in *Light of All Times*, "Ancestors," a poem about a real and imagined journey through my mother's memories. For as long as I can remember I could use my imagination to build images with words. I agree that my physical and imaginary travels, or whatever you would like to call them, influence the way I write. As I mention before, in my works you will find a replete combination of elements and realities. I believe my poems are multi-dimensional.

SB: The natural world clearly feeds your poems. Sometimes in setting, sometimes in image or trope, Nature is very present in this book. There is a real sense of the natural world as something always with us, and yet there is also a sense that we have lost something, lost some rich and lush wilderness, perhaps, that is now relegated to an imagined or symbolic realm. Would you talk a little more about the role that Nature plays in your work (please interpret that word loosely!), and, do you regard yourself as an "ecopoet"?

MVB: I believe that Nature is one of the muscles that make up the heart of *Light of All Times*. As I mention before, in my childhood travels with my mother, Nature was always present. Sometimes my mother and I would walk through the mountains from community to community. The town that my mother grew up in was a powerful one full of energy, energy of people and Nature. If you were there, everywhere you look you would find the force of Nature. In my mother's town people grow mangoes, papayas, plums and other lesser-known fruits. It's a town with a subtropical climate surrounded by two rivers and many streams.

Talking with the people who live there, many are indigenous from the Mazatec Sierra, mestizos, or descendants of Afro-Mexicans.

I began listening to Nature as a child. My play was about deciphering its voices, and I believe that from them I learned the world's poetic sense.

What I want to say is that I spent the first years of my life immersed in the wild and learning from people with strong traditions that deeply respected Nature. As I mention before, I began listening to Nature as a child. My play was about deciphering its voices, and I believe that from them I learned the world's poetic sense. I also began to think about what I was losing when my mother and brother and I stopped traveling to her town and we started living in the city. Thus, this first loss that I suffered—of no longer living close to Nature—was at once real and symbolic. As a child, I also learned that Nature has her own voice. I learned about this when a powerful storm carried away my Aunt Estela's home. I remember the current of water rushing down the mountain, and my cousin Francisco kneeling to pray; in this moment I felt we were in the hands of neither God nor of the storm.

About being an ecopoet. I don't know. I believe that my friends would tell you that I don't believe in "labels." Until this moment, many of my friends here in Madison didn't know I write poetry. I believe that labels limit you and close you in, above all when society insists on classifying people.

SB: Your own heritage is complex. Would you talk a little bit about who you are, your parents and extended family, where and who you come from, and how you feel this inspires and informs your poetry?

MVB: Sure. My mother was the first person to tell me the story of my family. She told me that my great-grandfather was a descendant of Afro-Mexicans. She also shared with me that it seemed my maternal grandfather was an adventurous man; during the time of the rains he crossed cattle from one side of the river to another. In the poem "Ancestors," I speak of what my mother told me about my family. My mother originates from a town in the Mazatec Sierra of Oaxaca where the inhabitants are descendants of indigenous peoples, Spanish and Afro-Mexicans. The original language is Mazatec with different variations. Something that I also remember my mother telling me is that with the arrival of the railroad, people from her town had to abandon their homes in order to establish another town closer to the rail lines. I believe that, like for many Mexicans, my indigenous past is not clear because we were violently uprooted from our native roots.

My father's family is originally from the city of Oaxaca. My paternal grandfather was a peasant, and my grandmother was one of the first and last midwives in the city. On my father's side of the family, the figure of my grandmother was the one that most interested me growing up. My grandmother was named Guadalupe, and she was an independent woman who divorced from my grandfather because she was the one who maintained the family. I believe that she was one of the first midwives in the city. I write about her in "Ancestors."

While I was living in Oaxaca, I had other contexts as a writer, but since arriving

to the United States, I've become more interested in rediscovering my indigenous past and identity. I have begun to read more about the history of Mexico; the history of indigenous literature, geography and other topics feed my literary work. Definitely, my origins influenced my work.

SB: Your work takes many risks in different ways: for instance, in its subject matter and writing in two languages. Could you talk a little about danger and risk as a theme for you? What motivates risk-taking in your poems?

MVB: I remember clearly that, since I first started writing, it always interested me to take risks, whether in form or in content. I have an unpublished book of stories that combine prose and poetry in order to take on some rather risky topics. As verbal apparatus they function well enough, but they can insult the sensibilities of some people, which is why this book remains unpublished to this day. As I mentioned before, as I was beginning to write the poems in *Light of All Times*, I tried to distance myself from the topics of my first book. At times I get the impression that people keep associating poetry with elements like the moon, the stars, etc. In *Light of All Times* there are poems in which the topic is hate; in others, blood. I wanted to explore these themes on purpose. My objective is to take these topics on; for instance, I also attend to themes that are to some degree ecological, like in the poem "Polar Bear." I believe that as someone who works with the word, my job is also to address topics that are not usually considered material for poetry.

SB: You also write children's books. Talk a little about how children's books and poetry are similar, and how you feel they are different. Does the writing come from the same place?

MVB: In my case, the majority of the topics of my stories and poems for children come from ideas that my sons have given me. I believe that childhood is one of the stages of life that is most full of poetry. We often talk about the ways in which children perceive the world. You know, for instance, the fascination that kids hold for things such as a single sound, a texture, the beings of the earth. I believe that children and poets see the world in similar ways; they explore in a direct manner in order to learn about the world. Not only do they explore, they also give life to things. As poets give voice to a tree, a stone, an ant, a polar bear, children also give life and voice to the beings of the world. For example, my second children's story was recently published by the Institute for Education in Oaxaca, and it's about a boy who loses his belly button, and the belly button is the one who searches for his boy until he finds him. The idea to write a children's story whose main character is a belly button came from my son Marcel. When Marcel was little, he was fascinated with his belly button, which is why I decided to write a story about this.

I think that in many ways my written work for children comes from the same place as my poetry. Both are full of images, and memories of my childhood. The difference is that there are some topics I address in my poetry that I cannot in children's stories—like violence, indifference to love, and hate.

SB: How do you think moving to Madison, Wisconsin, has affected your work?

What challenges do you face as an immigrant author?

MVB: As I mentioned, my arrival to Madison has positively affected my work. I still remember, for example, that my first encounter with snow was something incredibly impactful and fascinating to me. I remember that it snowed so hard that first night I saw it. It was before morning, and I was so excited that I went out to walk in the middle of the night. One of Rimbaud's verses turned into reality for me that night—"deserts of snow." What I'm trying to say is that the spectacle of nature widened the possibilities for my writing. As you can appreciate in *Light of All Times*, the passage from Mexico to Madison is very present in the entire book. Not only changing landscapes enriched my poetry but also the birth of my two sons, Marcel and Adrien. For more than two years the only thing that I did was care for my older son; while spending so much time with him, I had much occasion to recall my own childhood in his. Some of the poems in my first book reference specific places in Madison, like the street where we lived for some years.

I feel that my poems sometimes are a dialogue with my sons or with the people I see on the streets of Madison. I believe that language was or could be one of my obstacles as an emigrant writer. For example, although many of the poems in *Mayo Entre Voces* were written in Madison, at that time my grasp of English was too limited for me to transfer them into English. I believe that if I return to that prior book in order to draft English versions of those poems, few would work in translation because I was not thinking in two languages at once.

Until this point, I've now had many years writing poetry in isolation in Madison. Personally, it is an enormously satisfying endeavor to be able to make my work known through Cowfeather Press!

SB: What's next for you, as poet and writer?

MVB: As a poet, for now I am working on my next book, looking for fresh themes. I don't have a title yet. Also, I'm working on a collection of children's poems with my own illustrations, called *Sausagetarian*. The idea for that title comes from my younger son because he once declared himself a *Sausagetarian*, meaning that he won't eat chicken, turkey, fish or any other kind of meat ... except for sausages. As a writer, I am working on a number of projects at the same time. For example, I'm working on a short novel about a family that immigrates to the States, and the narrator is a young woman in the family.

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☞ Entrevista a Moisés Villavicencio Barras

TRADUCIDO POR MOISÉS VILLAVICENCIO BARRAS

SB: *Luz de Todos los Tiempos* es un libro bilingüe, pero vacilo en usar la palabra “traducciones” para describirlo. Tu proyecto parece algo menos que simplemente traducir un poema del español al inglés (o viceversa) y más acerca de cómo un poeta puede explorar las posibilidades de su material en dos lenguajes diferentes de manera simultánea. ¿Estás de acuerdo? ¿Y qué te gustaría decir acerca de este proceso como un poeta?

MVB: Gracias Sarah. Aunque la mayoría de los poemas de *Luz de Todos los Tiempos* fueron escritos en español, estoy de acuerdo que el hecho de leer y escribir en dos idiomas, español e inglés, cambió mi manera de escribir y no sólo eso. Estoy de acuerdo que mi trabajo como poeta una vez que llegué aquí a Madison se volvió también un experimento verbal y un experimento con la manera de ver mi realidad. Mientras escribía los poemas de *Luz de Todos los Tiempos* me detuve siempre para pensar cómo funcionaria cierto verso o todo el poema en inglés. Así que tengo muchos poemas que quedaron afuera de *Luz de Todos los Tiempos* porque no funcionaban en inglés. No sólo la traducción no funcionaba, sino las referencias culturales limitaban al poema. Es decir que el contexto cultural del poema era bastante cerrado. Como traductor de la obra de poetas como Roberta Hill, Simon Ortiz y Neeli Cherkovski, es algo que aprendí de ellos que sus poemas no se circunscriben a temas locales, sino temas universales como el amor, la familia, la muerte, etc. Cuando empecé a escribir mis primeros poemas para *Luz de Todos los Tiempos*, también tomé la decisión clara de alejarme de la manera en que escribí mi primer libro, *Mayo entre Voces*. Una de estas decisiones fue escribir de manera directa sobre un tema. Descubrí que muchos de mis recursos verbales no funcionaban en inglés, como metáforas demasiado elaboradas. Decidí construir metáforas claras y poderosas, muchas veces contrastando elementos y realidades. En mis poemas puedes, por ejemplo, encontrar búfalos y jaguares. Creo definitivamente que leer, escribir y “vivir” en dos idiomas y realidades es una ventaja que aprovecho para mi trabajo poético.

SB: “Cruzar”, es un tema con muchos niveles en esta colección. Comparte un poco acerca de lo que este concepto significa para ti, considerando tus viajes, los dos tipos, físicos (trasladarse de México a los Estados Unidos, o viajando cada mañana al trabajo) y también otras maneras de viajar (moverse entre ser un maestro, ser un escritor y ser un padre, o moverse entre dos culturas) ¿Piensas que esto afecta cómo te mueves de una imagen a otra, de una línea a la otra en tus poemas?

MVB: Estoy de acuerdo contigo, la idea de cruzar o de pasar en manera física o mental de un lugar a otro está presente en todo el libro. Voy a citar una frase que me gusta del poeta Arthur Rimbaud. “Yo soy otro, yo agregaría otros.” Esta frase ha estado siempre conmigo desde que cobre conciencia de mi ser como poeta. Pienso que todos viajamos y cruzamos de un lugar a otro en diferentes niveles e incluso como tú dices asumimos diferentes identidades, como tu mencionas, como la de ser padre, madre, escritor, creo que lo hacemos sin tener conciencia

de lo que significa. Sarah, me gustaría primero hablarte un poco de mis viajes físicos por que pienso que ellos son la base entre otras cosas de mi trabajo poético y mi ser como poeta. Yo recuerdo que desde que era niño me gustaba viajar, con mi madre. Mi hermano y yo viajamos cada semana en el tren de mi ciudad natal Oaxaca, al pueblo de mi madre, Cuicatlán. El viaje en tren al pueblo de mi madre duraba cinco horas, este viaje para mi fue siempre algo fascinante e inédito. En cada pueblo que el tren se detenía, la gente vendía algo de comer, cosas hechas a mano, por ejemplo, en el primer pueblo que el tren se detenía la gente ofrecía queso, en el siguiente pueblo vendía sombreros hechos de palma, y en el siguiente pueblo ofrecían pan, cada olor, sonido, sabor e imagen también me transportada. También desde niño nació mi fascinación por observar a las personas detenidamente, como a la tía Estela, como mencionó en el poema mi tía nunca llevó zapatos. Me fascinaba escuchar su voz, observar su cara y sus pies de la tía Estela. Siempre me hice preguntas sobre ella porque era una mujer fuerte que vivía sola. Desde niño he sido un viajero no sólo en el mundo real sino también en la imaginación. Algunos de los sitios que me gustaba visitar en mi imaginación eran el mundo de las historias que mi madre me contaba. Por ejemplo, ella fue la primera que me dijo que el nombre del pueblo de donde era ella, Cuicatlán, también significa tierra del canto. Mi madre me contó que nuestro ancestros cantaban en los palacios de los emperadores aztecas, yo menciono esto en el primer poema de *Luz de Todos los Tiempos*, Ancestros, el poema es un viaje real e imaginario a través de los recuerdos de mi madre. Todavía recuerdo cuando cobré conciencia de que tenía conciencia de lo que pasaba a mi alrededor y cuando me di cuenta que podía usar mi imaginación para construir imágenes con palabras. Estoy de acuerdo que mis viajes físicos o imaginarios o como quieras llamarlos afectan mi manera de escribir. Como mencioné antes, en mis trabajos puedes encontrar una buena combinación de elementos y realidades. Creo que mis poemas son multidimensionales.

SB: El mundo de la naturaleza se encuentra de manera clara en tu trabajo. Algunas veces como escenario, algunas veces como una imagen o tema, la naturaleza está muy presente en tu libro. Hay un sentido real del mundo de la naturaleza como algo siempre con nosotros, y también hay el sentido de que hemos perdido algo, de que hemos perdido la exuberancia rica de lo inhabitado. Quizás ahora está relegado a un reino imaginario o simbólico. Podrías hablarnos más del papel que la naturaleza juega en tu trabajo (¡Por favor, interpreta esta palabra como tú la quieras interpretar!). ¿Te consideras un ecopoeta?

MVB: Creo que la naturaleza es una de los músculos que forman parte del corazón de *Luz de Todos los Tiempos*. Como mencioné antes, en los viajes que hice con mi madre desde niño la naturaleza siempre era presente, algunas veces mi madre y yo caminamos por las montañas de pueblo en pueblo. El pueblo de mi madre es un pueblo poderoso lleno de la energía, de energía de la gente y la naturaleza. Si tú estuvieras ahí, por donde quiera que mires encontrarías la fuerza de la naturaleza. En el pueblo de mi madre la gente siembra frutas como mangos, papayas, ciruelas y otras frutas poco conocidas. Es un pueblo de clima subtropical rodeado por dos ríos y muchos arroyos. Hablando de las personas que viven ahí, muchos de sus pobladores son indígenas de la sierra mazateca, mestizos o descendientes de afro-mexicanos. Lo que quiero decir es que pasé mis primeros años de mi vida rodeado por la naturaleza, y como mencioné antes

desde niño empecé a escuchar a la naturaleza. Con mi imaginación jugaba a descifrar sus voces y creo que de ella aprendí también el sentido poético del mundo. Creo que también empecé a pensar en lo que estaba perdiendo cuando mi madre y mi hermano dejamos de viajar al pueblo de mi madre y comenzamos a vivir en la ciudad, entonces de alguna manera esa primera pérdida que sufrí, dejar de estar cerca de la naturaleza. Fue una pérdida real y al mismo tiempo simbólica.

De niño también aprendí que la naturaleza tiene su voz propia. Aprendí sobre esto cuando una tormenta poderosa se estaba llevando la casa de la tía Estela. Recuerdo que la corriente de agua bajaba desde la montaña, y mi primo Francisco se incoó para rezar, en ese momento estábamos en las manos no de Dios, si no de la tormenta.

Sarah, creo que mis amigos te pueden decir, que no creo en las etiquetas. Hasta ahora muchos de mis amigos no saben que escribo poesía. No creo en etiquetas como la de ser poeta, siento que las etiquetas te limitan, te encierran, sobre todo cuando la sociedad se obstina en clasificar a la gente.

SB: Tu origen familiar es complejo. ¿Podrías hablar un poco acerca de quién eres, tus padres y tu familia, de dónde provienes, y cómo piensas que eso alimenta y motiva tu trabajo poético?

MVB: Mi madre fue la primera persona que me habló sobre la historia de mi familia. Ella me dijo que bisabuelo era descendiente de afro-mexicanos. Mi madre me contó también sobre la vida de mi abuelo materno, al parecer era un hombre aventurero, por ejemplo. Ella me narró que durante el tiempo de lluvias cuando el río crecía mi abuelo cruzaba el ganado de un lado a otro. En mi poema *Ancestros*, *Gato de Monte*, escribo sobre de lo que mi madre me contaba. Mi madre es originaria de un pueblo llamado Cuicatlán. Este pueblo está ubicado en la Sierra Mazateca, donde se hablan variaciones del Mazateco. Mi madre me dijo que con la llegada del ferrocarril su pueblo se tuvo que mover de un lado a otro. Creo que como muchos mexicanos mi pasado indígena no está claro porque nos arrancó de nuestras raíces de manera violenta.

La familia de mi padre es originaria de la ciudad de Oaxaca. El abuelo paterno era campesino y mi abuela fue una de las primeras y últimas parteras de la ciudad. Del lado de la familia mi padre, la figura de mi abuela es la que me interesa más a mi desde pequeño. Mi abuela se llamaba Guadalupe, ella era una mujer independiente que se divorció de mi abuelo porque en este caso ella era la que mantenía la familia. Pienso que ella fue una de las primeras parteras de la ciudad. De ella hablo también en el poema *Ancestros*. Me ha interesado más redescubrir mi pasado indígena y mi identidad desde que llegué a los Estados Unidos. Me he puesto a leer más sobre la historia de México, la historia de su literatura Indígena, su geografía y otros temas que han alimentado mi trabajo literario.

SB: Tu trabajo toma muchos riesgos en diferentes maneras, por ejemplo, el tema y el acto de escribir en dos lenguajes. ¿Puedes hablar un poco acerca del peligro y el riesgo como temas en tu trabajo? ¿Qué motiva el hecho de que tomes riesgos en tus poemas?

MVB: Recuerdo de manera clara que desde que comencé escribir siempre me intereso tomar riesgos, ya sea en la forma o en el tema. Tengo un libro inédito de cuentos en que combino la prosa y la poesía para abordar temas bastante riesgosos, como aparatos verbales los cuentos funcionan bien, pero pueden lastimar la sensibilidad de las personas, y por eso ese libro permanece inédito todavía. Como mencioné antes al comenzar escribir los poemas de *Luz de Todos los Tiempos* intenté alejarme de los temas de mi primer libro. A veces tengo la impresión que todavía la gente sigue asociando la poesía con elementos como la luna, las estrellas, etc. En *Luz de Todos los Tiempos* hay poemas donde el tema es el odio, la sangre, etc. Quería explorar estos temas a propósito y creo que salí bien librado de ellos. Mi objetivo era abordar, por ejemplo, los temas de alguna manera, ecológicos, como el poema Oso Polar. Pienso que como alguien que trabaja con la palabra mi trabajo también es abordar temas que usualmente no son considerados como material de poesía.

SB: Tú también escribes libros para niños. Habla un poco de ¿cómo tus libros para niños y tu poesía son similares? ¿Cómo sientes que los dos son diferentes? ¿Viene la escritora para cada uno del mismo lugar?

MVB: En mi caso la mayoría de los temas de mis cuentos y mis poemas para niños vienen de ideas que mis hijos me han dado, y creo que la infancia es una de las etapas más llenas de poesía en la vida. Se ha hablado con frecuencia de la manera en que los niños perciben el mundo. Tú sabes, por ejemplo, la fascinación que los niños tienen por las cosas como un sonido, una textura y los seres de la tierra. Pienso que de alguna manera los niños y los poetas ven el mundo de manera similar. Exploran de manera directa para aprender del mundo. No sólo exploran sino también dan vida a las cosas. Como los poetas pueden dar voz a un árbol, una piedra, una hormiga, también los niños dan vida y voz a los seres de la tierra. Por ejemplo, mi segundo cuento para niños recientemente publicado por el Instituto de Educación en Oaxaca, trata sobre un niño que pierde su ombligo y es el ombligo que lo busca al niño hasta que lo encuentra. Esta idea de escribir un cuento para niños teniendo como personaje principal un ombligo vino de mi hijo Marcel. Cuando era pequeño él estaba fascinado con su ombligo, y entonces decidí escribir un cuento sobre este tema. Sarah, pienso que de alguna manera mi trabajo que hago para niños viene del mismo lugar como lo de muchos de mis poemas. El trabajo está cargado de imágenes, de recuerdos de mi infancia. La diferencia es que algunos temas que abordo en la poesía, no los puedo abordar en mis cuentos para niños como la violencia, el desamor, el odio, etc.

SB: ¿De qué manera el hecho de moverte a vivir a Madison, Wisconsin, a influenciado tu trabajo? ¿Qué tipo de desafíos encuentras como un autor emigrante?

MVB: Como te dije, mi llegada a Madison afectó de manera positiva mi trabajo. Todavía recuerdo, por ejemplo, mi primer encuentro con la nieve: fue algo impactante y fascinante. Recuerdo que nevaba muy fuerte esa noche. Era de madrugada, estaba yo tan emocionado que salí a caminar en medio de la noche. Uno de los versos de Rimbaud se hizo real esa noche. “Los desiertos de nieve”. Lo que quiero decir que el espectáculo de la Naturaleza amplió las posibilidades

de mi escritura. Como ustedes podrán apreciar en *Luz de Todos los Tiempos*, el paisaje de México y de Madison está muy presente en todo el libro. No solo el espectáculo de la Naturaleza enriqueció mi trabajo poético también el nacimiento de mis dos hijos, Marcel y Adrián. Por más de dos años lo único que hice fue cuidar a mi hijo el mayor, así que tuve mucho tiempo para recordar mi infancia en su infancia y pasar mucho tiempo con él, algunos de los poemas de mi primer libro hacen referencia a lugares específicos de Madison, como la calle donde vivimos por algunos años. Siento que mis poemas a veces son un diálogo con mis hijos o con la gente que veo en las calles de Madison. Creo que el lenguaje fue o puede ser uno de mis obstáculos como escritor emigrante. Por ejemplo, aunque muchos de los poemas de mi primer libro fueron escritos en Madison, mi conocimiento del inglés en ellos era muy limitado y no pude transferirlos al inglés. Creo que si vuelvo al libro para tratar de hacer versiones de esos poemas pocos funcionarían porque no estaba pensando en dos idiomas simultáneamente. Por muchos años también hice mi trabajo de poeta aquí en Madison de manera aislada. Es un motivo enorme de satisfacción personal poder dar a conocer mi trabajo por medio de Cowfeather Press.

SB: ¿Qué es lo que sigue para ti, como poeta y escritor?

MVB: Como poeta, por ahora estoy trabajando en mi siguiente libro, estoy en la búsqueda temas frescos, todavía no tengo un título. También estoy trabajando en un libro de poesía para niños con mis propias ilustraciones. El libro se llama *Sausagetarian*, la idea para al título de mi libro vino de mi hijo el menor cuando se declaró *Sausagetarian*, dijo que no quería comer carne de pollo, pavo, pescado u otro tipo de carne, sólo salchichas. Como escritor, estoy trabajando en varios proyectos al mismo tiempo, por ejemplo estoy escribiendo una novela corta sobre la historia de una familia que emigra a los Estados. La narradora es la adolescente de la familia.

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☞ Black Earth Institute

BY PATRICIA MONAGHAN

On election day 2004, I had a life-changing encounter. I was on a cold Madison street corner, holding up campaign signs for the liberal candidate, when I was approached by a gentlemanly fellow. “Don’t you want to vote for the one with values?” he asked, his voice soft and not unfriendly.

I brought up the civilian death toll in Iraq and Afghanistan, the denial of benefits to returning veterans, children suffering for want of health insurance, environmental degradation, and a half-dozen other similar issues. But the man, although he remained polite and soft-spoken, was firm in rejecting all these arguments. “I am concerned about values,” he kept repeating. When I asked what that meant, he could not be specific, just kept saying, “I have to vote my values.”

That evening, as my public-health physician husband Michael McDermott and I watched the depressing election returns come in, we talked about “values voters” like the man on the Madison street corner. Somehow, it seemed, such voters did not perceive “values” in the social justice, environmental, and peace movements. Michael, who had been studying the influence of conservative think tanks on American politics, heard echoes of the “talking points” provided by such institutions in what ordinary Americans were saying. Those points included a perception that conservative politicians stood for “values,” while liberal ones did not.

Heavily-funded think tanks fund commentators to disseminate conservative viewpoints, often in an orchestrated fashion, to the media. Many studies over the last decade have shown that these think tanks provide a disproportionate number of “analyses” in the mainstream media. Media critic Eric Alterman describes the combined influence of corporate wealth and conservative think tanks by telling us that

in recent decades ... right-wing billionaires like Richard Mellon Scaife, Rupert Murdoch, the Coors brothers, and, more recently, the Koch brothers have joined together with multinational corporations to shift the center of political gravity in our debate rightward on matters of economic, military, and social policy.... At the same time, the growth of right-wing talk radio, cable news, and a bevy of well-funded think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Cato Institute, the Manhattan Institute, and the Hoover Institution at Stanford University have overwhelmed what remains of their less ideologically committed counterparts, such as the Brookings Institution and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, to say nothing of the advantage they enjoy over genuinely liberal organizations such as the labor-backed Economic Policy Institute and the more recently created Center for American Progress.

That night, the Black Earth Institute was born: a think tank for progressive

writers and poets who address social justice, environmentalism and spirituality in their work. Michael likes to joke that “we are exactly like the heavily-funded conservative think tanks, except for being progressive and not having much money.”

First we forged a mission statement, which called for art to connect with both society and spirituality, as found in most traditional cultures. The ancient Celtic bard, for instance, was not only a skilled wordsmith but was charged with monitoring the relationship of the king to the land. Should the king become corrupt, the results would be instantly apparent in weather disturbances, crop failures, and cattle diseases. In the face of such ecological distress, the bard had to create a satire so perfectly phrased that it magically caused the king to become disfigured. As a disfigured king could not rule, he would be forced out and the ecological order restored under a new and better king.

But in today’s world, art is connected with commerce and celebrity rather than with magic and spirituality. And political art is, almost by definition, derided as failing to meet the demands of craft. Could artists be brought together to find a new vocabulary, one that encouraged a more traditional and holistic view of art? Once this idea was hatched, we set to work. How to attract top-flight artists to this enterprise? Especially with the “not having much money” stipulation? Undeterred, we made up a list of authors we believed met the criteria of connecting art with spirituality, ecology and social justice, then invited them to a four-day intensive. The site would be our weekend (and someday, retirement) home in Black Earth. The participants would get fed and housed, but otherwise had to pay their own expenses.

Astonishingly, everyone invited said “yes.”

Writers like Iowa Poet Laureate Mary Swander, University of Nebraska distinguished professor Allison Hedge Coke, slam champion Richard Cambridge, Seattle University writer-in-residence Judith Roche and others flew to Wisconsin in September 2005 to begin three-year appointments as Fellows to the new Black Earth Institute. Over those years, during the annual BEI intensive, Fellows met with volunteer Scholar-Advisors who include Manitowoc historian Kerry Trask and Aldo Leopold Fellow Cristina Eisenberg, applying themselves to a variety of topics ranging from the philosophy of George Lakov and the influence of the Great Awakenings, to chaos theory and mirror neurons.

One former Fellow describes the meetings as “a combination of slumber party and doctoral seminar.” Fellows share rooms, trailers, and tents on the Black Earth property. Every day, they harvest garden vegetables, prepare meals to share, and grow rowdy around evening bonfires while sipping wine from the vineyard that we painstakingly cultivate. During the day, they discuss the assigned readings, which always include scientific information as well as philosophic and literary theory.

This year’s theme, “Hope and Resilience,” focused on the question of how to maintain hope in a period of climate change, where millions of the world’s most impoverished people are in danger from rising tides and food shortages. Soil

scientist Liam Heneghan and clinical psychologist Arieahn Matamonasa, both of DePaul University, discussed the concept of resilience as it is found in biological communities and within the human mind. Wolf researcher Cristina Eisenberg discussed the concept of “panarchy,” and how resilience is a theme that weaves together both science and the arts. Visiting scholar Curt Meine, Aldo Leopold’s biographer and a consultant at the International Crane Foundation, introduced the philosophical and spiritual ramifications of hope. And sociologist Mary Jo Neitz of the University of Missouri presented ideas on how social institutions can promote or discourage optimism and activism. In response to each, Fellows reflected in conversation, writings, and even ritual on the ideas presented.

Between the meetings, Fellows and Scholars present panels on BEI’s philosophy at national and regional meetings: Associated Writing Programs, American Academy of Religion, Association for Study of Literature and Environment, Split This Rock activist poetry festival, Iowa’s Wildness Symposium, and others. They have germinated individual projects such as Swander’s *Farmscape*, a play derived from oral histories of Iowa farmers, and Annie Finch’s *Wolf Song*, the first production of the new Poets Theater of Maine, founded in response to ideas from W.B. Yeats on theater and activism, presented at BEI. Several have returned to school to add additional advanced degrees to their resumes, while others have added new themes to their ongoing work, as Judith Roche did in creating a series of environmental poems for Seattle’s new water treatment plant.

At the core of BEI’s work is a commitment to acknowledging that art has not always been a form of commerce. BEI reminds us of the position of the artist as a mediator between humankind and the realms of the gods, the ancestors, or the Earth itself, found in most traditional societies. In today’s world, where religion is often a source of conflict, BEI’s artists offer a model of inclusive spirituality, which is always connected to BEI’s other two motivating values, social justice and environmentalism.

Fellows over the past six years, in addition to those already named, have been: Deborah Wood Holton of Chicago; John Briggs of Massachusetts; Linda Hogan of Oklahoma; Brenda Peterson of Seattle; Patricia Spears Jones of New York; Regie Gibson of Boston; John T. Price of Nebraska; and Elizabeth Cunningham and Cait Johnson of the Hudson Valley. Seamus Cashman of Ireland has served as International Fellow as well.

After a year-long search process, BEI has just announced its 2011–2013 Fellows, including Wisconsin poet, Roberta Hill. These Fellows will be in residence in Black Earth for part of October each year and this year presented a public reading as a fund-raiser for the Black Earth Library. More details on Black Earth Institute can be found at blackearthinstitute.org.

Fall 2010

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☞ Fond du Lac's Foot of the Lake Poetry Collective

BY MARY WEHNER

Often when poets gather, they begin the conversation by raging against the unpoetic world—politics, school issues, the spouse or significant other, their day jobs. Yet it doesn't take long to circle back to what they love most: poetry—how it works, how to write it better, and ultimately how to encourage the rest of the world to read and listen to the poems about which they are so passionate.

This is how it happened with a small group of poets in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. Five poets: Sandra Ahrens, Judy Barisonzi, Paula Sergi, John Walser and I met at a coffee shop in 2003 to explore ways to promote poetry as well as support each others' writing. Inspired by the Laurel Poetry Collective in Minnesota and various other groups around the country, we began to combine our visions for promoting poetry in the Fond du Lac area.

Fond du Lac sits on the south end of Lake Winnebago. The lake and its poetic imagery has inspired much of the poetry written by members of the group, thus, The Foot of the Lake Poetry Collective. Membership consists of the original five poets plus two recent additions, Cathryn Cofell and Karla Huston. We have several Friends of the Collective who have generously contributed to its well-being in recent years.

Our mission statement is very simple: we are a group of local poets who will support one another as poets, create frequent opportunities for the community to discover what poetry offers, and energetically foster the synergy of all artists working together.

A reading series was developed the first year, and the inaugural reading took place in February 2005 at The Awarehouse, a loft space/art gallery. Wine, snacks and an open mic slot brought in a broad and enthusiastic audience. After The Awarehouse closed we were invited to hold our readings at the Windhover Center for the Arts, a thriving art center with a cabaret-style atmosphere, a cash bar and snacks the membership provides. Happily, our featured readers have been surrounded by art in a quiet and acoustically sound setting since 2005.

At the end of our eighth year we continue to provide readings and workshops, and collaborations of all kinds with various organizations and artists. We can count nearly sixty reading events with a respectable audience of 30 to 40 loyal and enthusiastic attendees. Only the highest quality poetry is featured and the series has become sought after by poets and writers all over the state. The reading series runs from September through May and is generally held at the Windhover on the second Tuesday in the month. We begin promptly at 7, and always feature a short open mic. One reader, Ralph Murre, said he would gladly come from Door County just for the high-quality open mic. Well known area poets, David Graham and Kate Sontag from Ripon, and Karl Elder with his carload of

students from Lakeland College near Sheboygan all bring poems to read at open mic. We have attracted writers and lovers of writing from across the state.

In 2011 the Collective collaborated with Agnesian Health Care when we brought in Phyllis Langton from Virginia to read from her book *Last Flight Out*, a memoir recounting the final days she shared with her husband with Lou Gehrig's disease. The reading took place at the hospital and the audience was filled with doctors, nurses, caregivers and many others interested in Langton's fine writing.

Other collaborations include bringing Eau Claire poet Max Garland (Wisconsin's 2013–14 Poet Laureate) to Fond du Lac for two readings at the local Unitarian Universalist church and a project with the Fond du Lac Public Library in the summer of 2010.

Paula Sergi submitted a winning proposal to *Poetry Jumps off the Shelf* in the name of the Collective in 2010. We received funding for the project we called Poetry at the Market. As part of the project we worked with the Fond du Lac Farmer's Market organization and WIC (Women Infants & Children program). A call for submissions went out around the state and poems about harvest and food came flooding in. Fourteen poems were chosen; the Library designed a logo, 3000 copies of the chosen poems and large posters were printed to distribute each week at the Saturday Farmer's Market. An art exhibit was presented at the Windhover featuring food- and garden-related paintings. A reading featuring then Poet Laureate Marilyn Taylor kicked off the summer-long event. As a wrap-up several chosen poets including a twelve-year-old from Baraboo read at the Park Ridge Organic Farm's Fall Festival. It was a great three month success.

Poem in Your Pocket provided another opportunity for partnership with the Library. A mannequin in a blue jean dress was placed in the lobby of the Library with various poems written by Collective members tucked in the smock's pockets. "Take a Poem—Put it in Your Pocket" said the sign, and folks did.

The Collective's reading series is comprised of several recurring events. For the last seven years we have asked three college or university professors in the area to choose three or four students to read their poetry or prose. We create a special event with printed programs, posters and newspaper press releases. Highlighting the upcoming writers in our area is part of our mission to honor good writing. Our Favorite Poem Project is another popular event each year. Based on former US Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky's Favorite Poem Project, local celebrities are asked to read their favorite poem. We ask Wisconsin's Poets Laureate to read several times during their tenure. Marilyn L. Taylor and Bruce Dethlefsen have both been extremely generous with their time.

We created a special event a few years ago called *Two Voices in the House* featuring couples who live together and create art in different ways. In February 2011 the late fiction writer and poet Jim Hazard and poet Susan Firer, his wife, presented their individual methods of writing. It was a special night none of us will forget.

This year poets Jeanie and Steve Tomasko and artist-poets Sharon Auberle and Ralph Murre gave us a sampling of their individual work and discussed their continuing collaboration.

Several years ago we created the website lakepoets.com where we share the work of all of our readers and announce upcoming readings. Check us out, see what we've done over the years and what we are all about. We have a great lineup for next year's programming and look forward to creating new ideas for expanding our mission. One of my recurring dreams is to publish an anthology of past Foot of the Lake Collective readers. No doubt, it will be a bestseller.

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[Author's Update: Windhover Center for the Arts changed its name to Thelma Sadoff Center for the Arts or THELMA at the time it added a beautiful addition to the building in 2013. It now offers a world class exhibit space, and the entire building has been upgraded. The Foot of the Lake Poetry Collective is in its tenth year and on the first Tuesday of the month, September through May, they host readings in a restored room in the style of the 1906 building; lakepoets.com is the website for the Collective with current information.]

☞ Letter to a Poet

BY ADAM HALBUR

The Frost Place
Franconia, NH
August 12, 2010

Dear Poet,

If you are anything like some poets, you probably won't like it here much. I don't know why. If you don't like it here, you wouldn't like the rooftop apartment in the old part of Paris, just off of Avenue Carnot, or the creaky wooden floors of the Grande Galerie in the Louvre, from which you can peek in on a grinning Mona Lisa.

In fact, a taste of France is not far off. Quebec is just to the north, and even as you enter the Granite State, you are greeted with a hearty *Bienvenu*, right below the motto Live Free Or Die. Of course, there is a laundry to do your clothes and a store to get coffee beans, fresh bread, eggs, honey, yogurt, and, like at the open market on the Boulevard Raspail, fresh vegetables and meats.

I wouldn't go so far to say the Frost Place is as good as all old things are, like wine, cheese, and the Mona Lisa. I would say it's as old as a lot of good things are. There are a number of insects to squash. It's been a bad year for earwigs, which gardeners say you can attract and drown with saucers of beer. I recommend a rolled up literary magazine brought firmly down on the offending bug, as you might need the beer later for drowning yourself.

Otherwise, pest wise, I've heard tales of mice taking up residence in the stovetop in past years, sneaking cherries from a bowl and pulling them down through a burner, but for the most part, the mice confine themselves to the walls. And what house doesn't have mice? Which brings me to the topic of the poetry I have been writing here: the area in and around Tokyo, my Paris for the past 12 years:

It's getting late. And from the fifth
floor office, I watch rats squirrel
under empty buses and idling taxis
where the drivers smoke and talk
in slippers. And I feel like a rat,
like this will have to do for a life,
a nightlife, an afterlife because
rats, man, have no heaven.

Rodents, along with men, live and die in the most sophisticated and unsophisticated of places. The difference is the Frost Place offers bears. One lone yearling came to the kitchen screen door and welcomed me my first full day here. That was thoughtful; though, seeing a bear can be as shocking as seeing a

stranger without pants, if you're not used to seeing strangers without pants:

A woman stands outside in pink pajama top
but no bottom, and from far away her fur
is as thick as a black bear's. I want to see
her face, but as I near, I can't make out
what's there. I turn. The best way to save us
all from shame is pretend she's not here.

The difference then is really a matter of scenery. Here, there is a view of the White Mountains, which change color and form depending on weather and time of day. They're a frosty gray silhouette now at noon, but by the time I finish this, they'll be glowing pink with the setting sun. If you're not a fan of mountains, don't look at them. And definitely don't sweat them for hours to reach waterfalls and mountain lakes or stony outcrops from which to survey the valley below.

If you don't like solitude, don't be a writer. But even if you like solitude, you should like people because they're people and you need something to write about. Plenty of people stop to see the museum in the house, shop in the barn, or walk the newly restored poetry trail. They'll be sure to sit on your front porch describing the mountains in adjectives even you wouldn't use: beautiful, stunning, marvelous, gorgeous, majestic, something else. And they'll say how inspiring it must be to write here.

Then, a woman will read the sign out front, making a general announcement to all within earshot: "1 to 5 p.m. (except Tuesdays). At other times, if you walk the grounds, please respect the concentration of the resident poet living and working in this house."

And a man will answer: "There's a what?"

Woman: "A poet."

Man: "A poet?"

Woman: (Raising the volume of her voice) "It says here, 'please respect the concentration of the resident poet living and working in this house.'"

Man: (Looking in the window where you sit typing) "I don't see anyone."

Woman: "Well, it says right here."

And you'll hear this conversation many times and not be noticed by many people. If you're lucky, someone will walk in and see you in your underwear, unless you're like me, and you keep all the doors locked and your pants on.

Life goes on day after day like this while you write gorgeous, marvelous poems that are something else. And you begin to feel lonely. If you're lucky, like me, the days will be broken by a visit from a friend, but even if you're not, there are the

interns and staff running the place, visits by neighbors, meal invitations, poetry seminars, and readings, when you can strut your stuff, eat and drink with others, and learn why Frost and this place is important to them. Then again, this only makes you miss France more, or in my case, Japan, where my daughter, son, and wife are staying for the summer. And even though you're in such a majestic, beautiful place that's something else, you feel like you're nowhere, and you wish you were back on that mountain in another country with the ones you love:

This is a mountain lake. There is
my wife, my son, my daughter, and me.
I was here once before, but I didn't
have anyone with me. I wasn't born,
but now I am taking breaths, not just
in any view of any mountain lake. I am
nowhere with someone breath-taking, too.

What's there to do but get back to work? Read that Dostoevsky novella you borrowed from the Abbie B. Greenleaf Library with the line "Nature is not a tender mother, but a step-mother to the monster." Pull off the living room shelf Donald Hall's description of Frost in *Their Ancient Glittering Eyes*, "The ground outside sank away, and Frost, approaching the lecture hall uphill, appeared to be rising out of the ground." Or pick up the Summer 1977 copy of *The Iowa Review*, the inaugural year of the Frost Place residency, with a speech titled "A Writer's Destiny," given in Iowa by Jorge Luis Borges the year before:

Writing ... is a fulltime job, because every experience should be of some value to you. You find in the long run that your misfortunes should be made into your tools, since happiness is an end unto itself and does not need to be written about. In fact, I do not think there has been a single poet of happiness.... If a man is happy in the present, then that happiness has no need of being written down. Happiness has to be transmuted into something else, into art—so that all experiences are grist to the mill of the writer.

So you return to your computer and start writing again under Frost's eyes watching from the enlarged photo on the fireplace mantel:

My daughter came into life feathered
like the bird skin jacket of an Ainu woman
until washed and placed into a bin
next to other babies on display
like a row of clean craniums lined from
mouse to hare to fox to wolf to a bear
once chained and baited by men.

And you get up, go for a run or swim, take a shower, eat your dinner, check your email or chat online, and then study another language, French, Japanese, or any other language that Frost's poems have been translated into, and then go to bed, so you can get up early enough and do it all over again, so when your time is up, you don't have to regret saying goodbye.

Before I came here, I read in one of the many biographies about Frost that he didn't care much for Paris. I don't know why. If you don't like Paris, how could you like an old farmhouse in summer in New Hampshire kept cool only by breezes and the wet basement beneath the creaky floors? How could you like an old barn, now hung with photos of past residents? How could you like any place of art or artifact? Mona Lisa would be as happy hanging here as anywhere.

Now, it's time for me to thank everyone who made this possible, and say *au revoir*, *sayonara*, and goodbye.

Yours truly,

Adam Halbur
2010 Resident Poet

Published in Verse Wisconsin 104

IN THE CIRCLE—
POETS IN COMMUNITY

✿ Community Inclusive: A Poetics to Move Us Forward

BY MARGARET ROZGA

When I visited the Zora Neale Hurston Museum in Eatonville, Florida, several years ago, I could only imagine what Eatonville might have looked like shortly after the Civil War, at the time of its founding as the first African American town in the United States. For Harlem Renaissance writer and anthropologist Hurston, Eatonville was a “city of five lakes, three croquet courts, three hundred brown skins, three hundred good swimmers, plenty of guavas, two schools, and no jail-house” (qtd. in Trubek). It was, according to writer Anne Trubek, a place where “black people lived unseen and unexamined by white people.”

Today Eatonville is less isolated. An exit from Interstate 4 put me right into the west-central part of town. But I found at the eastern edge of the town what seemed to be a remnant of another era. On the east side of East Street, where Eatonville’s Kennedy Boulevard becomes Maitland, Florida’s Lake Avenue, there is a continuous low wall spanning the edge of the yards of the Maitland homes. You can see this wall on a close-up view in Google maps. It’s not an ugly wall as walls go. It’s not a tall prison wall topped by barbed or razor wire.

When the wall was constructed and why I could not discover. If the people of Eatonville and Maitland mutually concluded like the neighbor does in Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall,” that “good fences make good neighbors,” then my apologies to all. But for me, an outsider and a long-time civil rights activist, the voice of Frost’s narrator rang truer: “Something there is that does not love a wall.” Since the wall separates an African American town from its largely white neighbor, I had to wonder. It seems to symbolize exclusion and enforced separation.

Let me risk appropriating this symbol and transporting it in a minor key to the subject of this essay: the question of the lingering tendency to wall off “political” poetry from supposedly non-political, ego-centric poetry, and the lingering tendency to assume the latter is necessarily in a superior class to the former. In other words, if it’s political, can it be poetic? If it’s poetic, does it not have to shun the political? Are the two categories mutually exclusive?

First to consider definitions, what do we mean when we talk about the “political” in terms of literary content? And, of course, what is poetry?

Poetry rarely works within the terms of the narrowest definition of “political,” that is, the process of choosing one candidate for public office over another. More applicable is the term’s reference to watershed public events and to policy matters, especially policy matters that affect the well-being of people and of the world generally. Policy gets formulated in abstract and legal terms, often dry, sometimes incomprehensible, generally removing any trace of image from the language so that we do not see. Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell, for example, advocated for the passage of a state law that required women seeking abortions

to undergo a “transvaginal probe” without himself knowing what those terms signified. Other examples of political language that hide reality abound: separate but equal; apartheid; incursion; correctional institution; no child left behind; defense of marriage; Senate Bill 10.

Insofar as poets are seers, we observe specifics in our lives, some of them the impact of poorly chosen policy, and we craft word images to express what we see. Of course, political commentary in prose can translate abstractions into concrete language and can give examples of individuals who are affected in particular ways by public policy. Sometimes it does so eloquently. To the extent it is eloquent, it is often called, yes, “poetic.”

Practicing poets work at their craft. Some develop the skill to take a step further the courtship of beautiful language and social concern. They are attuned to the music of language, the power of form, the way words look on a page, and they aim to marry the beauty and emotional power of language to their deepest and most profound concerns, including social, civic, or political concerns. Craft and compassion reinforce each other beautifully in Gwendolyn Brooks’ images of post-World War II segregated Chicago. Both craft and compassion are what make Lois Roma-Deeley’s signature poem “Apologizing for the Rain” a powerful expression of women trained to shoulder all the blame. Both craft and compassion make Yusef Komunyakaa’s “Facing It” with its depiction of reflections in the granite of the Vietnam Memorial so compelling in conveying the impact of the Vietnam War. Images that arise from the poet’s eye and heart attuned to political, social, and community concerns and shaped by the poet’s skillful hand have given us much excellent poetry.

Whether or not we intend our images and word music to affect a change in policy, the words become part of the experience of our audiences who are, we hope, somehow enriched, somehow empowered. At the heart of my poetic practice is the belief that we are more with poetry in our lives than we are without it. We are more with each other than we are isolated and alone.

The lonely poet working in isolation is an image ingrained in our culture. And it is true that because writing poetry requires concentration, it may be solitary. Many poets begin writing poems after the isolating experience of a failed romance. But all these factors do not mean that poetry must be focused on the isolated individual. Poets, like other people, have social networks and concerns: jobs, friends, family, civic issues, and histories. Poets can and do write about individual experiences. They can and do write about falling in and out of love, about the role of art, about facing old age and death.

But if poetry, defined most simply, is the art of using language most resourcefully, then why limit poetry to a handful of subjects? Writing that taps into a wide array of the resources of language ought to be free, will free itself, to explore a wide array of topics. Poetry can be egocentric, but it need not be exclusively egocentric. The “I” may be neither the center of poet’s world nor the center of the poetic world. A poet may find inspiration in others and in action, as well as in solitary contemplation. Rather than be exclusively egocentric, poetry can be community inclusive.

People who share my views struggle to come up with a term that acknowledges a wider array of poetic interests and avoids the controversies set off by pairing the word “political” with the word “poetry.” The organizer at Woodland Pattern Book Center came up with the term “civic poetry” to use in the title of a workshop I led there. Split This Rock, a national poetry organization that sponsors a major poetry festival in Washington DC, identifies itself as an organization focused on “poetry of provocation and witness.” What these terms try to do is to reach beyond the narrow limits of the poetic tradition and practice we inherited from the first half of the twentieth century.

What we’ve inherited is a pervasive sense that the proper subject of poetry is poetry, that at some level and with some variation in the degree of subtlety and metaphoric approach, poetry is what poems should be talking about. George Orwell wrote in 1941 that writers from the 1890s onward focused on technique. T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Virginia Woolf “were far more interested in technical innovations than in any moral or meaning or political implication that their work might contain. The best of them all, James Joyce, was a technician and very little else, about as near to being a ‘pure’ artist as a writer can be.” These writers are still among the most frequently taught.

Wallace Stevens is another such twentieth century poet, an important one, cited in 1975 by critic Harold Bloom as “the best and most representative American poet of our time” (qtd. in “Wallace Stevens”). There is much to admire in Steven’s work, his descriptive skill, for example, and yet as poet Louise Bogan notes, his world is “strangely empty of human beings” (qtd. in “Wallace Stevens”). In fact, Stevens advanced the argument for an abstract, egocentric poetry. He wrote that “Life is not people and scene, but thought and feeling. The world is myself. Life is myself” (qtd. in “Wallace Stevens”).

Such a solipsistic world may be rendered skillfully, perhaps even beautifully, but it is not the world in which I live, and so its artifice fails to engage me. Though I admire Stevens’ precision, I want to apply such precision to a wider range of topics. Mine is a world of students and colleagues, movements for social justice and human beings reading, writing, making plans, making friends and sometimes enemies, making art, planning parties, planning protests, engaging with the natural world and questioning their role both in that world and in the social worlds of which they are a part. Such challenges and excitement deserve being represented with all the resources of the language and all the skill of the poet.

To build a wall around poetry, to build a wall around certain subjects deemed worthy of poetry, is to erect an artificial barrier that at best raises questions. At worst, constructing walls to protect a supposedly “pure” and exclusive poetry from being debased may be what has led to the marginalization of poetry, to the loss of audiences beyond the select few. Poetry sales leave much to be desired. According to Laura Moriarity of Small Press Distributors, most poetry titles “sell between 50 and 250 copies per year” (qtd. in Nichols). But a fuller depiction of the contemporary world, not the accountant’s bottom line, is my concern here. The confessional and the ethereally poetic are scarcely the whole poetic community. If we take down the walls that keep us from seeing, identifying

with, and connecting to other poetries, we will realize how extensive, even within the Anglo-American tradition, that wider community is: from the heroic *Beowulf*, to Chaucer's fallible nuns, priests, and other pilgrims on their Canterbury trek with all the baggage of their lives, to Shakespeare who made dramatic poetry out of history, to England's traditions of poets laureate including John Dryden who wrote the political satire "Absalom and Achitophel" and Alfred Lord Tennyson who wrote "The Charge of the Light Brigade," to the work of Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, Wendell Berry, and Rita Dove, to the surge of public interest in poetry following the September 11th attacks in New York, to the outpouring of poems about the 2011 Wisconsin spring protests, so ably collected in *Verse Wisconsin's* Main Street issue.

If it's poetic, does it have to shun the political? If it's political, can it be poetic? If it is ego-centered, does it get a bump up in poetic rank? These questions are a remnant of an earlier era, an outlived set of values and preferences.

Where in the world is poetry today? I'd like to see it everywhere. It's already jumped the wall, and gone onto buses, into vending machines, onto the stage and into the streets. I see poetry moving beyond the exclusively ego-centric to become more community inclusive. Where it will go from here is the new question. As poets and as readers, we engage with this question every time we craft a poem and every time we choose one. As we think about and articulate reasons for our choices, we take the next steps towards a poetics in keeping with Wisconsin's motto. Forward.

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Poetry in Prison

BY LAUREL BASTIAN

We offer to others, to our community, the best of ourselves. Experientially, what I have to offer to mine is a background in peace studies and mediation, a background in victim advocacy, an MFA in poetry, and a background in teaching.

Philosophically what I have to offer is the belief that the vast majority of people, given the space to be their best selves, will rise to that occasion (and the belief that the converse is also true). The combination of these experiences and beliefs is what drove me to run a creative writing class in a men's prison.

This essay is not about prisons or the individuals housed there. It is about a group of writers. I want to tell you everything that moves me about these writers, some of whom I have seen nearly every week for the past two years. Because I know them as fellow creative minds and human beings, I want to tell you their full names and include their work, which always invigorates me and often stuns me with its insight. I want to include their experience of the class and of the writing life in their own words. But this is not possible. The prison does not allow full names to be used in conjunction with its programs and monitors material carefully. Much of that is understandable: seeing the men's full names and work would likely mean something very different to me or potentially you than it would to anyone who might have been a victim of the crimes they're serving time for. Even writing about my own experience without naming the men, or the institution, is slightly risky, because I have not asked anyone for permission, and I am only able to continue doing what I do there with the prison's permission. And yet I, like most writers, do not want to run my words by censors, grateful though I may be that the administrators let me in. As a writer on the outside, I have the freedom to take that risk.

Part of me wishes to explain, for those not familiar with the prison population in the US or this state, a bit about the numbers of people in the system, the racial disparities, and the culture outside of prison (created by law-abiding and law-breaking citizens alike) that keeps the numbers inside high and the disparities wide. Part of me wishes to talk about the individuals—and there are many—who have worked for decades in social justice to improve the health of those who are behind bars, to support them in being healthier citizens after release, and to support their families. This is not my area of expertise and there are many organizations, websites, books, and personal stories that serve as important resources for this information. Yet there is no way of describing the group of writers themselves without giving a very brief background of the system they write in.

The United States currently has the highest reported rate of incarcerated people per capita of any country in the world. In January 2010, according to the PEW Center on the States, 23,112 people were serving time in Wisconsin state prisons. According to Department of Corrections statistics, for nonviolent

offenses in Wisconsin, African Americans are imprisoned at thirty-seven times the rate of whites and (according to UW–Madison’s Dr. Pam Oliver) about 12% of black male Wisconsin residents in their twenties are currently incarcerated. Regardless of where any of us are on the political spectrum, these numbers (these numbers which stand for people and do not quantify how this impacts families, economies and communities) are deeply disturbing.

In an attempt to mitigate the negative impacts of incarceration, there are wonderful, volunteer-based programs that address inmate needs (with nonprofits like Madison’s Community Connections). There are, however, many needs that are not met due to lack of funding. There are also needs that are not met because many of us in the electorate don’t believe that people who have gotten caught in illegal, sometimes violent, acts deserve anything above the barest minimum, regardless of whether that means they’ll return to our shared communities feeling less human, and with fewer internal resources, than when they left.

The weekly creative writing class I’ve taught for the past two years aimed to address the need for creative community and increased literacy. The class was, at one point, university affiliated (though it’s not at the moment), and many people’s energy went into its creation, from the then-PhD student who started the initiative five years ago, to all of the wonderful writers who have taken time to visit and even to co-teach, to the prison administration and officers who allow the group to meet. But most important in the creation of the class and its longevity is the energy of the hundreds of men who have brought in their work and perspective. Some come only for a couple of weeks before being released or sent elsewhere. Two writers have been there every week since my first day. One of those writers is also a prolific musician and has been in prison longer than I’ve been alive. The other, a sterling poet, is serving a sentence twice as long as the age he was when he went in. Many of those who have come through the class have served a decade or more. But no matter the length of their stay, all are welcome to participate, whether they want to check it out for ten minutes, come every other week, or stay for the long haul.

Everyone is also welcome in terms of writing capacity and the genres they have experience in. Some of the men have never written creatively before; some struggle with literacy; some have been writers for most of their lives; some identify more as rappers, spoken word poets, musicians, or genre writers and some as “page” poets or fiction authors. The only creative censor in terms of the material that participants bring is this: we respect the class by bringing our best self and work to it, and if we have an “ism” in that work, or something else that a reader could find highly offensive, we’d better be ready to be challenged about the necessity of using it. The main exhortation is to stretch ourselves. To know our strengths and work outside of them. To surprise ourselves and others. We do.

As all writers know, we stretch ourselves most and write best when we’re reading. So every week we focus on different writers and different writing styles. This has been a great exploration of what’s out there for me as well, since two years of finding relevant but varied material for one class that doesn’t take a break or get all new students keeps me on a continuous search. We’ve read literally hundreds of authors together. A sampler of those authors: Jean Toomer, Adrienne Rich,

Audre Lorde, Shakespeare, Hart Crane, Saul Williams, Jessica Care Moore, Willie Perdomo, Basho, Lorca, Dickinson, the Beats, Imagists, Romantics, Confessionalists, and dozens of local and regional poets. We've taken a "world tour" where the men tell me what country they'd like to go to, I put together a brief history of the country, and we read some of that country's most celebrated authors. We have themed classes: fatherhood, death, love, the divine, sports, nature, hometowns, music. We tackle form poetry and make up forms of our own. Each week I give a writing prompt they can use as fodder for the next class's work, and in between classes many of the men share their work with their peers.

But the thing I appreciate most about the class and the writers is not actually the writing, which is widely varied and truly good. What I appreciate most is how they interact with each other, and with me. And perhaps this is where I am different from other creative writing instructors who teach in correctional facilities. In some ways, I could care less about craft. I care because they care; I care because it's another tool to go deeper into creativity. But more than the writing itself I value the opportunity for conversation and self-exploration that comes from their writing. On multiple occasions students have said the class is the one place they can be themselves and not put up a front. They can talk about what it means to be away from family and to have a hard history. They can talk about love and fear and favorite childhood foods and the downside of street life. They can talk about responsibility. What they say is supported by their peers. At these points, I am irrelevant. I exist to hold the space they need to reach the places they're willing to go. And they are brave in this.

While I say I appreciate their interactions most, I have a responsibility to keep pieces of myself hidden while I am there. Besides the fact that I'm a woman in a male space and the fact that there's an unavoidable power differential (I, after all, can leave), I'm not supposed to become close with inmates. The administration sees any kind of personal sharing as "fraternization." I respect this boundary. I laugh a lot in class and get visibly sad too, but both of those are in response to their writing, not from sharing my own stories.

There has only been one time where I shared an emotional part of myself in the group. It was after a class where the phrase "keeping it real" was repeated a good deal, and I proposed that the key to being real and fearless in writing was not bravado but vulnerability. I encouraged them to bring something to the next class that challenged their comfort level, and I did as well. In reading my work during the next class, my voice broke and I found myself, for a split second, crying. I laughed and brushed it off, but the silence in the class was thick. After a beat, one man assured me it was OK, then another. One who'd attended for weeks but hadn't brought his own work said he had been afraid to read it, but seeing me put myself out there made him certain he could as well. We went on with the poetry. On our way out that night one of the students stayed behind for a moment. "I just want you to know," he said, "that we see you. We see who you are on the inside. We know you see us on the inside too."

And this is why we write in the first place, no matter where we're writing from. To witness each other. To witness the world we didn't know we were walking

through together. To do this is a matter of survival. It is comforting and uncomfortable and funny and backbreaking labor. It is the most natural thing we do as artists. And that's who the men in this class are, whether you see their work in literary journals someday or whether the only people that see their poetry are their family members. They are artists because they need to be more than the number that hangs on the lanyard at their neck, and we need them to be more than this too. They are writers because they claim it for themselves, and they earn it.

As I want to offer the best of myself, so do the men in my class. To give is an act of grace. To accept an offering is an act of grace as well. The more we're able to accept offerings from those whom we forget have something of great value to give, the closer to being whole, as individuals and artists and communities, we come.

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A Community of Poets

BY HARLAN RICHARDS

Poetry is the dance of life made manifest in words. Since becoming a poet (only a few short years ago), I have looked for poetry and poets everywhere I go. It is amazing the places they can be found.

When I arrived at Stanley (Correctional Institution) in 2011, one of the first things I did was look for a creative writing group to join. Since I first participated in a prison-based creative writing group when I was housed in Oakhill (Correctional Institution) in 2010, I have sought out opportunities to share poetry with fellow prisoners in a group setting.

There wasn't any type of program at Stanley, so I wrote to the education director and asked for permission to recruit volunteers from UW–Eau Claire to come into Stanley to teach a class. At the time, I had only been writing poetry for a little over a year and hoped to benefit from the expertise of someone possessing or working toward an MFA. However, I soon found out that a non-staff member could not teach a creative writing group in Stanley without a staff member being present. My request was denied due to an ongoing staff shortage.

My plan seemed doomed but I'm a firm believer in the axiom that God's delays are not God's denials. I bided my time until I saw an opportunity about nine months later. The prison library had been operating for years with a "temporary" librarian, i.e., an administrative assistant who was assigned to run the library. Plans were made to hire a librarian so I tried again, this time asking the education director if it would be possible for the newly replaced administrative assistant to oversee a creative writing group when she ceased running the library. Instead, he referred the matter to the new librarian and suggested that she create the group.

Valerie Carter-Brown had never worked in a prison before. She had pursued a career as a librarian in academia and public libraries. But she was a fast learner and very supportive of the idea. I was a prisoner/library worker at the time, which gave us an opportunity to discuss the idea and figure out what a creative writing group should look like at Stanley.

Another six months passed as Ms. Carter-Brown learned her new duties and became acclimated to working in a prison. She then prepared a proposal and submitted it for approval. At first, there was some discussion about including prose writing in the program as well but it was deemed unworkable. Poetry and prose are too dissimilar and there would not be enough time to teach character development, plot, etc., for prose writers while simultaneously teaching poetry. A meeting was held between the librarian and education director to finalize the details.

It was decided that fifteen poets at a time would participate in a twelve-week program, meeting for one hour each week and featuring weekly writing

assignments (prompts). The class was to be held in the basic education classroom and the teacher, Ms. Decker, would help supervise (she retired midway through the first group and was replaced by Ms. Hoffstatter). Notices went out and requests to join poured in. Ms. Carter-Brown and I got together and worked out a 12-week syllabus which covered a broad range of poetry-related subjects. Participants were asked to write one or two poems each week utilizing a specific form or technique. We included assonance, alliteration, simile, metaphor, villanelles, pantoums, and other writing prompts. I was part of the first group and both participated in the exercises and helped facilitate the operation of the group.

It was amazing to watch, and be a part of, this group of diverse poets. These men for the most part did not know each other very well and there were many differences in culture, background, and commitment offense. Even though we did not see eye-to-eye on politics, religion, and a raft of other subjects, we set aside our differences for the sake of our poetry. We all knew that in Stanley starting a group like this and making it successful would be very difficult. One incident, one situation where the class got too noisy, or a guard had to be called in for any reason, would result in termination of the group.

I am proud to say that the guys in that first group realized what was at stake and rose to the task. The prompts were kept under wraps until they were passed out as assignments. That way, all of us were working on the same prompt each week. Participants could not skip ahead and work on something they liked better. This lent an immediacy to the sessions. The guys never knew what to expect and once they received the prompt, their finished poem was due at the next session. Initially, there was some resistance to trying new things. One guy particularly detested villanelles while another one had a hard time with pantoums. But they all produced finished poems for every class.

By the twelfth session, nobody wanted it to end. From a suspicious, diverse group of prisoners sprang forth a community of poets. We are all connected through our poetry. When we pass each other on the compound these days, talk often turns to the group and our latest creations. Each of the poets in that group came away enriched, not only in amassing a treasure trove of new tools with which to create verse, but with a new attitude toward those who are different from them. Plans are in the works to create a book of all the poems written during the class so each member can have a copy. Meanwhile, the second creative writing group is off to a great start on its way to a brighter future.

Here is the notice we ran to get participants in that first group at Stanley:

Calling All Creative Writers

Here's the deal
What's really going on
And where to go
To get your frisson.
It's the creative writing group
Where you can shine

Learn the scoop
Write something really fine.
So don't delay
Or waste another minute
Send your request today
So you can begin it.

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🌀 Interview with Martín Espada

BY WENDY VARDAMAN

WV: What was it like for you to come from New York City to Wisconsin? Why Wisconsin?

ME: I didn't come directly from New York, so the culture shock wasn't as dramatic as you might think. I did some wandering before I arrived, and lived in various places before coming to Madison. I went to the University of Maryland for a year, from 1975 to 1976, dropped out for lack of funds even to pay in-state tuition, then worked at a variety of bizarre occupations to save enough money to pay my way to the next destination, where I would finish my education. And so, at the time, I had very little idea what I was going to do. I was drifting a little, but ultimately decided on Wisconsin for reasons that were completely goofy. I thought Wisconsin was where Oregon is. I had very little idea of the geography on the other side of the country, obviously. A high school teacher mentioned Madison as one of several schools where I might, number one, get a decent education, and, number two, be admitted in the first place. It should be mentioned here that I was not a great student, either in high school, or in my first year of college at Maryland. I was a rather terrible student, in fact.

I had no sense at all of what was coming. I had never experienced anything like Wisconsin in terms of weather. I had no money. When I finally got there, in the fall of 1977, I had saved enough money to pay for one semester, and was compelled to drop out after that semester, even though I had a very high grade point average. I worked full-time for a year, which lowered the tuition to the point where I could afford it.

Madison, for me, was a fortuitous accident.

WV: So the political reputation wasn't a factor?

ME: The political reputation was not a factor at all. I had no idea what I was doing. I was twenty years old, and my work experience consisted of being a "porter" at Sears & Roebuck, i.e. a janitorial assistant; being a dishwasher and a cook at a pizza house; being a telephone solicitor; selling encyclopedias door-to-door; and washing cars for a Fiat factory showroom. I cobbled together enough money to move almost a thousand miles away and start over again.

WV: So it was this drive to go to school that was pushing you through all of these different jobs that you then wrote about in your poems?

ME: Yeah. I guess you could say that.

WV: I know you were a history major—did you spend much time in English or creative writing classes here?

ME: I spent very little time in such classes at Wisconsin. I had already gotten a

taste of the English Department at the University of Maryland, and I didn't care for it at all. At Maryland, I took one introductory poetry class and one creative writing class there, and thought both were rather dull, certainly not relevant to who I was or what I was writing at the time.

When I got to Wisconsin, I had no intention of pursuing an education in English. Instead, I was focused at first on film, and at one point decided I was a film major. I actually made a few Super-8 films. My priorities shifted when I advanced to the next level and discovered that 16-mm film was much more expensive. I couldn't afford to continue studying film, so my filmmaking career ended.

At the same time, I focused on history. There were two mentors for me at UW: one in History, one in Afro-American studies. The history professor was Steve Stern, who is still there. He was teaching the history of Latin America. He taught me how to read and how to think in political-historical terms, which contributed greatly to my development as a poet. It's a fallacy to think that poets only learn from other poets, or from the reading of poetry.

The other mentor I mentioned was Herbert Hill, the former National Labor Director of the NAACP, a witness to history and a brilliant lecturer. Hill was influential in my decision to go to law school.

Both of them had a tremendous impact on me and contributed to my development as a poet, despite the fact that these were not poetry workshops.

WV: Did you write poetry as an undergrad?

ME: Yeah, I did. For quite some time, no one knew I was writing. I came out as a poet before I graduated. I started doing readings in the Madison community. The first reading I did was in 1979. Actually, it was not a reading of my work, but that of Nazim Hikmet, the great Turkish poet, at an event for Turkish solidarity, which then, as now, was needed. I got an appetite for reading and performing in public. I remember also, in the early 1980s, getting involved with the Central American solidarity movement, a natural outgrowth of the education I was getting on Latin America. I did a reading of Ernesto Cardenal's poems as part of a Central American solidarity event. From there, it was an easy progression to reading my own work.

The first reading I did of my own was at the Club de Wash, at the same bar where I was working as the bouncer. Naturally, since I was the bouncer, I immediately got all the attention I wanted, and didn't have any problem getting people to listen to me. I cut my teeth reading in places like that and the Cardinal Bar, places where you had to learn certain tricks to make yourself heard.

WV: More of a slam setting, almost?

ME: Yeah, although here I would add that a slam setting implies competition. I wasn't there to be judged or rated. I was there because I had this compulsion to write poetry, to be heard and to find an audience, which all poets want, whether

they admit it or not. That first reading did involve a certain amount of bellowing. The skills I learned reading in bars are still valuable, more than thirty years later.

WV: During the late 70s, Madison still had a sense of itself as politically radical. Did you find it that way?

ME: Yes. As I mentioned, when I came, I didn't know much of anything about the local political history, and, because I arrived with my own set of politics, I quickly gravitated to the political activism in Madison.

I wasn't a neophyte politically. I grew up in a very activist household. My father, Frank Espada, was a leader of the Puerto Rican community in New York during the 1960s, and I grew up with an ethos of resistance all around me. That's why it was so easy to integrate with the political activism of Madison. What was very much in evidence when I arrived was that this, indeed, had been a political battleground. You might remember that, at one time, there were actually chains up around certain parts of the campus for crowd control.

The counterculture was very much alive. One thing you saw everywhere you looked were alternative institutions. When I arrived, I encountered my first radical bookstore, which was Gilman Street Books. I encountered the Green Lantern Co-op. I encountered the Yellow Jersey Bicycle Co-op. There was a communal way of life for many of the students. We tend to forget how important that was. When we talk about these political values, we're not just talking about what you learned in a classroom, or what you heard at a demonstration. These were values people lived every day, with varying degrees of success, but there were co-ops everywhere, including communal living arrangements, with people acting out their principles.

There were still a number of individuals in the community who had played an important role in Madison during the 1960s. They included people like Mayor Paul Soglin. I remember meeting Glen Silber, who made the film *The War at Home*. The Armstrong brothers were around. During my time in Madison, they were released from prison. Many of these people had something to teach us. Many of them made an impression on me, none more so than David Velázquez. David was a veteran of many political battles, who had been a farm worker and an activist on many levels, from the Puerto Rican community in New York to the Central American solidarity movement in Madison. I wouldn't be who I am without him. He died young and is buried in Madison. He wasn't a professor—he didn't even have a college degree—but he was as good a teacher as I've ever had, and there were many people in Madison who exemplified that counter-cultural spirit.

WV: It doesn't sound as if you would think of Wisconsin as isolated.

ME: Wisconsin is complicated. There are many Wisconsins. It's a mistake to talk about one Wisconsin, or one Midwest. When we think of Wisconsin in terms of a rural stereotype, what are we leaving out? If you're from Milwaukee, you're probably not writing about the deer and the birds. If you're from Racine, you're

probably not writing about the lakes and the fish. If you're from Madison, which is one of the great college towns in this country, you have a cosmopolitan view of the world.

Lou and Peter Berryman (I was their bouncer) have written many songs that lampoon these stereotypes—beer and bratwurst and snow. And beer.

Wisconsin is also a place with a great progressive tradition, and with large populations of African Americans and Latinos. We don't have to think of Wisconsin as simply rural, or exclusively white, or provincial and isolated.

WV: Do you think that poets in the Midwest are at a disadvantage culturally or geographically?

ME: I think there's a disadvantage for poets in terms of their recognition. If you don't live on one of the coasts, it's easy to be overlooked. There have been any number of writers from the Midwest who haven't gotten their due because they happen to be, literally, stuck in the middle of the country. However, in terms of what you're exposed to culturally, there's a richness and diversity of experience that we tend to overlook when we talk about the Midwest or Wisconsin. There's a lot more going on there than meets the eye. I think there's a *Prairie Home Companion* myth out there that's embraced by certain audiences: the myth sells to an urban audience that finds it charming. But think, too, about *The Progressive* magazine, that just celebrated its 100th anniversary, or about Fighting Bob LaFollette, or all the farmers' movements in the Upper Midwest, or about the fact that socialism took root in this part of the country during the early twentieth century as it did nowhere else.

WV: A number of your poems draw on experiences you had in Madison, e.g., "Do Not Put Dead Monkeys in the Freezer," "The Bouncer's Confession," and "The Saint Vincent de Paul Food Pantry Stomp." Would you tell me about the circumstances surrounding that poem?

ME: In spite of the fact that I had a very rich experience politically and culturally in Madison, it was a difficult place for me economically. I was there for five years, and struggled to make ends meet the entire time. There were times when I hit bottom, when I ended up on food stamps or General Relief. In the case of that poem, I was referred to the food pantry by the Dane County Welfare Rights Alliance because I had run out of money. I turned to them for help. What the poem chronicles is the feeling of having hit bottom, which was as comical as it was despairing. Here I was, a young man with no religion, referred to a Christian agency and waiting for my carton of food that no one would touch if there was any other choice. The list of food items in the poem is very precise.

WV: You've written many poems about work—your own and the work lives of others. A favorite of mine, "Who Burns for the Perfection of Paper," has as its subject the production of the legal pads that you later encountered as a law student. Could you talk about the importance of poetry about work?

ME: Poetry about work is very important. I've been deeply influenced by poets

who wrote about work and the working class but did so in a way that was very concrete and grounded. It's easy to write about something called the working class in the abstract, but that impulse tends to produce bad poetry. It's very different to write about working class people in terms of the work they do.

I didn't invent poetry of work as a genre. Look at Carl Sandburg or Sterling Brown. Brown wrote in the form of the work song. There is a sense out there that poets can write about everything but work. Why not write about work? Why not write about the things we do to occupy our time all day long? You can write about any kind of work, even if you work in an office and think it's the duller kind of occupation. You can still find something to say about it. You can write about power relationships, about human relationships, about what you create. For me, my string of jobs that ranged from the bizarre to the dangerous was invaluable. In the process of doing these jobs—whether as a bouncer or as a grunt in a primate lab—I became invisible, but I never stopped observing my world, or writing down what I saw and heard.

The same would be true of "Who Burns for the Perfection of Paper," as a poem about working in a printing plant. You're only seen for what your hands can do. The rest of you is rendered invisible. Yet, in some ways, that's very helpful if you happen to be a writer. People will say and do anything in front of you. I remember when I worked in a gas station, soaked in gasoline, people would stand right next to me and light a cigarette. That's how invisible you are. But you still have eyes to see and ears to hear. You can write about things that matter. I didn't seek out jobs for the experience. When I took a job, I needed the job.

WV: Your work as a tenant lawyer has been a source of many of your poems. Why did you switch from law to teaching? Do you ever miss legal work?

ME: It was a matter of circumstance. The things that motivate me are the things that motivate everyone else. When I worked as a legal services lawyer, the money that supported what I did was constantly in danger of being cut back or eliminated. I had been living a double life as a poet-lawyer for a number of years when big cutbacks came down. I had seniority, and could have pushed out a colleague, but this guy was a good friend and had come from Chile after talking his way out of being shot by a firing squad. Someone like that has the gift of gab; someone like that should be a lawyer. There was an opening at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst for someone to teach creative writing and poetry seminars to undergraduates. They were looking for someone with one book; I had four. I began there in the fall of 1993. I used to tell people, "if the law doesn't work out, I always have poetry to fall back on." That was because of the nature of the legal work I did. I never took a nickel from a client.

Do I miss it? I never miss a legal system stacked in favor of wealth, property and power. You see that very clearly if you're a tenant lawyer. You deal with the issues that define our legal system. It's all about property: property over people; property as protected by the law. Every now and then, we were able to make a difference. However, it was also very difficult on a day-to-day basis, very emotionally demanding. I do miss the fighting. I think every now and then I have to get into a fight, a brawl, because I miss brawling. If you're trained that

way, then you seek out confrontation. And why not, if you're good at it?

In the literary world, people are more double-dealing and passive-aggressive than in the legal world. We're used to thinking of lawyers as dishonest, but I've found more dishonesty among literati than among lawyers. Nevertheless, I'm glad I made the choice I did.

WV: Does teaching work for or against writing poetry for you?

ME: There are many different kinds of teaching. When I began teaching at U-Mass, I taught five courses over an academic year. For the first time in my life, I found myself in a workplace where most people did not go to work every day. Most academics on the university level complain about how hard they work, though the courseload can't be compared to that of teachers at high school or community college. Likewise, it can't be compared to what Legal Services lawyers do, in terms of the hours they put in or the emotional commitment.

There are times, no matter what the teaching load, that it can be counterproductive to your own writing in a number of ways. It's simply a matter of time and energy. This past semester, I was employed by three different universities, and did nothing but grade papers and poems.

I spend most of my time these days evaluating other people's work, whether it's in a workshop setting or judging a poetry prize, writing a blurb or writing a letter of recommendation. It's rather ironic, because that leaves me very little time to work. I think, to a certain extent, the mentor-protégé system has run amuck.

WV: Would you recommend a young poet to get an MFA and teach or to study something else and then do other work while writing?

ME: It depends. There are all kinds of work. If you find work that's rewarding, that involves a contribution to the community, that involves social justice, the poetry will grow from your experience. I would love to see more poet-lawyers.

My favorite poet-lawyer in the 20th century is Edgar Lee Masters. He was Clarence Darrow's law partner in Chicago, before *Spoon River Anthology* made him famous. I can tell, just by looking, that *Spoon River Anthology* was written by a lawyer: those are poems of advocacy, of testimony. That's a lawyer's way of seeing the world. Think of Charles Reznikoff, or Lawrence Joseph, a terrific contemporary poet who teaches at a law school.

What about poet doctors? Everyone thinks of William Carlos Williams, but let's not forget Rafael Campo, a doctor at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston who has written beautiful poems about the community he serves, his patients and their life-and-death struggles. He couldn't do that if he simply got an MFA and taught poetry to others who want an MFA.

It's possible to get an MFA and be a decent, passionate human being, but it's not the only way. There are other ways. I've met and been impressed by a whole

variety of people who write poetry and do other things for a living. I did a reading once with a poet-mailman. Recently, I met a poet-firefighter. It's not just a matter of writing your autobiography. You see the world from a certain point of view because of the work you do and the community of which you are a part.

The system of MFAs has run into an economic snag: there are more and more credentialed people for fewer and fewer jobs. What is it for? Is it about community? There are lots of ways to find community. Poets, if nothing else, do tend to organize themselves. That's where the community is. It's all about organization. You don't need an MFA for that.

WV: Did you feel at a disadvantage when you worked outside a university?

ME: There were certainly things I missed, and continue to miss, because I came from another world, but there are so many things I gained from the complex experience of my world that I would have missed out on if I had focused narrowly on my education as a poet. I think it's important for poets to live in the world, to be part of the world, to reach beyond their immediate circle of friends who also happen to be poets. We should read and act beyond the walls of poetry. Not only does that make you a better human being; it enriches the poetry itself.

WV: Are there enough connections among different kinds of poets, e.g., those at universities, performance and spoken word artists, poets in prison, homeless poets? How do we build those connections?

ME: I think many more bridges need to be built. All too often, poets are sheltered and insular. I'm one of those poets who builds bridges and crosses bridges. I find myself participating in a dialogue with many communities of poets. I'm often dismayed at how segregated the poetry community is, even now. One of the things that has to change is the segregation of Latino poets. We are still largely invisible in the landscape of American poetry. I'm always amazed when I look at the table of contents of a reputable literary journal and don't see a single Spanish surname. I mean *not one*. How is that possible? There are approximately 50 million Latinos in the US, and yet their expression of themselves in the form of poetry is almost completely invisible. Where is it? Why is it that no Latino poet has won a Pulitzer or a National Book Award?

To a large extent, this schism exists because there's a perception in society as a whole that Latinos are not literary people, that Latinos don't read and don't write. If we don't read or write, then no one is under any obligation to read us. It's very easy for students to pass through English Departments and MFA programs without reading a single Latino poet. Why is that? We have to ask these questions, and they have to be answered.

WV: Not everyone who writes can be a great poet, but we can all volunteer, we can all serve. I'd like to know some instances where you have witnessed poetry making a difference.

ME: First of all, I think it's important to realize that we can't always see when poetry makes a difference. It's not always something that's visible to the naked

eye. What poetry does, first and foremost, is to change people from within. It changes the way we think and the way we feel. It changes hearts and minds. It creates a new way of seeing, of feeling the world, and that in turn changes the world. Even explicitly political poetry doesn't necessarily have a particular impact on a particular event at a particular time and place. The changes poetry makes are more profound than that. A number of people have come to me and said, "Poetry saved my life." Many times these are people who have come from extreme circumstances, such as deep poverty or the prison system, who have struggled with drug or alcohol abuse, or a history of domestic violence, and will tell you, literally, "Poetry saved my life. I would have been dead without it."

We can see something concrete happening when, for example, prison inmates are exposed to poetry, when a poet comes to visit, or their books are donated to the prison library. That's an epiphany for somebody out there.

I remember when someone came to a reading of mine—a Puerto Rican nurse at a hospital in Hartford—and he told me about a situation where there was a debate within the hospital administration about the use of English and Spanish, resulting in an English-only rule imposed on the patients and workers. He brought in a poem of mine to a meeting, "The New Bathroom Policy at English High School." He read this poem out loud and embarrassed the administrators into changing the policy. There's an example of a poem being put to a particular use to make change.

I want my poems to be useful. I want them to be used in all kinds of ways, but if we try to measure the impact of, say, political poems on the world, it's an exercise in futility. It's better to think about the changes that political poems make on the individual, who then goes out and makes the changes in the world at large.

WV: You've also been very interested in poetry activism, though, and I wonder where are some of the areas where poets' service might be most needed.

ME: There are so many things that poets can do to serve the community. It's a very broad question. First of all, poets should go where poetry is not supposed to go, where poetry, allegedly, would not be well-received at all. Think of prison as the classic example: you would think that poetry wouldn't be welcome at a place where the literacy level is so low. Yet the opposite is true. The most energetic, enthusiastic audiences for poetry are in prison. There are more poets per capita in the prison system than in the academic system. They have a lot of time on their hands, but they also have an urgent need to define themselves, to explain themselves, to present themselves to the world.

Poets should go into such places—into the prisons, the nursing homes, migrant labor camps, factories, wherever programs have been set up to make it possible for poets to offer what they have. I'm not advocating that poets wander in off the street; there has to be a system in place. But there are more and more such programs. A generation ago it was not as easy for a poet to visit a prison as it is today.

WV: And do you think that places like prisons are more receptive to having such programs? If one didn't exist, couldn't a poet approach such a place?

ME: A smart administration will always urge us to create educational programs in prisons. Let me clarify. A couple of generations ago, there was suspicion about such programs, which were thought of as a waste of time. But that's changed to a large extent, not just because it may help an inmate to acquire some skills, but because it provides an emotional outlet for inmates.

WV: I'm really impressed with the mission of Curbstone Press, where you published the anthology, *Poetry Like Bread*. Could you talk about the press and your connection to it?

ME: There are many kinds of community outreach poets can do. When I was involved with Curbstone Press, I was doing community outreach all the time, because that was part of its mission. Curbstone was based in Willimantic, Connecticut, a depressed city with a large Puerto Rican population. Curbstone committed itself at the beginning to providing those services, putting poets into all kinds of places. We did the obvious. Poets visited the high school, for example. But I also did a reading at a boxing gym in Willimantic for a team of young amateur boxers, between twelve and twenty years old, whose coach was a fan of poetry and involved with Curbstone.

There's a creative and unusual definition of outreach, and I think it's important to get beyond the usual definitions. We should be going into the high schools and the prisons, but we should also be going where poetry is completely unexpected. It sets off a spark for the poet and the audience.

WV: Couldn't any magazine or publisher think about adding that to its mission?

ME: Of course, it made sense for Curbstone to do this, because it published the kind of poetry that was socially aware and politically committed. Not every poet can do that. There is poetry written in this country that doesn't attempt to communicate, that is deliberately obscure, and which would not be well-received by an audience that is hungry for meaning. A prison audience is hungry for meaning. A high school audience is hungry for meaning. They want to make sense of their own lives and the world around them. Poetry can do that. But not all poetry does that.

WV: You speak of having a mission as a poet to make the "invisible visible," and that mission drives both the form and the content of your work—from your focus on certain people and situations, to your poetic accessibility, to your craft and use of literary elements like dialog, setting and narration. Have you always had that mission? Do you ever write outside of it?

ME: Well, there is a sense of mission in my work, but I think it's important to articulate that mission without becoming a missionary. First of all, no one's going to listen. Secondly, it doesn't make for very good poetry. It's important to strike that balance. There's a mission, a sense of purpose, but that has to be balanced with a sense of the aesthetic, the image, the music in poetry.

Do I ever write outside the mission? Of course. And yet, because of the way I see the world, that perspective is present in almost every poem. Not all my poems are political, but they're all coming from the same point of view, which is unique to me. I've written, as you know, a number of very personal, very intimate narratives. It's easy to see that I'm influenced by Neruda or influenced by Whitman. It might not be as easy to see that I'm influenced by a poet like Sharon Olds, who is so brave and willing to risk everything. I find that really admirable, and I aspire to write the same way, especially when it comes to my own personal experience. So, yes, there is a mission, but it comes out of a broader context.

WV: It's a serious mission, many of your poems are political, and it seems there's a stereotype that political poems aren't funny. But a lot of your work is extremely funny—I'm thinking of poems like "Thanksgiving," "Advice to Young Poets," or "Revolutionary Spanish Lesson," and I wonder if you could talk a bit about your use of humor and how you see that relating to your work.

ME: Well, humor can be a political tool. It relaxes your audience. It lowers defenses against ideas that might otherwise be resisted. You can use humor subversively to smuggle ideas that might otherwise be refused at the border. At the same time, I write the way I do because I find the world to be a very strange and funny place. I don't think you can impose that on a subject. You can't impose that on a poem. It has to be organic.

WV: You write almost exclusively in free verse (one exception is the haunting villanelle, "The Prisoners of Saint Lawrence"): what do you think about the place of form in contemporary poetry, and the renewal of interest in form?

ME: There are formalists whose work I really appreciate. I'll go back to Rafael Campo, who is very fond of the sonnet. I also think of a lesser-known poet, Jack Agüeros, who writes sonnets and psalms. Both Campo and Agüeros are political formalists. Marilyn Nelson is another formalist whose work I greatly admire. It's not something I do myself, mostly because I lack the training, but it makes a contribution. Still, it has everything to do with content. I'm much less interested in form than in content. What does the poet have to say? It's not enough to be right; you have to say it well, too.

WV: You've spoken about a working-class aesthetic—can you talk about what might characterize that aesthetic in terms of form or content?

ME: Primarily, it has to do with content. I don't argue that there's a working-class form. I'll leave that to others. You can talk about Blues, I suppose, as a working-class form, or hip-hop, but I'm interested in a working-class perspective.

Class influences the way you perceive the world; not just your work, but everything. We have to begin with that. That's what I mean when I talk about a working-class aesthetic. It goes beyond poetry. When I participate in a conversation or debate in the academic world, I'm very conscious of the fact that I don't come from the same class background as most of the people taking part in that dialog or debate. Latino writers as a rule tend to come from a working-

class background, whereas most Anglo writers come from a middle- or upper-class background, which accounts for some of the friction, some of the difficulties in communicating.

WV: Do you think it accounts for some of the reason why these poets aren't getting published, or aren't getting into the anthologies, as you mentioned earlier?

ME: I think so. I don't want to generalize too broadly, but in the mainstream poetry community there is sometimes a deep suspicion when it comes to those of us who are telling stories about coming up from the projects, let's say, or writing about oppression and resistance to oppression.

I did a radio program in Madison [April 2009] where the host decided to take some questions, and I got a very hostile email from someone who accused me of exploiting human suffering in my poetry. That's a deep cynicism and a deep naïvete at work, so I spent the next half-hour defending myself and trying to explain something that, to me, is a given: that you write about human suffering because this is who you are. This is what you've seen since the day you opened your eyes. There's an ethical imperative to speak on behalf of those who are suffering but who can't speak for themselves.

WV: And to make that suffering visible, which is what you often say.

ME: I want to make the invisible visible. However, in the poetry world, there is a calculated cynicism, a violent defense of apathy and lethargy. If certain people perceive what you do as a political poet or a poet who writes about social conditions as an implicit challenge to them, they can become very threatened and defensive.

WV: You have been critical of those poets who you say "don't have anything to say."

ME: Yeah, because I get bored. There's a lot of boring poetry out there. Am I right? Have you been bored by any poetry lately?

[laughter and agreement]

Too often poets let themselves off the hook, because they justify the indifference with which their work is received.

WV: Is it that the subjects are inherently boring, or the way the poets are approaching them?

ME: It's the approach. You can write about almost anything. Pablo Neruda wrote four books of odes. If you look at those books, you'll see he wrote about almost anything: he wrote an ode to an artichoke, he wrote an ode to a tomato, he wrote an ode to a bicycle, he wrote an ode to a cat, he wrote an ode to his suit, he wrote an ode to a chestnut, he wrote an ode to boy holding a hare, he wrote an ode to a bricklayer, he wrote an ode to a laboratory technician, he

wrote an ode to his cranium. He could write about anything. But what makes his work different is that, first of all, there's a passionate appreciation for being alive. Secondly, there is a deep compassion for human beings in his orbit. He never forgets, for example, the labor that went into the everyday objects.

When I refer to poets who don't have anything to say, I mean poets who aren't trying to communicate in the first place. There is no subject. It really isn't about anything. It's a matter of concrete language, of the willingness to speak to an audience.

The English poet Adrian Mitchell famously said, *Most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people*. It makes sense, doesn't it?

WV: So if we talk about how poets can help make poetry more relevant to non-poets, is it by taking more of an interest?

ME: Take more of an interest in people. Take more of an interest in the world around you. Take more risks. There's great safety in obscurity, in not communicating, in language for the sake of language. Ed Hirsch, in *How to Read a Poem*, which is a very good book, writes about the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, a prison poet, who is openly and unabashedly emotional. Hirsch says that, by contrast, "we live in a cool age," that most contemporary poets are terrified of openly expressing emotion. It's too risky, on a personal level and on an aesthetic level. Too many poets are afraid of the great accusation: sentimentality.

WV: That's the worst thing you can be.

ME: That's absolutely the worst thing you can be. Yet, that term is used so broadly now that it no longer means anything. When someone says a poem is sentimental, what that person means is, "I don't like it." It's a poem that expresses emotions that make me uncomfortable, or that I don't like for other reasons.

Every now and then, I see these words come into play, become popular, and then become meaningless. "Sentimentality" is such a word in the poetry universe.

Another word now being bandied about that really speaks to the issues we've been addressing is "agency." What we see is the use of the word "agency" as a rationalization to evade responsibility for saying anything of substance. So poets and critics argue that they won't write about certain subjects because they don't have the agency, that is, they don't have the authority. It's a cop out. I did a workshop in Vermont where I had just spent an hour talking about political poets. The prevailing logic of the group was, "Yeah, well, those people had those experiences, but I don't have the agency."

What happened to the concept of advocacy, of speaking on behalf of those who can't be heard? What happened to the notion of witness? What happened to eliciting testimony from those who are silenced, and presenting that testimony as evidence that the world has to change, that it begins with us? What happened to

the idea of taking responsibility for the world around you? What happened to the idea that you write what you know? All these things outweigh the risks, aesthetic or political, of speaking on behalf of others.

What I'm addressing is this sense of lethargy, of privilege, among too many poets in this country, who are comfortable saying nothing and then express amazement when no one reacts to them. Poets are accustomed to blaming a society that's increasingly illiterate for this indifference, and there's some grain of truth to that. There is a decline in literacy. In the end, however, poets have no one to blame but themselves if no one reads poetry.

WV: I'd like to know more about what you think makes a good political poem—is a good political poem fundamentally different from any other good poem?

ME: A good political poem shares many of the same qualities with a good poem that isn't political. I believe in poems that are grounded in the image, in the senses. I believe in poems that are grounded in strong diction. I believe in poems that are grounded in music, in the ear. There's common ground between poetry that is political and poetry that isn't. What's different is the substance; there's also an *urgency*, an immediacy to the best political poems that is difficult to find in poems that aren't political. It comes from that sense of shared humanity, a sense of suffering and resistance. It's not just about condemnation. It's also about celebration, about praise. It can be a portrait of an individual that reflects the dignity of that human being. It could be that simple. In that sense, I think it's important to define political poetry as broadly as possible, without defining it too broadly. There are people who are writing political poetry who don't know it, or who would violently object to defining it as such because that would make it "bad poetry."

WV: You've talked about the importance of having "faith in poetry"—do you ever have difficulties with believing in poetry and its significance?

ME: Anyone who looks at the world realistically has to have a crisis of faith. Whatever belief system you have will be tested by the realities of the world. That just means you're paying attention.

When I say "faith," however, I'm not talking about something with magical properties. I'm not talking about something Romantic. I'm talking about the fact that poetry has a profound and yet intangible impact on the world. Critics of political poetry make this mistake all too often: if you can't measure exactly what a political poem does, then it fails, or so the conventional wisdom goes.

Let's take a concrete example. Sam Hamill founded an organization in 2003, Poets Against the War, and created a website (poetsagainstwar.net) which attracted thousands and thousands of poems against the war in Iraq, and against war in general. I believe it was the greatest collective response by poets to any single event in history. Sam also edited an anthology called *Poets Against the War* (Nation Books). Yet, we all know the war happened anyway, and continues to happen. There are those who would say, "Look. Poetry failed. *Poets Against the*

War didn't stop the war from happening. They had no impact." I think that's the wrong way to measure the success of anti-war poetry. It's ultimately an act of faith. You write the poem and put it into the atmosphere. It becomes part of the air we breathe. You can hope that this poem, and others like it, will influence hearts and minds, will change behavior.

This is not to say that an anti-war poem can't have an immediate impact. A year or so ago, I was teaching Wilfred Owen, the great poet of World War I, who wrote very powerful and prophetic poems about his experiences in that war, and was killed a week prior to the Armistice. One of my students wrote a paper in response to Owen, where he said, "I was thinking about joining the army, but after reading Owen, I'm not going to do it." How many times do you think that happens? If it happened in my class, you'd better believe it's happening somewhere else at the same time. There are young people looking at this economic crisis and weighing their options. When they read a poet like Wilfred Owen or the poets of the Vietnam War, who I also teach, and they say "Wait a minute, what was I thinking?" then they have the opportunity to exempt themselves from the economic draft that's produced our modern army. Did we save a life? Was this young person saved? Who knows? The point is that poetry matters.

We poets have to stop participating in our own marginalization. We have to stop internalizing this idea that poetry doesn't matter. We have to stop with all of these expressions of false modesty. We have to stop buying into the idea that poetry is irrelevant. The choice is ours.

Published in Verse Wisconsin 104

ꠘ Kundiman: a Zuihitsu

BY CHING-IN CHEN

My poetry originates in other bodies. I listen, observe, look for the unexpected path between our bodies, the question which tells me you are a friendly cog, a configuration unlike me perhaps, but also shimmery material which won't fit, a body I can sit next to, a body humming with letters.

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The first time I took a poetry workshop was from Kearny Street Workshop in San Francisco, the oldest multidisciplinary Asian American arts organization in the country. I was in Maiana Minahal's Waiting for Our Words workshop, where we learned about the poetic forms of writers of color. Around this time, I was accepted into the Voices of Our Nations Arts Foundation, studying with poets of color like Willie Perdomo, Suheir Hammad, Ruth Forman and Elmaz Abinader, and into Kundiman, an Asian American poets' retreat where I studied with poets like Arthur Sze, Marilyn Chin and Kazim Ali. As a baby writer, I was nurtured by these kinds of community spaces. I met other writers who had followed different paths—for instance, going to an MFA program where they were the only writers of color in the program (one of the reasons that co-founders Sarah Gambito & Joseph Legaspi wanted to start Kundiman).

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Wondering about the bodies I relate to, the bodies I recognize since I've moved to Milwaukee. I did not realize how coastal I was until I moved to this Midwestern city in which I often feel like an alien—contradictory, singular and misplaced.

What does it mean for me here to search for other bodies I used to be familiar with and simultaneously make relations with those who I am not? Here, in this black-and-white (though not) city, I am here.

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At Kundiman, Melissa Roxas became my friend.

I remember listening to Melissa talk about her human rights delegation trip to the Philippines in the circle, about the people she met and about the shocking atrocities that were happening there.

The words Melissa sent to us before she left about the decision to leave her life behind in the US and move to the Philippines. The urgent e-mail notifying us that Melissa had been disappeared on May 19, 2009, with two other health volunteers.

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In Milwaukee, I make a new friend and try not to write about her, even when she says, looking at me, I have been so lonely. I keep writing and writing about this, trying to settle myself down, sitting inside myself. I have looked for two years for such a person, almost a myth, a person whose small movements, habits are familiar, familial. A body like mine.



Melissa has said that poetry kept her sane during the five days she was disappeared and that the outpouring of community support eventually helped resurface her. An excerpt of the Kundiman call out that Sarah Gambito circulated asking for Kundiman poems for Melissa—*Let us participate in a community of cymbals through poems—bringing noise and sound and outrage and unrelenting memory to what has happened to Melissa and what continues to happen to activists and artists around the world who dare to take a stand against injustice. Let us encircle them, encourage them and fight for them. There is power when people agree to stand and speak together.*



This essay was supposed to take a different turn. I meant to write about the value of misfit-ness, the productive nature of being a mutant. But I turn back and back again to one person, who I feel like I can breathe around.



Kundiman founders chose the name because “Kundiman is a classic form of a Filipino love song of unrequited love—or so it seemed to colonialist forces in the Philippines. In fact, in Kundiman, the singer who expresses undying love for his beloved is actually singing for love of country” (kundiman.org).

So what was Kundiman to us? I’d love to talk about Kundiman as a springboard for other projects, about collaborations and solidarity with other communities, and about how valuable it was to become intimate with the work and persona of other Asian American poets and to see how varied from each other we all were and how we could still remain connected in this network of relations. This is all true.

And Kundiman to us? A community we came to where we sat down with each other, looking at each other’s full selves, shaking with our words.

About Kundiman

Mission Statement: “Kundiman is dedicated to the creation, cultivation and promotion of Asian American poetry.”

“Kundiman sees poetry not only as vehicle for cultural expression but also as an instrument for political dialogue and self-empowerment. We recognize the need to create an Asian American poetic community, and, at the same time, engender a commitment among poets to give back to our own communities” (kundiman.org).

🌿 Home is Where the Art Is: Writing as Community

BY BIANCA SPRIGGS

Today, I am writing from the historic Hindman Settlement School in Hindman, Kentucky. It is yet June and the temperature is already rising into the high nineties. James Still's cabin resides on this land as does his final resting place. There are copperheads, silkworm moths, elk, and brushfires in this area, and until recently, the water was a clay color and undrinkable from the tap (a casualty of mountaintop removal) before the city decided to draw this precious resource from another reservoir. Every year, writers and readers of every age descend upon this campus to inspire and to be inspired.

I am here with my administrator hat on, helping to run The Twenty: A Kentucky Young Writers Advance, the brainchild of poet Nikky Finney and several other committed authors who saw an opportunity to get a hold of the burgeoning talent in Kentucky, a state many call the literary capital of Mid America. Hosted by the University of Kentucky, The Twenty welcomes young writers between the ages 19 and 23 (or thereabouts) who are serious about maintaining a relationship with writing throughout their lives whether they plan on becoming full-time writers or sharing their art with another passion or calling. They sojourn into the mountains to study professional development and craft with established authors for an entire week, and it is our hope that they emerge with a much stronger take on what they envision for their writing lives.

At the beginning of the week the students arrive in various stages of intent and accomplishment. Some of them have met previously. Some don't know a soul on this campus. But they are all here because something in them craves a literary community, people who aren't their parents or friends or family members or teachers in school, who understand their writerly impulses. Many arrive nervous but willing to write boldly, to take real risks in their work for the first time. At our opening circle this year, one of the students, a tall young man, a poet with a beautiful twang who doesn't know we all practically hold our breath to soak it up when he reads, said, "All you need is a week." We've dubbed that our unofficial motto this year because of the maturation rate of the writing that happens in these six days residing on a campus where the experience is only a few steps up from roughing it camping-style.

I've long had a taste for activism and reaching underrepresented populations. I can remember how my mother used to take my sister and me into nursing homes for Sunday programming revolving around her ministry. I'd wanted to do something similar in my adult life more along the lines of my own calling, that of wordsmithing. In late 2010, my friend and occasional collaborator, LeTonia Jones approached me as a representative of the Kentucky Domestic Violence Association because she'd spent almost a decade as an advocate in the prison systems of Kentucky and knew the need for creative writing workshops, particularly in the women's facilities. LeTonia knew of my interest in starting a

workshop community within this demographic, and she also wanted to document the process similar to the work Eve Ensler and Wally Lamb have produced with women's prisons in their regions. And so we met and began to secure funding through KDVA, the Kentucky Foundation for Women, as well as the help of an intern and a photographer.

Our first reading at the Federal Prison Camp featured a reading in a basement community room surrounded by handmade quilts. Frank X Walker, Leatha Kendrick, and I read to a room of about fifty riveted women inmates. We gave the inmates copies of books on the writing craft, journals, and other goodies. There have been a few challenges along the way, but since that first reading, we've accepted a slew of paperback book donations to the facilities we visit, and soon, we will have a publication featuring the women's portraits and writing, the physical representation of all our hard work over the past few of years coupled with the cooperation of the various facilities' administrations, and of course, the cooperation of the women we visit as often as we can.

As different as they are, the sojourns to Hindman and into women's correctional facilities are both reminiscent of my first communal experience of unfettered, unparalleled writing that for me did not occur in any classroom workshop. I have very fond memories of my first year at a writing retreat known as Cave Canem, a home for black poets.

I first heard about Cave Canem from someone in the Affrilachian Poets, the first writing enclave I was ever invited into, in 2004. I believe it was Kelly Ellis and Frank X Walker who started talking about their experiences at Cave Canem and encouraged the rest of us to apply. Founded in 1991, the Affrilachians who are spread out around the nation but always, always remain rooted in the Appalachian Region, now communicate primarily over an email listserv. There's a distinct familial vibe to us despite the fact that several of our members are enjoying some serious accolades, academic, and publishing credentials. We know one another's spouses and partners, children, literary aesthetics, and bourbon tastes, as dearly as our own. And so, I trusted that any organization they might endorse, I should probably seriously look into. At the time, I was also enrolled in the Creative Writing MFA program at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and had met other writers who'd come through town and were already Cave Canem fellows or in the process of applying. I felt instinctively from meeting them that Cave Canem was my tribe and I should figure out a way to join.

I applied to Cave Canem twice. I was wait-listed the second time in 2006 but in a fortunate turn of events, asked to join the retreat that summer, which included among its faculty—in addition to Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady—Patricia Smith, Kwame Dawes, Cyrus Cassells, Elizabeth Alexander, and Lucille Clifton as our feature that year. Since that time, I've met and worked with other amazing poets including Rita Dove, Carl Phillips, Yusef Komunyakaa, Ed Roberson, Claudia Rankine, and on and on. This does not even begin to cover the caliber of black poets who have come through the program as fellows and continue to do, as they say in the South, “the Lord's work” in the literary world.

Why is this important? Cave Canem was specifically geared towards not just

people of color, but black poets. It was supremely refreshing and a luxury even, to be immersed in an environment where so many of the cultural references my poems and personality are often infused with were a given. This was very important for me at a time when my writing consisted of exploring strong themes of identity. In past experiences, there might be one or two other people of color, sometimes another black poet, in the same workshop. Although UW–Milwaukee delivered consistently rewarding workshop-mates and professors, it just didn't feel so lonely to be in Cave Canem. Also, because of the model of writing a poem a day, that really sort of opened up my world in terms of the relationship between inspiration and self-discipline. I had previously always thought that poems just sort of dropped in your lap like ripe fruit. Cave Canem taught me to bring a ladder to the orchard and how to glean inspiration. And not just how to glean but to take the initiative to decide to look in the first place rather than wait. An important lesson.

Cave Canem also offers further opportunities through our listserv. After your first retreat, you're added to the list and are privy to announcements from Cave Canem headquarters and other fellows about publishing opportunities, residencies, job postings, and so on. So there's an element of professional development there for us to take advantage of. A day doesn't go by that Cave Canem isn't in my ear. Also, there is typically a Cave Canem reading every year at AWP (Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference) and plenty of fellows and faculty on panels, so a mini-reunion is always nice to refresh that sensation of solidarity.

Of course this is all the aftermath of what happens during that week in June. During the retreat, there's a palpable energy on campus. You can almost see it. I imagine it looks something like that river of pink slime in *Ghostbusters II*. Except that slime was agitating in a sort of destructive way. This slime is a luscious, irresistible azure. You throw some inanimate idea up in the air and it comes to life. I have found myself arriving at the retreat in a stalemate with my craft and by the time I leave, I'm doing *The Electric Slide* through poems. Sometimes literally depending on which day of the week we're on. But I think it's one of those things where we're all just ready to go there. There's no telling what circumstances everyone's leaving behind to take that week off. But there's no mistake, we're all there to work really hard and play really hard, both equally integral to an artist's health. It's impossible, if you're willing, to not grow exponentially as an artist in that week. To sample from that great cornucopia of ideas and methods to reach ideas, to learn what people are doing elsewhere, figuring new ways into your own work, the competition of outdoing oneself everyday in workshop, which faculty member you really want to wow ... it's a mosh pit of creativity. The idea is to come armed with that attitude, that willingness ... the stronger each fellow, the stronger the community wellspring.

There's never an official time where we all sit down together and say, "Okay, here's what it means to be a poet and specifically a black poet." There is an opening circle the first night where we all introduce ourselves and say who we are and where we're from. You start to see those themes emerge. But for me anyway, the conversation of being a poet and black poet is an ongoing umbrella topic throughout the whole week and beyond. This is happening simultaneously

alongside conversations about Michael Jackson, tattoos, almond milk vs. soy milk, and whether or not midnight frisbee or a foot race could be a good idea before or after the erotic poetry reading someone scheduled for midnight.

There is even a healthy mix of *gasp* slam poets and performance poets who've attended and even been faculty ... seasoned poets well known and decorated for their spoken word prowess. But to differentiate between poetry meant for the ears versus poetry meant for the eyes is tricky. For me, it's meant for both. Do you have poets who more actively practice techniques to perform or read their poetry in venues dedicated to that sort of thing? Certainly. But I don't know that there is a separation of camps during the retreat or afterward. You have your poets who are perhaps more experimental on the page, almost like visual artists. You have your poets who are more adept at narrative, more at concept or language. I would like to think we're all learning from one another. Personal style is akin to the way people choose to worship. There are plenty of denominations in terms of poetic style to go around at Cave Canem. And we celebrate them all.

I know I am making Cave Canem sound like poet-Disney World. It is that for many of us. But, look. I was going to be a poet whether I had Cave Canem or not. Perhaps being a fellow gives you a kind of edge in terms of networking and the rampant creativity I mentioned earlier that we all have access to. That is certainly a luxury. But there are some people who get to the retreat and are like, "You know what? This isn't what I need. This isn't for me." And they go off and do their own thing. And they might have applied numerous times to get in, just to find out it wasn't for them. What I like about this writing enclave is that while plenty of us have enjoyed publication, funding, awards, etc., I think Cave Canem fellows as a group are unique in that there are so many of us who understand that you value the craft first. The trappings of success are nice, but at the end of the day, writers write.

But perhaps the necessity of an established writing community, The Twenty, Cave Canem, the Affrilachian Poets, and The SwallowTale Project, is what makes these groups so successful. There was a serious void before they came along. And because so many members and instructors recognize that these groups are unique and precious, it makes our time together feel hallowed, something to be cherished. I don't know that you can replicate that notion specifically as each community has different needs, but there are underrepresented poets everywhere who would surely benefit from a consistent artistic community. Ultimately, as long as a writing community is willing to grow together, to stay committed to producing quality work, it will remain successful.

About Cave Canem

Mission Statement: "Cave Canem is a home for the many voices of African American poetry and is committed to cultivating the artistic and professional growth of African American poets."

"Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady founded Cave Canem in 1996 with the intuition that African American poets would benefit from having a place of their own in the literary landscape. Over the past 15 years, that intuition has become

a conviction. In Cave Canem, emerging poets find sustenance, a safe space to take artistic chances. The organization's community has grown from a gathering of 26 poets to become an influential movement with a renowned faculty and high-achieving national fellowship of over 300" (cavecanempoets.org).

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☞ Saag Paneer Sutra—or—How One Indian Entrée Nourished Seven Poets

BY JUDITH HARWAY

The idea for the *renshi* struck my friend Lynn over dinner in an Indian restaurant in Houston. It was September 2003, and after a sweltering day of helping her daughter move into a new apartment, Lynn felt eager to tune out the cycle of complaints she'd heard non-stop for eight hours (the heat is beastly, Texans are unfriendly, public transit stinks...) before weariness erupted into conflict. Feigning complete absorption in the menu, she imagined her daughter's voice rising like smoke into the general din of the room. "I need time," she thought. "I need poetry."

Lynn had flown out to Houston because her daughter, starting graduate school in Asian Studies, had actually asked for her help with this move. Their relationship was fraught and this seemed like a chance to mend fences. The previous years had been hard ones: after her daughter left home, Lynn faced her husband's chemotherapy, the death of a close friend, and her mother's debilitating stroke. She knew that her daughter struggled with depression and suspected that she might be suicidal. Lynn found it all but impossible to let go of her only child: instead of cutting the cord, she held on ever tighter, and her daughter made no effort to hide her resentment.

The menu was extensive and confounding. As she studied transliterated names of dishes, Lynn mouthed the unfamiliar words aloud: *rasa vada*, *masala dosa*, *utappam*, *biryani*. Each possessed its own exotic music, and she began to wonder if this was what drew her daughter to study Urdu poetry. They had spoken so little about anything that mattered in the past four years: Lynn's litanies of questions met monosyllabic answers, but the menu before her communicated richness and possibility. She closed her eyes, flipped through the pages, and pointed at random as if making a wish: opening her eyes, she announced, "I'll have *saag paneer*."

"Mother, do you even know what that is?"

"No. But I know that I want it," Lynn said.

Some months later, back home in North Carolina, Lynn described the menu incident to me and our mutual friend Audrey, with whom I was staying. It was such a little thing, to yield control and order dinner at random, she said, and yet it felt as if a magician shuffled and spread a deck before her, saying, "Pick a card, any card..." No matter what she picked, something amazing was sure to be in store. Now her daughter was settled and seemed more optimistic, her mother was dead, her husband's disease was in remission; it was time to get on with her own creative life.

The night shivered with trills of frog-song from the pond. We sat in the

darkness of Audrey's garden, drinking wine and smoking. Though none of us were smokers, Audrey's son had left a pack of Marlboros on the patio table and we lit one at a time, passing the tobacco hand to hand, lip to lip, a gesture of intimacy. The conversation turned, as it so often turned, to poetry, and to the maddeningly polite way it stepped aside to make space for daily responsibilities. I had only recently begun to write again after ten years of silence imposed by the demands of child-rearing and teaching. Audrey, at fifty-five, was still working on her first book. Even Lynn, my most prolific friend, felt completely blocked.

Audrey blew a smokering and Lynn laughed: "You must be psychic. How did you know I'm thinking about a circle?" As she explained the idea that occurred to her over *saag paneer*, that loop of smoke hung in the still, hot air. What we needed, Lynn said, was a sisterhood, a small, supportive group of women whose creative lives linked in essential ways. A *renshi* circle, she called it.

The *renshi* is a type of collaborative poetry that riffs on traditional Japanese forms like the *renga* and *renku*, but it does not adhere to strictures on length, rhythm, or diction. Rather, it encourages spontaneity by forcing participants to respond to random input, to borrow language or ideas that would not ordinarily occur in their writing. Lynn proposed that we draw together a half dozen women poets and let the *renshi* evolve online. There would be only two rules: we were to take turns contributing poems in alphabetical order, and each poem had to begin with the last line of the one that came before it.

The seven women who made up our *renshi* circle were scattered across five states, and ranged from passionate amateurs to widely published poets. Lynn wrote the first piece. Aptly titled "Saag Paneer Sutra," it rose like aromatic steam from that dinner she'd shared with her daughter six months before. Poem by poem, our inboxes filled with rough little gems unearthed from recesses of the imagination we'd never before explored. Though every subject was fair game, most poems asserted themselves as women's work: the chain of our words linked marriage, childbirth, a grandmother's voice, the Milky Way, milking the cows, a drowning child, an absent father, traditional quilt patterns, Shakespearean comedy, and haircuts. The challenge of starting with a phrase you had neither created nor chosen was strangely liberating, and the pressure of writing to and for a loving audience forced us to produce.

The *renshi* remained vibrant for two years and incubated nearly thirty poems, as well as new and deepened friendships, even though a few of us have yet to meet face to face. But nothing lasts forever: as our parents aged and our careers shifted, our emails began to include excuses for why one or another of us had to take a pass on her turn to write. Poetry once again coughed demurely and stepped aside to make way for the bulk of daily responsibilities. I couldn't say how many of the poems birthed in our circle survive in the digital wilderness today, but the voices of my *renshi* sisters continue to inspire me. They remind me of my debt to poetry, which can only be fulfilled by writing as Lynn's "Saag Paneer Sutra" prescribes:

Just day by day
trying to choose from a menu we don't always
comprehend, trying to say what we want
then waiting to see if we like it.

Published in Verse Wisconsin 109

☞ poetical economy/exchange: kitchens, coffee shops, cluttered tables, communities

BY WENDY VARDAMAN

As many readers know, *Verse Wisconsin* began its life as *Free Verse*, an independent print magazine edited 1998–2008 by Linda Aschbrenner. *Free Verse*, like a number of projects discussed in this issue, grew out of a writer's group. Its members felt boxed out of existing publications and wanted more opportunities, not just to publish but also to connect with other poets—truly a gathering around a table. As *Free Verse* reached more poets in and out of the state, it never lost that original sense of gathering, of community. The table just got bigger, and if there was overflow sometimes, card tables went up around the main one. People introduced themselves to each other. We waved at the big table. We waved at each other. We didn't have to wave at Linda, because she was always stopping by to see if you needed anything and to ask what you wanted to help with. She's good at figuring out what you might be able to do and setting you to work on something that makes you feel useful—poetry, of course, we all want to write poetry. But the other stuff too—the work and the writing that needs to go on alongside the poetry in order to support it and the poets who write it, like reviews, interviews, essays, proofreading, layout, websites, accounting. Like poetry news from up north and the Driftless and the cities: a writing center in Viroqua, a poetry series in Racine, a conference at Lakeland College, a literary press festival in Milwaukee, the sudden death of a well-loved poet in Whitefish Bay, the long-expected death of a well-loved poet laureate in Eau Claire. *Free Verse* put us in touch with each other in a personal way up and down and across Wisconsin, regardless of our jobs and whether we make a living as writers, which is why so many of us didn't want to lose what Linda had created when she finished a decade as editor, presiding over 100 issues in those 10 years.

Publication venues have many different purposes, and sometimes multiple ones. Some build careers for writers and editors. Others provide opportunities for students, undergrads or MFA-candidates to learn what's involved in creating a literary magazine. Some promote the writing of particular groups or a particular kind of writing. *Verse Wisconsin*, taking up the unstated mission of *Free Verse*, exists partly to promote the poetry of Wisconsin's writers, to each other and beyond state lines, but more fundamentally, to help maintain and build a community that makes this work meaningful in a personal sense. We're not a family, and yet familial metaphors seem helpful here: the kitchen table, as a work- and a gathering place, might make more sense of publishing efforts like *Free Verse*/*Verse Wisconsin* and Cowfeather Press or other newer publishing ventures around the state, like *Stoneboat* or *Echoes* or *N.E.W. Voices*, than *little magazine*, which refers to size rather than character, *small press*, which just means having a budget under \$50 million, *micro press*, which means smaller but still often driven by economic and professional concerns, or *nano press*, a term coined recently by Nic Sebastian to talk about one editor working with one author to produce one book. What makes me uneasy about those terms are their numerical connotations, like *nonprofit*, which draws your focus right away to

economics and money. I want something that sounds more human, that refers not to size but to substance. Something qualitative rather than quantitative. For most of us, the kitchen is a place where men and women, young and old, gather to create and to exchange what is actually necessary to sustain life physically and spiritually—not money but food, shelter, conversation—and to do that in a way that makes life meaningful.

Still, most kitchens require some cash to do their work, even if everyone pitches in, even if some of the produce comes from the garden, neighbors bring dessert, your uncle ice fishes, or you fill up the freezer with the deer killed on the way to Menominee in October. Even if the house is paid for and you're living in the place you grew up outside of Kenosha, outside of Shawano, outside of Ashwaubenon, and eating on your grandmother's dishes and bartering your skills in wiring for carpentry, there's still the electric and the gas bills to pay. Most literary magazines are subsidized in some way or another—either by the universities and colleges that house them, or by foundations and nonprofit fundraising efforts, or by personal resources, however small. And if knowledge, especially of software and web design, might be a contemporary poetry publisher's Green Stamps, there are still expenses, like printing and postage, if you want to put out a print magazine let alone ever pay anyone—poets, reviewers, proofreaders, editors—for all of their work. Early on in the process of taking on *Free Verse*, we considered whether *Verse Wisconsin* should become a nonprofit. As people with professional credentials and academic degrees, we saw what we were doing, at least theoretically, as a profession and as a business, which Linda did too, if not a profitable one. We didn't expect to make money, but we didn't want to lose it either. And we had a mission. Shouldn't we become an official nonprofit?

“Dave,” I called out to my next door neighbor, a tax accountant specializing in nonprofits. “I'd like to set up an appointment to come talk to you about my poetry magazine becoming a 501c3.”

Dave quizzed me. “What's your budget?”

“About \$6000,” I replied.

The corners of his mouth started to turn up, as he took off his straw hat and passed it over his face. “Do you intend to pay anyone?”

“Well, no. There's no money in poetry publishing.”

Dave took a deep breath and control of his expression, arranging himself once more into the normal accountant's countenance, before launching into a mini-lecture on the difference between a *business* and a *hobby*, a word that makes me cringe every time I hear it in relation to poetry, especially my poetry. “So what you have is a hobby, understand? Don't make it more complicated than that.”

But what if we wanted to apply for grants? Ask for donations? Look respectable?

“It's not worth your time—all the extra paperwork. Not with that budget.” And

then he vanished into the back of his house, perhaps to share a laugh with his wife about the wacky poet next door.

And after getting over the bruise to the ego, we realized that he was right, at least for now, and *Verse Wisconsin* has evolved outside of the nonprofit model, accruing adjectives rather than grants as it goes: mission-driven, independent, non-commercial, volunteer, hybrid, online-print. Every now and then we connect with an organization that wants to come to our “offices” or have us send some of our staff over, and we explain: two women, two laptops, and a community of generous and engaged poets, reviewers, proofreaders, and advisors. *VW* tries to continue not just Linda’s magazine but its spirit, making room around the table and involving poets with chopping onions and tossing salad. Or call it a potluck, and *VW* offers a gathering place and a group where you can show off your best recipes. The work of publishing and editing happens, as we imagine much of the poetry written and published in *VW*, where we are and where you are: embedded in daily life and its routines, between and around things ordinary and extraordinary—chores and work commitments, family trips, birthdays, kids’ visits from college and holidays from school, other volunteer work. In kitchens and coffee shops.

Verse Wisconsin is small and we like it that way. We’re not trying to mass-produce poetry or poetry magazines. We couldn’t do that and maintain the same kind of involvement with poets and the magazine in the process. We both correspond with every author. We don’t have national, or really any distribution, of our print magazine, which is subscriber-based, though we give away several hundred copies of each issue to contributors, community groups, literacy programs, prisons, literary festivals near and far, and we would do more of that if we could. We don’t earn money and don’t expect to, although I’d say we make money by not spending it.

True to its origins around a cluttered table, *VW* is open to a range of aesthetics and forms of poetry. We try to be as eclectic and as inclusive as possible, welcoming what you value, and we believe that many kinds of people and poetry can make something together that is more pleasing than its individual components. Although we focus on the process of working with poets and on what we create together more than, we hope, the product, work published in *VW* has been recognized by the Pushcart Award, Poetry Daily, the Council for Wisconsin Writers, and *Best New Poets*. Wisconsin is home to many poets who deserve a wider readership and more regional and national attention, and we appreciate you bringing your best work to the party: every time you do that, it helps raise our profile as a community of poets regionally and nationally. And it makes a better party.

Kitchen publishing informs more than our budget and where we work. It also influences what we look like. So far, we’ve published poems as colorful broadsides, as give-aways with candy in the Verse-O-Matic, and as a YouTube video, as well as in print and online. Serving up poetry in different forms and formats will, we hope, reach and appeal to more people and poets. In print, *Verse Wisconsin* retained Linda’s vision of a larger format with poems speaking to each other on the same page, rather than alone on a book-sized page with lots of

white space. On a given 2-page spread, we try to include deliberately different voices of men and women, new and established, from Wisconsin and beyond. This decision has a practical dimension—we can publish more poets for less money, but it also complements our aesthetic. One of my favorite tasks in editing and layout is deciding which poems will have a conversation with each other on a page, as well as the flow through an issue to create an extended discussion, a story. As a community-driven publication, everyone's name goes on the cover, another choice Linda made for *Free Verse*. *VW* also welcomes prose about poetry, not just reviews (which appear online) and interviews but pieces about craft and how poetry informs daily life. In print the poetry and prose flow around each other as much as possible. The online venue helps extend this vision of pieces and poets speaking to each other and includes visual and performance poetry, photos and art, audio, and video, poetry grounded in and informed by other arts, like theater, dance, music, the visual. We hope that different groups of poets will find each other through *VW* and that *VW* continues to find other groups of poets and artists whose work is informed by poetry.

I've lived all over the US as well as in Europe, and what I've come to love about Wisconsin during the 12 years my family has been here is that it's a state of builders, doers, and organizers. Of people who pitch in. Of outward-looking artists and civic-minded writers. Of people who talk to their neighbors and actually want to know them. Of people who go out of their way to welcome newcomers. *Verse Wisconsin* attempts to reflect those values, too. We're inspired by the work that goes on everywhere to support the vibrant poetry/writing climate of the state. So much goes on, in fact, that it's hard to know about it all. *VW* includes links to other Wisconsin organizations supporting poetry here on the website, and a "Wisconsin Poetry News" column in each online issue, directed not so much at individual news and successes, but at the news of Wisconsin groups working for poetry. We always need help with keeping these links up to date, with providing photographs and other multimedia material, and with collecting and writing the state's abundant poetry news: from the poetry trail project in Door County, to the poetry wall in Fort Atkinson, to sidewalk poems in Madison, to the annual Woodrow Hall Jumpstart Award that helps fund projects like Kenosha's poetry street cars and the new haiku marquee in Stevens Point, to the many festivals and conferences that occur statewide each year, to the new home for Wisconsin's Poet Laureate at the Wisconsin Academy, to the work of Writers in Prisons, a project that makes poetry and literature available to some of our state's most thoughtful and needy readers and writers. We invite each of you to send us material—pictures, video, stories—about what your group, or a group you know about, does to support poetry and to support people through poetry.

No matter how much we might enjoy our own kitchen or coffee place, the familiar can easily become dull, unimaginative, and isolating, which is why we enjoy collaborating with other poetry publishers and supporters in Wisconsin. Partnerships help provide new directions, new ideas, and new audiences, significant needs for every small arts organization. In 2011 we launched the Verse-O-Matic/Jawbreaker project with Poetry Jumps Off the Shelf, and we have another collaboration in the works for 2013. This issue of *Verse Wisconsin* (109) is the product of a partnership with the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets to

produce the 2013 Wisconsin Poets' *Calendar*, and includes a selection of calendar poems and the calendar's artwork, new audio/video of poets reading, and reflections on some of the many poetry communities in Wisconsin by their members. Many shorter calendar poems also appear for free with candy in the Verse-O-Matic, our poetry vending machine. Partnerships with other Wisconsin publishers are in the works, including one with *Hummingbird, a magazine of short poems*. We believe in working toward common goals as much as possible with other groups that support poetry in the state; in addition to WFOP these have included the Friends of Lorine Niedecker, the Wisconsin Book Festival, the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, & Letters, First Wave, the Creative Writing Department at the UW–Madison, the Association of Wisconsin Writers, the Wormfarm Institute's Farm/Art DTour, the City of Madison's Poet Laureateship.

The idea that my poetry, or poetry publishing, is a hobby still sets me on edge, but isn't most poetry a hobby from the business perspective? Some poetry, without a doubt, is rewarded in the marketplace: greeting card verse, lyrics for commercials and popular music, some rap and hip hop (though perhaps not the most interesting or revolutionary kind), the lyrics of Disney movie musicals.... But that's not the type of poetry most of us in *Verse Wisconsin* are writing. The kind of poetry we do write doesn't have a "commercial" audience and doesn't play by marketplace rules, which is precisely why we have the freedom and possibility to say what and how we like in a range of forms and aesthetics from sound poetry to spoken word, to visual poetry and other experiments, to poetry essays and novels, to verse drama, to haiku, to accessible poems about your dog, which is why we have to publish it (unless we have a wealthy, doting, dotty aunt) in non-commercial ways: subsidized by a university, a nonprofit, a community, our kitchens.

But nonprofits and universities are themselves not immune from marketplace rules. University publications tend to care (unsurprisingly) about the career goals of their students and faculty, about looking good to other university programs that are hiring or providing students, and about the audience within the university in charge of deciding funding and salaries. Successful, larger nonprofits with bigger and more specialized paid staffs, connected or not to universities, also tend to have the time and skills to compete for government grants and foundation money. A few arts groups—theaters, literary organizations, symphonies—have huge resources which makes them more likely to attract even more. The growing inequality of such resources for artists and arts groups parallels the inequitable distribution of income in American society overall. The rest of us can attend their performances/readings or buy their magazines, which may have some benefit, but this is trickle-down art whose advantage to an individual has limits and, depending on resources, may be inaccessible; in any case, viewing or consuming art is not comparable at all to practicing an art oneself. So how can groups like *VW*, too small even to bother being nonprofits, compete? How do artists without institutional or NEA-sized backing produce their work? Where does it leave you and me and the art that we feel compelled to do? And where does it leave too many individuals who are denied access altogether to public space and resources?

Verse Wisconsin, like a kitchen, is a group, an organization, a circle, in which the members, the people involved, produce the art, act as the audience for each others' work, and trade time, expertise and other resources for the benefit of the group's ability to produce, in this case, poetry, though the notion of such an art circle applies equally well to theater, visual art, music. We're not a "professional" publisher, though individual members can and do certainly function at a professional level. The circle itself, however, is about allowing people to grow as artists, to interact with each other, to practice their art, and to create something larger than the individuals involved. Some members may only participate occasionally or tangentially, but everyone in such a circle needs to invest in creating and maintaining the infrastructure, and everyone should spend time being the audience for the circle's members. The circle can't exist without both of those forms of support and participation. For poetry that means spending, on the one hand, time reviewing, publicizing, publishing, editing, and/or organizing readings/events and, on the other hand, reading each other's books, attending readings, reading and buying, if possible, poetry magazines, and visiting magazines online. Connecting small circles to other circles also helps all of us to make better art and strengthens the art as a whole.

The community art circle, in contrast to a professional model, allows people *right now*, today, to take charge of their artistic lives. It's not about some improbable success or reaching the top of a heap of very talented people—it's not about gaining recognition or getting a job or a grant—it's about being an artist now and practicing an art as part of a more meaningful existence. You are never too old or too young to do art in this way; you can't exhaust its possibilities creatively; it's always possible though never easy. The community circle puts art within everyone's reach as makers and creators, not consumers. It's about democratic access; responsive, responsible art. The goal of the community art circle is not careerist or material; it is the mutual support and artistic fulfillment of those who belong, from people who may have very ordinary talents, to those who may be or become major artists.

Community publishing or kitchen publishing? Think of the kitchen as a metaphor for the smallest of communities. The one you have the most control over. The one you spend the most time in and are presumably the most attached to. The place you already have where others can gather. The place you already are. *Kitchen* is, I believe, a vital space to hold onto ideologically and culturally—not as a locus of retreat or homogeneity but as a revolutionary space where personal choices can immediately affect social outcomes. Besides being a center of work, paid or not, it's the center of social interaction in a home, both among the people who live in a house as well as between its residents and visitors. For those of us who are not wealthy, it is the place in our houses that we probably spend the most waking time; for the wealthy, it is the place where problems of class and race are most often visible; it is also the space in a home, for all of us, where gender and age differences, if they exist, are most visible, the space that witnesses how families organize themselves and divide the work of living. Economically, it is a place where we witness everything from the ordinary struggle of trying to get by to the hardship that occurs when there isn't enough to feed the family, to celebration, to the creativity and fulfillment that can come from making do with what we have and making it ourselves.

Taped to the Refrigerator: 14 Theses Advancing the Currency of Meaning, Not Money

What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change.—James Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers”

1. It's better to produce art than to consume it.
2. It's better to produce art for an engaged audience, however small, than a passive one, however large.
3. It's a mistake to think that there's an audience for art that is not interested in producing it.
4. If everyone who is in the audience (for a poetry reading, a journal, a book, a theatrical performance) also wants to make art, why are we all trying to sell our art to each other?
5. Are there other models of how to practice art that cut out the middle man—not the audience—but the businesses and individuals, big and small, who own the means of our production and use up our most important commodities: time, choice, meaning?
6. You may think your art deserves a more engaged, supportive audience than someone who is less talented, but you're wrong.
7. You may think you need a widely distributed audience to practice art and to be satisfied, but you're wrong.
8. You can build your own audience, but you shouldn't expect narcissistic devotion from that audience—in other words, you must be the audience for your audience, and you must help your audience to produce its art.
9. Connecting to more and different kinds of art circles will make better art.
10. A diverse audience will help you make better art and connect you to more artists than a homogenous one.
11. Artists, especially literary ones, require educated, literate audiences. Literary communities should also engage in providing basic social services like literacy.

12. Wider audiences are created by wider connections. Connections are driven by relationships.
13. Value does not equal valuable. Money does not equal meaning. Not spending money doesn't just make money, it makes an opportunity for meaning.
14. Meaning-driven art circles require and help to create active, engaged producer-participants who are not content with viewing and consuming. A society that promotes sustainability, stewardship, political activism, and social justice will not be possible without meaningful, local art communities.

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✂ Is Half a Poet Better Than None?

BY CATHRYN COFELL

At a recent speaking gig in my home city of Appleton, I was asked to come forward and share a truly challenging connection in my life: the connection with my own self. Or rather, my two selves, because I stood there—in front of 950 women (and a few brave men)—as two women. If you know me at all it's as the poet, Cathryn Cofell. But it's unlikely you know the other side of me: Cathy Mutschler, former Girl Scout CEO, current nonprofit exec. For that speaking engagement, it was the flip-flop: most of those women didn't even know Cathryn Cofell existed, were baffled by my suddenly hyphenated name on the program. The event was a “coming out” party of sorts for the poet, Cathryn Cofell.

When I say “coming out,” I mean no disrespect to those of you who have come out about more controversial identity issues. You are strong men and women, and I admire you for your courage. Me? I have been a coward. I have cut myself in half and kept those two halves apart for most of my adult life, simply because my alter ego can't help but write poetry.

In a journal whose subscribers are primarily poets, I'm sure that sounds utterly ridiculous to you. However, on the rare occasion when I have confessed to a business associate that I'm a poet, I usually get a look that's a combination of fear and disbelief—you know, like I said I'd just climbed out of a UFO. Then, the “smile and head nod” otherwise reserved for people who think they actually did climb out of a UFO. Finally, the obligatory ask if they can read some, which seems perfectly polite and what a struggling writer would want—but not me, because I know most non-poets are expecting the poetry of greeting cards or chickadees. Not the stuff Cathryn Cofell normally writes: issues like infertility, suicide, the dark heart of love, abnormally-sized body parts. Issues that haunt, humor, anger, arouse her—in hopes of evoking from her readers a connection, a spark of that same emotion. Poems that *Cathy Mutschler's* customers, Girl Scout moms, bosses might find objectionable, off-putting, offensive.

As poets, we know the power of words. Forget atom bombs and machine guns; for me, a word is the most powerful weapon on earth. Sticks and stones can break your bones, but names can never hurt you? Baloney! Ask yourself how often you've been seriously injured by a twig or a mineral deposit? Then think about how many times you've been *crying-in-your-pillow-or-martini-destroyed* by the weight of words someone threw at you? This may be less blatantly obvious for men, but women know how verbal bullying works—how one word can start or end a war, a relationship, an innocent discussion about, say, health care—how one word can make you feel good or bad, skinny or fat, smart or stupid.

So, no way was Cathy Mutschler going to let Cathryn Cofell's arsenal of poems jeopardize her business relationships, her family's livelihood. And no way was Cathryn Cofell going to let her lack of an MFA, teaching credentials or 100% commitment to the craft add one more reason to the pile of reasons to be rejected. I was Moses; I kept that Red Sea in me parted.

At first, it was easy. My two selves had nothing in common: one was driven, organized, a smooth-talker; the other creative, frenzied, a goofball. They didn't like each other one bit; they gladly kept their distance. Business was business: Fox Valley. Poetry was poetry: everywhere else. D tente.

But then, they both started climbing their respective ladders. Started craving more time. Showing up in all the wrong places. Cathy would meet with a coworker and out would come poetry. Cathryn would go to a poetry event and volunteer to chair a government commission. The more successful each got, the uglier each got. The poet started doing readings in downtown Appleton! Typing resignation notices to quit the day job, to prove she could provide if she could write full-time. But that business woman made more money, was a better parent, was helping make her customers' lives better. She was more polite and dressed better too. She had just about the whole world on her side.

Cathy Mutschler had Cathryn Cofell in a choke hold and was not letting go. Cathryn tried writing about sweeter things—like the joy of gardening. Sometimes it worked, but most times, it went like this. Title: "Introduction to Gardening." First line: "I know dead when I see it."

Then Cathryn tried to use one of Cathy's favorite weapons against her—*The List*. Cathryn made an attempt to list all the reasons why being a poet was important. That poem turned into this:

Why I Will Fail as a Poet

I am addicted to black shoes. And purses. I need lots of purses. I need to open those purses and pull out matching wallets fat with bills and give those bills away to store clerks, cute waiters, a colorist who helps me look shiny and young, if I'm going to fail I will at least look shiny and young, like I have plenty time to succeed. I need to earn that keep. I am not a kept woman. I am more

than \$125 on an IRS Form-990. I need fame. Applause after every poem. I'm no symphony, I'm a Sex Pistol, a Violent Femme; give me groupies, a mosh pit, more than the same five bodies in the same cramped caf . I need love (every day I fall in love, every day I lose my pen

to his body so full of trap doors). I need to find myself in the Caribbean. To lie on a blue chaise on that white sand against the dazzling blue and ooze cocoa butter (so spit-fire-Jalapeno-hot), not writing, not reading, just listening to the poetry of salsa, the slurp of margarita through a blue-

white straw. I need thighs the size of straws. Triceps that don't take flight when they reach for a book. I don't need another book of prize-winning poetry I don't have time to be in. I need time. I need time to stop. To prove the stopped

clock of this 747 body wrong (so much of me on snooze control).
I need very much to wake, to remember my dreams

but do not. There are so many people more hungry, more broken,
more full of dreams and need who need me to be useful, but there is
nothing useful about poetry except it's the one thing that makes me
want, that makes me breathe deep, that releases the dying breath
held so deep, hands held like ashtrays to catch the flickering embers.
Because hands cupped this way can only hold so much.

Talk about a plan that backfired! But a good poem is a hard thing to control.
And it was true. That one want, poetry, was nothing compared to all that need.

So the poet went into hiding. Cathy poured every ounce into the career, climbed
and climbed until she became the CEO of a Girl Scout council. At first, it was
a dream job, everything Cathy imagined it could be: her girls were thriving; her
council was thriving, which meant that I was thriving. Right?

Not so much. On the outside, Cathy was challenging girls to become women of
courage, confidence and character—but on the inside, I was anything but. The
more I tried to be only Cathy, only business, the more off-kilter I felt. The more
phony.

That poem did remind me of all the reasons why I wanted to be a success in
business. But it also reminded me that a life without poetry isn't much of a life.
And ironically, Cathy began to realize that what separated her from the business-
suited, brief-case bearing pack was that darn poet. She was the one with the
confidence, the moxie, the nontraditional ideas. Although I loved the idea of the
job, I didn't love me anymore. So I resigned, climbed back down that corporate
ladder a notch and began the slow convergence of two women into one.

I am fortunate to have found a new position in the nonprofit world that keeps
my passion for business and community service fulfilled yet is supportive of
the poet in me. My boss lets me miss occasional meetings for poetry and my
coworkers even encouraged me to bring a poem about cookies in lieu of the real
deal for the holiday cookie exchange. For now, I might not be as successful a
writer as others who dedicate more time to it, but I am grateful for every sassy or
sweet piece that's been published, and for that business savvy that allows me to
help strengthen the poetry organizations I adore.

I would be lying if I said the transformation was complete. I still worry that
one of my donors might be offended by a poem I wrote about kissing or
menstruation—even though I suspect many of them can relate. And I still worry
that you will consider me less of a poet because my career consumes an awful
lot of my time. But, I am now willing to risk you not liking a piece of me, in
exchange for me liking my whole self: ONE organized, creative, goofy, driven,
opinionated woman deeply connected to her two passions.

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❧ 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.

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 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 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.

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.

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ON THE PAGE—
CRAFT TALK

✂ In the Beginning ... Some Notes on Just That

BY SARAH BUSSE

You're reading this piece most likely in the spring, according to my editorial chart, when the snow is beginning to melt, crocuses beginning to poke above ground. Sandhill cranes fly north with their prehistoric, bell-like calling. Robert Creeley once again sees Kore emerge, surrounded by her goat-men, "O love,/ where are you/ leading/ me now?"

It's a different season for me as I write this between Halloween and Thanksgiving, one more traditionally associated with endings, although for me it's a beginning too—a few weeks ago I put my youngest child on the school bus, off to full-day kindergarten. I don't know how it is for other parents, but for me this fall has been like waking up out of an almost ten-year dream. Where am I? What's the game plan? When will the prize committee call?

Turns out I'm not nearly where I expected to be. I'm staring out the window, doodling with my thumbs, mulling how to begin writing about the beginnings of poems. I've made a few false starts.

First, I planned a parallel piece to the essay published in *Verse Wisconsin* 104, on the endings of poems. Simple, I told Wendy. I'll look at two or three or four common failings, suggest some solutions, and wrap it up. No problem. Put me down for the spring issue. Sitting down to write, I slowly realized the flaw in this plan: beginnings aren't parallel to endings at all. They do their work much differently in the poem, and we approach them differently, as writers. The same sort of essay simply won't do.

Started in a second time and got all twisted up by the definition of "beginning." Every poem starts somewhere in seed, with a writing exercise, journal twiddle, overheard remark, or other trick that gets us launched into the poem draft in the first place. That's not the point of this assignment, however. Some other article, some other issue, can cover that ground. Once again, I tossed out the opening paragraphs and returned to a blank screen.

Oh, beginnings, beginnings, I sing as I dance around my basement study, bending paperclips and reshelving books and trying to avoid the yawning computer screen. Such tentative, tricky, tender ground! How do we know, as writers, what sort of beginning a poem needs? Trying to gain some clarity, I read over the poems in this issue of *Verse Wisconsin* to explore a few of the possibilities.

The first type of beginning I noticed, paging through, is what I call a "grand sweep." The poet starts with a wide angle lens. Look at W. J. Nunnery's "The Union."

The Union

A collage of cacophony,
bustling voices that swing lower
than the sweetest chariot back and
forth, colliding into a dissonant wash
and, standing on a rickety wooden stage,
the twangy sound of an out-of-tune
soul, echoes passion, pulling whatever notes
are left to be pulled from a cracked acoustic guitar,
punk rock stickers peeling from its hollow body;
sun setting melodies that stretch all the way
to the room's back wall and an old bald man
wearing Ron Dayne's red and white thirty-three
stands up and he shouts: more beer,
I need more beer, as though
that was all that mattered,
a smile grabbing his face like the moon
in a black and childlike sky, unwilling
to let go until tomorrow.

The poem begins slightly out of focus, then after a few lines the soundscape focuses in: "the twangy sound of an out-of-tune/ soul." Visually, the poem takes even longer, until it finally locks in on the figure of the "old bald man." There it stays until the end. The general effect of the poem is of a spiraling in, towards the sweet spot represented by that "smile grabbing his face."

Strikingly similar in shape but almost completely opposite in tone is Ray Greenblatt's "Berryman's Bridge."

Berryman's Bridge

I was coming home from
the Guthrie with a friend.
Early in the week I had seen
the frothy *Midsummer Night's Dream*
feeling joy evolve out of sorrow
tonight it was *Long Day's Journey into Night*
where hope dissolves into tragedy.

My friend halted on the bridge
saying this very place was where
John Berryman had jumped.
Also being a poet
I could visualize
from a distance that black spot
in mid-air then a white spot
as it met the river.

The moment closed in like ice

I shoved hands into pockets
and we began to walk again.

In this poem, the first stanza recounts, even a little prosaically, that he's walking home from seeing a play, and he saw a different play earlier in the week. The focus rivets in the second stanza, moving in closer and closer to follow finally "that black spot/ in mid-air then a white spot/ as it met the river."

Both of these poems illustrate how a poem can pull us in. The very opposite effect takes place in Marine Robert Warden's poem "A Button Fell Off." Here, the poem starts with an extremely close focus, the size of the gap in a woman's shirt, then slowly spins out, wider and wider until we're left at the end with an open-ended sense of possibility, like ripples spreading across a still surface.

A Button Fell Off

her blouse and she never
seemed to notice her
cleavage was showing

her husband didn't notice
a man leaning on the door
post was watching her

in his mind the leaning man
broke a Commandment
and coveted her

but he never approached her
or said a word to her
and the moment passed

as the woman walked away
into another room
and there was an unfinished tale

or a poem where a word or whole line
is dropped by accident
and the poem becomes better for it

In all of the examples so far, the motion moves inward or outward but it does so in a relatively straight line. There are also poems which engage in trickier maneuvers. In John Krumberger's "Holy Family Cemetery, Racine, Wisconsin," his first stanza surveys his own extended family.

Holy Family Cemetery, Racine, Wisconsin

Here among the stories of my kin:
the uncles who drank too much,
the grandfather, a big soap box talker,

the cousin too wild when he was young
snuffed out before the age of thirty-one,
and my father Henry the gentlest of men;

here in this meadow beneath maples, oaks and jays
I see these trinkets: ribbons, stuffed animals
and necklace carefully arranged
into a shrine around her stone:
Jane Doe, June 12, 2000.

Stranger found face down
clothed in ditch water leaves
who the police tried to find
a family for and failed;
someone should grieve for her,
someone should write a poem for her,

even if it is only me
and my words, too sentimental,
are drowned by the drone of traffic
from the highway, and the rain is bitter,
and this world was never a home.

With the second stanza, we swing to focus on the unknown grave of someone unrelated to anyone in the family, or the cemetery. A Jane Doe. The temptation, in a workshop setting, might be to suggest cutting the first stanza. It's true the poem would be more straight-forward then, but it would lose much of its resonance, which lies in the contrast, and the speaker's awareness of dissimilarity. In a poem such as this, the end points us back around to the beginning again, which we read with an altered knowledge and vision.

Something twisty also happens in "Home Health Nurse Visits Woman with Cancer" by Jeanie Tomasko.

Home Health Nurse Visits Woman With Cancer

I told her husband I'd let the skunk out
after he said it was in the trap
instead of rabbits—

He called the sheriff
who said to shoot it in the back
of the head

fast and clean,
just don't say I said you could.
Call the DNR, I said

or, I'll do it, really,
but he mentioned the garden

the house, the smell.

I thought it would just run off
into the woods, happy,
grateful, even.

All the while she sat there
she, with cancer
who had told me

about the bones irradiated
about the new lesion
the pain

how they were afraid
the neck
might snap—

It was the morning after
my friend died.
Cancer. It was

the morning I understood
maybe he just wanted to shoot,
something.

At the start this poem feels quite safe, even gently comical. A man has trapped a skunk by accident and is debating what to do. Slowly, the focus shifts to his wife, dying of cancer. Another shift brings us to the speaker's friend's death, also cancer, and a new understanding of the emotional underpinning of the original conversation. We move in a slow spiral back to where we began, but we arrive with a difference.

In looking closely at these poems, what occurs to me now is how difficult it is to talk about, or think about, beginnings without also considering larger structural issues. The beginning of a poem is inseparable, it seems, from the motion of the poem's action. Maybe this is an essential difference between beginnings and endings? If a poem takes place through time, then the beginning of any poem is like the opening measures of a dance: it sets up a movement that will unfold as we read. An ending, on the other hand, cuts off, and allows the white space to regain purchase.

I suspect a poem informs itself in reverse, in the writing of it. Work on the rest of your poem first. At the end, in the end, the beginning will become clear. As T. S. Eliot wrote in "Little Gidding":

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

☞ Who's on the toilet?: A family of Zen poets (re)digested through Žižek

BY ADAM HALBUR

As a poet, I have been attracted by Zen, and yet something about this eastern philosophy has kept me at a distance. Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek addressed my concerns in his October 16, 2012, lecture at the University of Vermont using as an example the best known haiku by the best known Zen poet, Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694):

[Nirvana] is something that what Gilles Deleuze in his best book, maybe *The Logic of Sense*, describes as the pure momentary event of sense. You know, how reality loses its substantial weight and becomes just like a momentary lightning phenomenon which stands for eternity, the void, and so on. This is why the poetic form of Buddhism, especially Zen, we all know is the Japanese haiku—Matsuo Bashō. You know the best known one... Old pond/ a frog jumps in/ splash! First you have the situation, material, old pond. Then you have the act, a frog jumps in. And then you have what the poem is about, this pure effect as Deleuze would have said referring to Stoics, incorporeal, a bodiless pure phenomenon. The problem I claim ... if you are truly Buddhist, you shouldn't cheat, and by cheating I mean always taking these innocent noble cases—you know, water, a pond, splash. First, a vulgar way, what about: Toilet bowl with stale water/ I sit on it/ splash!—my shit. Sorry, if you are seriously Buddhist, you should say, *I have no right to cheat and say this is not authentic. Why not? Your shit, it drops, it splash [sic], it can also be a pure phenomenon.* Now let's go even further. Let's say you are a murderer, a person is hanging on a rope in front of you and in a moment of wisdom, you compose this haiku: Fat body wiggling in front of me/ the swing of my sword/ splash!—his blood. You have to go to the end here. If you humanize it—*It should be ethically good, blah blah blah*—it's not Buddhism.¹

In other words, Zen encourages a constant withdrawal or distance from our actions, allowing for atrocities such as those by the Japanese during World War II² and by corporations as enlightened as Apple, Inc. in China today.³ Žižek calls into question the west's tendency to blindly romanticize Buddhism, and as such, I am moved to (re)read the Zen poetry that has influenced me.

Žižek is right in pointing out that Zen Buddhism goes to the end; however, he need not transpose the Bashō poem for vulgarity and depravity, present both in classical and modern Zen poetry. Take for example this, also from Bashō May 15, 1689 on a famous journey that took him through present day Fukushima Prefecture: “what with fleas and lice/ the horses having a piss/ right at the pillow.”⁴ Or how about this toilet humor by predecessor Sōchō (1448–1532): “Falling from horse, I crippled my hand and cannot write. What's more, how will I hold chopsticks and wipe my ass?”⁵ Even seemingly beautiful Zen poems are vulgar in the sense that nature is nothing but vulgar in itself, such as in this haiku also from Sōchō: “Pine crickets—/ deep within the mugwort,/ voices

of autumn.”⁶ Etymologically, mugwort is derived from words for “marsh” and “root.” Nothing is muckier, yuckier. And the poem takes on a depraved quality today when one knows that Chernobyl, or *Chornobyl* in Ukrainian, is “the place where the mugwort grows,” and that in Fukushima, the new Chernobyl, Japanese mugwort (*yomogi* ヨモギ) is cuisine. Already insinuating the seasonal death of winter, the “voices of autumn” suddenly fall silent as all places once inhabited become abandoned, and now, rather than purely paint a pretty picture of natural compost, the poem shrouds pastoral beauty in industrial radioactive decay.

Sōchō speaks to us retroactively of nuclear fallout, but Shinkichi Takahashi (1901–1987), an admirer of Bashō and who was himself the greatest Zen poet of the 20th century, speaks to us directly in greater length on the issue:

I’m an unthinking dog,
a good-for-nothing cat,
a fog over gutter,
a blossom-swiping rain.

I close my eyes, breathe—
radioactive air! A billion years
and I’ll be shrunk to half,
pollution strikes my marrow.

So what—I’ll whoop at what
remains. Yet scant blood left,
reduced to emptiness by nuclear
fission, I’m running very fast.⁷

Here, Takahashi makes little of himself in the first stanza, reducing himself to dog and cat and fog and rain, and in the second stanza, radiation reduces him further—to a half-life. As Takahashi diminishes, in the third stanza he stands his ground, asserts his remains as if in protest, and gathers strength from what strikes him down: “I’m running very fast.” Takahashi fully recognizes reality, neither satisfied with ignoring it nor with whining in self-pity. He takes on the phenomenon of the world as his own, and reminds me of residents that have refused to leave the evacuation zones of Chernobyl and Fukushima, or people back in Wisconsin knowingly fishing rivers and lakes polluted with mercury and PCBs. In a sense, it is their right to do this, to set the self on fire with that through which society minimalizes existence. Nevertheless, at the same time, Takahashi with his “So what” foregoes any responsibility; his relation to radioactive pollution is the same as a mindless subatomic particle.

In explaining how Buddhist philosophy calls for withdrawal and detachment, Žižek goes on to say

there are only two really serious ethics in the world, Buddhist and, properly reread, not the way it was done, Judeo-Christian ethics. The reason why I tend toward more Judeo-Christian ethics is ...it’s an ethic of external traumatic encounter. Buddhism is like distance, don’t be too attached to objects, don’t fall. I think our ethics is precisely of the fall.⁸

Žižek surely defines the traditional concept of Buddhism, but he is also steering us toward the exception to the rule, one that spans the gap between the ethics of west and east.⁹ In moving toward this model, Takahashi, who had been a Dadaist before turning to Zen, experienced a period of antisocial behavior. “I was lost, didn’t care for anything or anyone. My troubles were small suicides.”¹⁰ Then after a nervous breakdown and convalescence following rigorous study under a Zen master, it was only in his (re)reading of Zen that he found a way to throw himself fully back into the world:

Dead man steps over sweaty sleepers
on the platform, in quest of peace.

Thunderously dawn lights earth.

Smashed by the train, head splattered
on the track—not a smudge of brain.

Nothing left: thought—smoke.
A moment—a billion years.

Don’t curl like orange peel, don’t ape
a mummified past. Uncage eternity.

When self’s let go, universe is all—
O for speed to get past time!¹¹

In traditional Zen flair, Takahashi calls for us to get past the self and the time and space of our transitory reality, but while he gives up desire, I’m not sure he gives up the drive as Žižek defines in his book *Less than Nothing*.¹² Takahashi confronts the trauma of the world, here namely suicide, which today results in 30,000 deaths in Japan annually. He then plays counselor, urging us to neither “curl like orange peel” nor “ape a mummified past”—to get past the narrow thoughts, “smoke,” the illusions that would pigeonhole us into jumping in front of a train in the first place. For Takahashi, the drive is to maintain and share what he discovered in satori (a moment of Nirvana-like enlightenment), which for him is very much a moving outward—through Tokyo, Korea, the Himalayas, Asia Minor, Mexico, Mars and so on toward greater speed with each encounter. But, still, the problem remains that this type of non-committal freedom in time and place, when one is active in the public sphere (whether wielding sword or pen), is what Žižek means most by constant withdrawal.

In further illustrating the difference between the Judeo-Christian ethic of the fall and the Buddhist ethic of distance, Žižek uses the example of falling in love:

Let’s take falling in love.... What is love? You are in your ordinary shitty life. You might be very happy even, you know like one-night stands maybe here and there, drinking with friends, blah blah. Then you meet the one. Literally, I insist on this term, which works only in English and French—other languages as far as I know don’t use this term: fall, to fall in love, it’s a fall, you fall, you are attached. Love is a catastrophe in this sense. All your life

turns around this traumatic encounter. Love is a good example of what Hegel calls this reversal of contingency into necessity.¹³

While making his point, Žižek uncannily also describes the life of Zen monk and poet Ikkyū (1394–1481), famous for including visits to whorehouses as part of his Zen practice. This is not to say Ikkyū did not suffer, that he practiced promiscuity at a cool distance. Rather, he often suffered “self-doubt if not guilt”¹⁴ common to the best-educated Catholic and, perhaps with each encounter, sought a more binding relationship. Ikkyū writes in one poem: “sin like a madman until you can’t do anything else/ no room for any more.”¹⁵ If this is not a philosophy of falling, I don’t know what is; the poem could not have come into being but out of a fall. Furthermore, Ikkyū finally did turn contingency into catastrophic necessity by falling in love (*koi ni ochiru* 恋に落ちる): “I love taking my new girl blind Mori on a spring picnic/ I love seeing her exquisite free face its moist sexual heat/ shine.”¹⁶ The poem, as Žižek would say, still adheres to pure effect, the “shine”; in other words, there is a sense of detached voyeurism as the now aged Zen monk takes relief in having a handsome girl at his side to take care of him, and yet the poet is consumed enough to exalt in the sight of his blind mistress.

A free spirit, Ikkyū writes rebelliously of institutional Buddhism itself—“that stone Buddha deserves all the birdshit it gets/ I wave my skinny arms like a tall flower in the wind”¹⁷—which perhaps freed him to make insights beyond his professed order. Takahashi, a rebel also, was educated with easy access to western thought, writing in one poem, “A quail has seized God by the neck// With its black bill, because there is no/ God greater than a quail./ (Peter, Christ, Judas: a quail.)” Takahashi sees God in all phenomena and “All the phenomena in the universe: myself.”¹⁸ Though freeing, such an approach is reductive in its formulaic nature, rather than accumulative toward deeper and deeper understanding—the difference perchance between a rolling stone and the snowball effect. Zen and the western ethic have also mixed in some of our greatest American poets, namely Jim Harrison, a follower of Ikkyū and Takahashi both who keeps close the vulgar and addresses the depraved realities of life. An illustrative example comes from his book *After Ikkyū and Other Poems*:

I went to Tucson and it gave
me a headache. I don’t know how.
Everyone’s a cousin in this world.
I drove down a road of enormous houses
that encompass many toilets. Down hallways,
leaping left or right, you can crap at will.
A mile away a dead Mexican child slept
out in the desert on the wrong side of a mattress.¹⁹

A true Zennist in that he believes he is a failed one, Harrison unlike Takahashi and Ikkyū approaches Žižek in acknowledging the vanity of forever being withdrawn from the world; first, he gets a headache, then reaches out with “Everyone’s a cousin in this world,” and finally speaks to the injustice he sees. Feeling in and thinking about the world is important, and Harrison says in another poem there is “no happiness outside consciousness.”²⁰ Of course,

regardless of whether a Zennist is a racist or a humanist, like Harrison, he is perhaps called first to act ethically without reason—to help the child “out in the desert on the wrong side of a mattress.” His own private moral argumentation—*It’s just a Mexican kid and not my own* or “Everyone’s a cousin in this world”—is irrelevant. The point is, however, that Harrison threw himself into the world first and experienced a falling before any attempt at withdrawal.

This brings us to Žižek’s point of the exceptional Zennist. He says his friend Kojin Karatani

found some minority of Buddhists, where they claim, the true Nirvana in the sense of getting over of your false self, it’s not withdrawing into you but it’s precisely to fall fully, that as far as we speak to our self, we are not ready fully to fall. So if you read Buddhism in this way, who knows, maybe something wonderful can happen²¹

Harrison, maybe more so than Ikkyū and Takashi in that the student proves master of his teachers, seems to come closest to fitting this minority. In one poem (partly quoted above), he stops speaking to himself as he addresses the gap within Zen that Žižek illustrates at the beginning, the gap between the detached Japanese soldier of World War II and the naïvely compassionate western Buddhist:

Once and for all there’s no genetic virtue.
Our cherubic baldy flounces around, fresh out of Boulder,
in black robes, Japanese words quick on his tongue.
World War II nearly destroyed my family, so I ask
him to learn Chinese. He understands I’m a fool.
Then over a gallon of wine we agree there’s no language
for such matters, no happiness outside consciousness. Drink.

Unequivocal, Harrison moves in his drive through Zen thought in an attempt not at “cherubic” aloofness but, as a gregarious fool with a gallon of wine, at getting beyond his own self-referential moralizing. “We are more than dying flies in a shithouse, though we are that, too,” Harrison says in explaining his practice of Zen meditation. “[W]e spin webs of deceit out of our big hanging asses, whether with Jesus or the Buddha.// But still practice is accretive.”²² Though he glosses over the divide Žižek stresses between the ethics of west and east, Harrison refreshingly sees possible growth in Zen practice, a way not to maintain distance but to (re)commit to the world after each cumulative fall. The step left, then, as an inheritor of this Zen lineage may be, as I interpret Žižek, to meet Nirvana or satori around the other end and make the practice of meditation the practice of the fall—falling in love, assuming the mistake and going to the end, failing again and failing better. This is not to say that maintaining daily duties and habits like meditation cannot save us from being destroyed by great falls, but even withdrawal is self-consuming, and it is only in the fall that a void is created into which to withdraw, to (re)charge, and perhaps, for a poet, to (re) write poems or jot down a few lines in stride before something again dislocates us, which could be nonetheless poetry itself.

Notes

¹Slavoj Žižek, University of Vermont 16 October 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjhhHpCAXHM> (last accessed 10 April 2013).

²Indeed, even the Japanese poem (*shi* 詩) and warrior (*samurai* 侍) are closely related words, both containing the character for temple (*tera* 寺). In addition, since Japanese society is so homogenous and closely knit, it functions like a very structured family in which one diligently carries out one's duty regardless of one's personal feelings. And the shame for failing in one's duty is greater than in any other society.

³In understanding Žižek's argument, I also rely heavily on the following: Slavoj Žižek, "The Buddhist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism," European Graduate School 10 October 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkTUQYxEUjs> (last accessed 10 April 2013).

⁴Matsuo Bashō, Trans. Cid Corman, *Back Roads to Far Towns: Bashō's Travel Journal* (White Pine Press 2004), p. 39.

⁵Saiokuken Sōchō was a companion of nobles and warlords, a student of the orthodox poetic neoclassicism of the *renga* master Sogi, and a devotee of the iconoclastic Zen prelate Ikkyū. He composed more than 600 verses that together illustrate most of the principal poetic genres of the time: *renga*, *waka*, *chōka*, *wakan*, *renku*, and comic or unorthodox *haikai* verses. The Sōchō poem here I helped to translate for a private project. This is my edited version.

⁶Sōchō, Trans. H. Mack Horton, *The Journal of Sōchō* (Stanford University Press 2002), p. 32.

⁷Shinkichi Takahashi, Trans. Lucien Stryk, *Triumph of the Sparrow: Zen Poems of Shinkichi Takahashi* (Grove Press 1986), p. 153.

⁸Slavoj Žižek, University of Vermont 16 October 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjhhHpCAXHM> (last accessed 10 April 2013).

⁹It is the exception that best [re]embodies the original concept because, as Žižek would say, it fails better at it.

¹⁰Shinkichi Takahashi, quoted in Lucien Stryk interview, *Triumph of the Sparrow* (Grove Press 1986), p. 161.

¹¹Shinkichi Takahashi, Trans. Lucien Stryk, *Triumph of the Sparrow: Zen Poems of Shinkichi Takahashi* (Grove Press 1986), p. 145.

¹²“...what Freud calls the ‘drive’ is not, as it may appear, the Buddhist Wheel of Life, the craving that enslaves us to the world of illusions. The drive, on the contrary, goes on even when the subject has ‘traversed the fantasy’ and broken out of its illusory craving for the (lost) object of desire. And therein lies the difference between Buddhism and psychoanalysis, reduced to its formal minimum: for Buddhism, after Enlightenment (or ‘traversing the fantasy’), the Wheel no longer turns, the subject de-subjectivizes itself and finds peace; for psychoanalysis, on the other hand, *the wheel continues to turn*, and this continued turning-of-the-wheel is the drive (as Lacan put it in the last pages of Seminar XI: after the subject traverses the fantasy, desire is transformed into drive),” Slavoj Žižek, *Less than*

Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism (Verso 2012), p. 131.

¹³Slavoj Žižek, University of Vermont 16 October 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjhhHpCAXHM> (last accessed 10 April 2013).

¹⁴Lucien Stryk, quoted in Stephen Berg, *Crow With No Mouth: Ikkyū 15th Century Zen Master* (Copper Canyon 1989), p. 10.

¹⁵Ikkyū, Trans. Stephen Berg, *Crow With No Mouth: Ikkyū 15th Century Zen Master* (Copper Canyon 1989), p. 21.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁷Shinkichi Takahashi, Trans. Lucien Stryk, *Triumph of the Sparrow: Zen Poems of Shinkichi Takahashi* (Grove Press 1986), p. 50.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁹Jim Harrison, *The Shape of the Journey* (Copper Canyon 1998), p. 367.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 378.

²¹Slavoj Žižek, University of Vermont 16 October 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjhhHpCAXHM> (last accessed 10 April 2013).

²²Jim Harrison, *The Shape of the Journey* (Copper Canyon 1998), p. 361–2.

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Small Thoughts: Writing and Submitting Haiku

BY MICHAEL KRIESEL

I came to haiku after thirty years of writing minimalist nature poems. Those years of writing helped and hurt. In a lot of ways, I knew what I was doing. I just had to remove the I. I had to stop editorializing, to even the smallest degree. I had to abandon cause-and-effect style writing. I had to let the images speak for themselves.

Haiku is what resonates between two images. It's unlike other forms of poetry. Haiku dwells somewhere between the poem and the Zen koan. It's closer to a meditative state than other types of writing. My mental state's different when I'm writing haiku. It's somewhere between the trance of chanting/meditation and the state of mind I occupy while writing "normal" poetry. I'd say there's a connection between writing haiku and meditation. Certainly the latter enhances the former.

I sent what I thought were my first few haiku to *Frogpond*, the Haiku Society of America's quarterly journal. The gods were kind. Not to my poems, which weren't even haiku—but in the editor they found. John Stevenson replied in two weeks. He told me what was wrong with my poems, and kindly encouraged me. Three months of feedback, guidance and encouragement resulted in my first two haiku being accepted by John for the Spring/Summer 2006 *Frogpond*.

empty lockers
the janitor sweeps
a red mitten

empty beer can
crickets
chip away the light

Later, I found another mentoring editor: Charles Trumbull at *Modern Haiku*. What's best, these two aren't anomalies. Everyone I've met through the mail in haiku's tiny universe has been wonderfully supportive and encouraging. It reminds me a lot of my experiences with the members of the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets since joining that organization a few years ago. I have about a dozen keepers to show for a year's worth of tinkering. I maybe threw away a hundred.

When I first began exploring haiku, I consulted Lewis Turco's *The Book of Forms*. It defines haiku as three lines with 5-7-5 syllables—a form most of us learned in grade school. But all that's changed, as I found out when I hit the internet. The agreed-upon form is less rigid these days. Seventeen syllables is no longer required.

R.H. Blyth, a translator of Japanese haiku in the 1950s and 60s, suggested haiku in English should be a stressed form, since English is a stressed language.

Some haiku have two lines. Once in a great while, a haiku has four. There's also a popular form with just one line. Here are a few of mine:

whale of stars swallows me

(*Modern Haiku* Winter/Spring 2007)

gravel loud as frogs one headlight out

(*Wisteria* July 2008)

crows standing in a field I lose again at chess

(*Modern Haiku* Summer 2008)

Besides haiku, there's *senryu*. Haiku relates nature to human nature. *Senryu* deals with human nature. The boundary between the two is sometimes fuzzy. I present two of mine:

door flies open
Miss September
barely hides me

paper plate
floats on a lake
we lived here

(*Seems* #40 Fall 2006)

There's been a renaissance in English-language haiku since the 1960s. The first magazine devoted solely to original haiku in English appeared in 1963 in Platteville, Wisconsin. In 1968 the Haiku Society of America (HSA) was founded. Currently it has 800 members. Today there are dozens of haiku magazines, electronic and print. The internet's the place to find out about haiku. Critique groups and theories and contests abound. Page after page of award-winning poems from the last several years can be yours at the touch of a print button.

Now the bad news. Few academic journals publish haiku. There may be a reason Turco's *Book of Forms* ignores the last four decades of developments in the haiku form. Haiku doesn't lend itself as readily to the MFA mindset of explication/competition. Most haiku writers are middle-aged or older. There's also more of a spiritual element to haiku than you find in many academic journals, where the emphasis is often on language and experimentation.

There's hope in the small press. Since the late 1990s some minimalist-style poets have been trying their hands at short nature poems and the occasional haiku. Most of these writers are in their early thirties. I think as they get a little older, you'll start to see haiku appear more often in the small press.

For now, though, here in America haiku's pretty much a squatter in the basement of the ivory tower. There's some pretty serious segregation going on. If you pick up a haiku journal, you won't see the names of any mainstream poets, or even small press poets, for that matter. Meanwhile, few haikuists ever leave their pond, though there are exceptions. HSA President Pamela Miller Ness's work appears frequently in the small press zine *Lilliput Review*, which specializes in short poems; HSA Vice President Michael Dylan Welch edits *Tundra*, devoted

to the short poem, where Ted Kooser and other major poets have appeared.

Rengay is a recent development in haiku. These six-haiku sequences between two poets or more are super popular, because they're so much fun! The Rengay was invented by Garry Gay about 20 years ago. His two rules: more than one participant, and adherence to a theme. Be warned: Rengay are really hard to get published. Everyone's writing them, and the few haiku journals publishing them only run one or two per issue.

Here's one I wrote, where some of my grandfather's sayings finally came home:

Elegy for Barns

*Quite a world
one half fucks
the other*

sunlight climbs the wall
grandpa's glass of muscatel

*40 years farming
those cows never
took a vacation*

the starter just clicks
after an hour
he gets off the tractor

*But if you say something
then you're the asshole*

it finally snows
dead battery
left on the lawn

ALVIN KRIESEL
MICHAEL KRIESEL

I'd been writing haiku for a few years before I tried my first Rengay. Though interested in the form, I'd yet to find a writing partner. Then while collaborating on some free verse pieces with Cathryn Cofell, the form came to mind and we wrote a couple. Here's one of them:

Eat Me

I swing into you,
a surprise attack of fist.
Skin connecting skin.

first kiss
I chip her tooth

I break you open
for breaking me wide open.
You terrorist.

peeling sunburn
from your back
I eat it

Do you feel me wind through you?
Know me as tapeworm, hunger.

eating even
the seeds
her first orange

CATHRYN COFELL
MICHAEL KRIESEL

Not all the sections in the above two examples are “true” haiku. But so what? Deviation from dogma is how evolution occurs. One haiku editor’s objections to *Elegy for Barns* were that my grandpa’s segments weren’t haiku and that the language was too rough for haiku’s soft-spoken genre. Another editor said the poem came close to making the cut for his magazine. But I’ve grown less concerned with haiku’s rules of the road and more interested in whether I’ve got a good poem. You can learn to write “true” haiku and then move on to use elements from the form to enhance your other verse. Condensation and resonant imagery are the two biggest things haiku added to my other poems. But now I’ve started going back to haiku’s forms themselves, and using them in new-ish ways. And I’m not the only one. Sequences of haiku and haiku-like poems are sometimes being used to tell a story—in this case, one about modern-day vampires, by Wisconsin poet Wendy Vardaman:

Suburban Vampires

1.
Unlike the other
mothers, one look’s all she needs
to calm wild children.
2.
The first grade teacher’s
phone call wakes him up: “There’s some-
thing wrong with your son.”
3.
She tries hard to fit
in—never brings friends home—wears

long, bite-hiding sleeves.

4.
Friday night—can't get
a date—Mom lies: "There'll be more
like you at college."

5.
You think you're liberal
until your son confesses:
he's been one for years.

6.
Broken glasses, blind
as bats, he cracks his teeth on
a mannequin's neck.

7.
Camping vacation,
mix business with pleasure,
mentor mosquitoes.

And here's an example I wrote that has a more pronounced story arc:

Zombie Summer

fingers poke
through melting snow
purple tulips

scarecrow wanders
in the corn
zombie crows don't fly

soldiers shoot
the moaning wind
on CNN

zombie summer
everyone wears
an orange hat

party upstairs
dead girl dances
in the basement

trick-or-treaters
tell real zombies
by the smell

Lincoln's statue
students chant
zombie rights!

Christmas sale
white ashes
land on shoppers

“Suburban Vampires” and “Zombie Summer” appeared respectively in a pair of Popcorn Press anthologies: *Vampyr Verse* (2009) and *The Hungry Dead* (2010). The poems also illustrate another new trend in haiku: genres. Science fiction haiku is everywhere. Another new form is *vaiku* (vampire haiku). And there are more. Are these poems “true” haiku? Maybe not. And maybe that’s a good thing. How’s that saying go? Don’t let your dogma eat your karma?

Some of the info in this essay came from *Haiku: A Poet’s Guide*, by Lee Gurga, 2003. Lincoln, Illinois: Modern Haiku Press, 2003. Foreword by Charles Trumbull. \$23.00 postpaid in the United States from Modern Haiku Press, Box 68, Lincoln, IL 62656. Buy this book before you start. It’s readable, enjoyable, full of great examples.

The Haiku Society of America. Annual dues \$35. Membership in the HSA includes a year’s subscription to the Society’s journal, *Frogpond*. In addition, members receive a quarterly newsletter. Membership application available at: has-haiku.org/join.htm.

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Sample copy \$14 (Make checks payable to HSA)

Modern Haiku, Editor: Paul Miller POB 930 Portsmouth, RI 02871-0930
Sample copy \$15 (Make payable to Modern Haiku)

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✂ Some Notes on the Art of Uncovering the Art of the Prose Poem, or Confessions of a Prose Poetry Writer

BY CX DILLHUNT

My dear friend, I send you this little work of which one couldn't say, without injustice, it has neither tail nor head, since all of it is, on the contrary is at once head and tail, alternatively and reciprocally. Consider, I ask you, what an admirable convenience this offers us all, you, me and the reader. We can "cut" whatever we like, I my reveries, you the manuscript, and the reader his reading; because I do not hang the latter's restive will on the interminable thread of a superfluous plot.—Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen: Little Poems in Prose*, Dedication to Arsene Houssaye, 1862

I want to tell you what a prose poem is. I have several reasons, but perhaps it won't lead to as clear a definition as you'd hoped for. It's easy to say, "Oh, that's the nature of the beast." But, first, here are my reasons: I'm writing this because I've been told that I write prose poems and I believe that I write prose poems.

So, when this all came to the attention of the editors of *Verse Wisconsin*, I said, "Sure, I can write an essay about prose poetry." Well, I must tell you, I have been out hunting, looking for them in the woods and works of others and studying every definition of "prose poem" I could find in the English fields.

I have shelves in my home library dedicated to prose poetry—anthologies, essays, collections by the best, most well-known prose poets—from Charles Baudelaire to Charles Simic, from Whitman to Wilde to William Carlos Williams, from France to the frenetic Russell Edson and the fanciful Louis Jenkins.

You know, I can't really tell when James Tate is in *prose story* (my term) or *prose poetry* mode, nor do I think the National Book Award (*Worshipful Company of Fletcher*, 1995) or the Pulitzer Prize (*Selected Poems*, 1991) committees have worried as much about it as I have.

When Charles Simic won the Pulitzer Prize for his (prose poetry) collection, *The World Doesn't End*, some argued that it was settled once and for all, that it was decided that prose poetry is poetry. But not all listened and not all that did agreed. Anyway, I think the best definition of prose poetry I've come upon is one of Charles Simic's from his essay "The Poetry Village Idiots" (*Verse*, 1996):

Writing a prose poem is a bit like trying to catch a fly in a dark room. The fly probably isn't even there, the fly is inside your head; still, you keep tripping over and bumping into things while in hot pursuit. The prose poem is a burst of language following a collision with a large piece of furniture.

The point being, I think, is that it is a process, this prose poem beast; it is something a writer does, it's not so much a goal or a finished anything as an ongoing action, an animal in motion, "a burst of language." As a prose poetry writer, I must confess that I don't really know what a prose poem is, but I think I know what Simic is talking about.

Let me try to explain in my own words. I'll start with nine things I think I've figured out about prose poetry so far:

1. Don't overthink it.
2. If you don't know what it is, it's not a prose poem.
3. If you set out to write one, you won't get there, it's not like writing a sonnet or a haiku.
4. Like most things in life, shape can be misleading.
5. Contrary to what you may have heard or thought you saw, it's still about the line.
6. You can't want to write a prose poem, it's got to want to write you or at least with you.
7. A prose poem begins, ends in one fell swoop—pull out all the stops, write like crazy.
8. If it walks like a prose poem and talks like a prose poem, it still could be a duck.
9. One rule never changes: write, your life does depend on it, there is nothing else.

From the Mallarme-Rimbaud-Lautremont trinity crossing the oceans to the Stein-Ashbery connections in the US, to all the so-called prose poets in between, all I have to say is, I'm a poet, I'm a story teller. Call it, call me what you want.

It's said that everyone has one good story, so tell it. If it's a prose poem it'll let you know. As you've already learned, if it's a prose poem, it's not a piece of furniture; however, I'm thinking, if it is furniture, it could be a large piece of prose poetry.

Let the arguments rage. Let the furniture fly!

I can live with most of Ron Padgett's rather prosaic definition of prose poetry [my complaint added in brackets] in the *Teachers and Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms*, and I admit I use it in my own teaching. Listen, it's a good working definition:

As its name suggests, the prose poem is a cross between prose and poetry. It looks like prose but reads like poetry without rhyme or rhythm. [Well, both r & r show up in mine!] Often it has the imagery, density, and quickness of language associated with poetry. Prose poems tend to be short (from a couple sentences to a couple pages), but there are exceptions that run as long as fifty pages. Sometimes it's hard to distinguish between poetic prose and prose poetry (as for example in the writing of Gertrude Stein).

So, you ask, is prose poetry *prose* or poetry?

A new genre, perhaps? Either way, I disagree with those who say it's poetry because it's got metaphor and something some call "heightened language." It seems the argument would be just as strong to claim such a beast as good prose. For example, my five-year-old niece once called me her favorite *boy-girl*, and my friends call me a prose-poet. If my niece were a nephew and I were a woman, would she/he call me a *girl-boy*? I know I'm one or the other. Also, I'm a poet, so, I'm wondering if I actually write *poetry-prose—a poet-proser*, so to speak.

How about you?

All I can say is, once all the arguments are out of your system, get back to work; write, and write some more, and ignore the gender and genre police. Don't stop. And don't look out for furniture, no matter what room you're in!



How to Write a Prose Poem

When you can't sleep wake wake up this poem make it recite itself over over until it goes goes to sleep rocking you now back now forth now somehow waiting for one more breath before going under singing of syllables smash smashing into consonants constantly tapping sapping what's left of your memory of not sleeping here not drowning there just in time for all these old vowels buried in the bowels of the line floating gloating over this space time continuum in which even this poem will not have even one clue to whom it began or if when it began ending or who is awake who is not asleep and begins comparing silence to air to this sleep to poetry while above all looks under the bed finds just dust says stay stay there there for this while.



How to Write a Prose Poem

When you can't sleep wake
 wake up this poem make
 make it recite itself over
 over over until it goes goes
 to sleep rocking you now
 back now forth somehow
 waiting for one more breath
 before going under singing
 of syllables smash smashing
 into consonants constantly
 tapping sapping what's left
 of your memory of not
 sleeping here not drowning
 there just in time for all

these old vowels buried
 in the bowels of the line

floating gloating over this
space time continuum in
which even this poem will
not have even one clue to
whom it began or if when
it began ending or who is
awake who is not asleep
begins comparing silence
to air this sleep to poetry
above all looks under the
bed finds dust says stay
there there for this while



This is Not a Prose Poem

This is not a prose poem. This is not a lyric poem. This is not an essay. This is not a letter. This is not an airplane. This is not the sky.

This is not the tree next to the house. This is not the sidewalk or the driveway, the curb the gutter, and this is not the road. This is not anything leading to or from or anything anywhere near your house or my house or any house. This is not what I think it is. And certainly I can tell you that this is not what you think it is.

This is not written by the poet. This is not the poet. The poet does not know who writes this. If this is a poem the poet doesn't know it. If this is not a prose poem it ends wondering what it is. This doesn't care what it is or what it has been told.

This is not the end.

This line does not exist.

This line is not part of what you were just reading.

This is not a prose poem.

This is the last line of this.

from *Things I've Never Told Anyone*, Parallel Press, 2007, CX Dillhunt

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✂ Tradition & the Individual Sonnet, or *Listen! Iambic Verse Has Variation*

BY WENDY VARDAMAN

[The poet] is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.
—T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”

Shut up. Shut up, shut up, shut up. Okay? —Marilyn L. Taylor, “The Seven Very Liberal Arts: A Crown of Sonnets”

Part I

I wrote my first clumsy sonnet more than fifteen years ago after rereading T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” That essay broke open a creative channel for me and gave me license to stop worrying about “originality”—a relief after a graduate education in postmodernism, theory, and contemporary memoir. Sonnets in particular became a lifeline for my writing as an at-home parent of three small children. After a little practice, I could hole up for an hour or so and crank out a first draft. Once when my husband was out of the country and out of contact, I set myself the task (inspired by John Berryman) of writing 77 poems in 2 weeks. My sonnets were not about an extramarital affair but, instead, what consumed me: children, chores, the chats I’d have had with my husband were he home. Only three of those poems have ever been published, but they kept me sane and gave me something to think about besides the kids, even though, ironically, ostensibly, I was writing about them. Since getting hooked on the sonnet, I’ve written seven different all-sonnet manuscripts, all unpublished. (Out of the hundreds, about seventy of the individual poems have appeared in various journals and anthologies.)

The wheels I reinvented during the early years, having read broadly in English and American poetry, but knowing very little about contemporary formal poetry or much about the possibilities of prosody (the study of meter and rhyme), could have outfitted a pioneer’s coast-to-coast caravan. What I learned from that experience can be collapsed into two obvious, though hardly simple or easy, pieces of advice: 1) read contemporary writers of form and 2) read historically so that you understand both the tradition and the innovation that is already possible within it—what is, in T. S. Eliot’s eloquent statement, *already living*.

Fortunately, there are poets among us who live both in the present, as well as in the present moment of the past, and the rest of this essay outlines some of the marvelous metrical variation that occurs in a few memorable contemporary sonnets. Although it can be a fine line, for the sake of brevity, I look only at variation that takes place in the context of regularly metered, iambic pentameter sonnets, as opposed to variation that occurs either in the context of irregular meter (e.g., William Carlos Williams’s “variable feet” or Gerard Manley Hopkins’ and Robert Bridges’ “sprung rhythm”), or in the context of boundary-stretching,

is-it-really-a-sonnet? sonnets, or in hybrid sonnets that include regular lines mixed with irregular ones; that's a fascinating topic, too, and critical to my own poetry, but it's a different essay for another time.

For the purpose of this discussion, you need to know that a traditional sonnet usually has 14 iambic pentameter lines; these lines are typically divided into 8 and 6 (the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet), or 4, 4, 4 & 2 (the English or Shakespearean sonnet). The rhyming patterns differ; between that and the different architecture created by 2 longer or 4 rather whirlwind parts with their potentially thudding final couplet, the kind of poem you will or can write within each form differs surprisingly. You'll know that's true if you've written a few dozen sonnets that include the two types (and their variations). But it's the sonnet's "iambic pentameter" rhythm that I'm primarily interested in here, and, to some extent, how rhythm and rhyme can work together or be in tension with each other in the contemporary sonnet. For that, you just need to know that iambic pentameter means a five-foot line of poetry, where each usually two-syllable "foot" has a "duh-DUM" beat. When critics "scan" lines of poetry to determine their rhythm, they typically use these three marks (or similar ones): "˘" (for an unaccented syllable), "/" (for an accent), and "|" to indicate the end of a foot. (More complicated systems of marking and weighing accents exist, but we'll stick to the simplest one here.) Imagine that epigraph from Marilyn L. Taylor:

˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /
 Shut up.| Shut up,| shut up,| shut up.|Okay?|

Perfect iambic pentameter, right? (And one of my favorite lines of iambic pentameter in contemporary poetry.) *But wait.* Don't you sometimes yell at, or at least say forcefully, to your kids or barking dog, SHUT UP? And don't you also, sometimes say angrily or sarcastically, OKAY?

That's a "spondee" in prosody speak. Both syllables have an accent. And what if one of those "shut ups" was murmured under your breath, preparatory to hurling a "SHUT UP" or "OKAY" at the offender? Then it might look like this:

˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ ˘ / /
 Shut up.| Shut up,| shut up,| shut up.| Okay?|

Then "shut up" in the fourth foot is a "pyrrhic"—a foot in which neither syllable is accented. A pyrrhic foot can have the effect of emphasizing what follows even more and often comes after or precedes a spondee. It can also seem lighter and faster than a regular iamb, and certainly than a spondee. Poets have traditionally balanced their use of these two types of variations within a line.

How do you hear Taylor's line in your head? Is it completely regular?

˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /
 Shut up.| Shut up,| shut up,| shut up.| Okay?|

Maybe. What that suggests to me is a character, a persona, who is near hysteria,

at their wit's end and rather obsessively trying to get through to the person they're talking to, perhaps without a lot of hope of doing that. I even picture the character's body rocking rhythmically when she says it. But what if it's like this:

˘ / ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ / / / /
Shut up.| Shut up,| shut up,| shut up.| Okay?|

Or

˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ / / /
Shut up.| Shut up,| shut up,| shut up.| Okay?|

The first to me suggests a character who is talking to someone, not getting their attention, then getting really angry. The second suggests someone who is talking to herself rather quickly and working up the courage to finally blurt out at the end something that's been bottled up, maybe for a long time. The possibilities for scanning this line are surprisingly many, if not unlimited, and each suggests a subtle, or not-so-subtle, difference in the character. How would you scan and read this line out loud? The one kind of rhythmic variation I don't think we can attribute to this line is a trochee, SHÚT up (or Ókay). I just can't hear that in how I imagine a real person saying these words, but maybe you can.

In any case, with the regular iamb (duh DÚM), the three possible variations with two syllables—spondee, pyrrhic, and trochee—are the basic concepts you need to know to begin scanning and understanding the nuances of writing “iambic pentameter” verse. You also need to know that no one, certainly not Shakespeare or Milton, ever wrote every line of every iambic pentameter sonnet in unvaried iambic pentameter. Carefully crafted variation is, in fact, key to the success of their poetry. This is a vast subject about which libraries of books and articles have been written. The most common of their variations is an initial trochee; the least common, a final trochee. And there are other variations they commonly use, too: an extra unstressed syllable at the end of a line (the “feminine” ending); an extra unstressed syllable at the end of a medial iamb, followed by a punctuated pause (the “epic caesura”); a six-foot line or pair of lines (an “alexandrine”); expansion (drawing out the pronunciation of certain words for the sake of meter); elision (contracting words for the sake of meter); and, more occasionally, having fewer than five feet per line. If you want to dig into prosody, you should read a good introduction to the subject, like Paul Fussell's *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*.

We wouldn't understand so much about the variation and the purpose of variation, in metrical verse, however, if the majority of it wasn't regular. If you read metered sonnets by Shakespeare and Milton, you'll see that although the majority of the lines have no variation, a surprising number include variation for a purpose. Here's one example from Shakespeare's Sonnet XXIX to show you what I'm talking about:

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone bewep my outcast state.

Imagine reading that in exactly regular, unvaried iambic pentameter, and do it out loud with some exaggeration, please. Now think about how you might read it to convey its emotional nuance. *Out loud again, please!* How would you scan that opening? Here's how I said it:

/ ˘ ˘ / ˘ / ˘ ˘ / /
 When, in| disgrace| with for|tune and| men's eyes,|
 ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / / /
 I all| alone|beweep| my out|cast state.|

You probably did it differently than I did, but one thing is for sure: if you take this sonnet off your shelf or read it online, even if you know where to expand and contract the words properly based on likely Elizabethan pronunciation, and you try to turn that sonnet into pure iambic pentameter, you'll be saying silly things like feaTUR'D, wishING, hapLY, as well as emphasizing unimportant words. And you'll miss the point entirely: Shakespeare, like many good contemporary poets, used metrical variation both so as not to put the reader to sleep and also to draw attention to the content. A trochee is disruptive: it makes you notice particular words and creates a break (there are numerous trochees in this sonnet, mostly at the beginning of lines). Spondees tend to create heaviness, to slow down a line, and are often made out of two one-syllable words put together in a foot. Pyrrhics create speed and can help emphasize a word or pair of words that follow.

These are some of the most basic tools to create rhythmic effects within a sonnet (or any other metered form or line of verse). Complex interplay among rhythm, sounds, repetition of sounds and words, and diction create even more advanced effects. While formal innovation within the sonnet and among sonnets is certainly possible, I would encourage sonneteers to explore the enormous variation and effects that a deeper knowledge of prosody make available already. These possibilities have fascinated English-language poets for over 500 years—it's the “already living” in our poetry.

Part II

Marilyn L. Taylor is known for her mixture of traditional forms with contemporary, often surprising, and frequently humorous content. Here for instance is “Aunt Eudora's Harlequin Romance” (from Taylor's *Subject to Change*) a loosely rhymed English sonnet whose slant and inexact rhymes (open/elope, reads/words, cheek/neck, hair/clear, flash/breath, hang/legs) operate in tension with the more regular rhythm of the poem up until the resolution of the final couplet:

Aunt Eudora's Harlequin Romance

She turns the bedlamp on. The book falls open
 in her mottled hands, and while she reads
 her mouth begins to quiver, forming words
 like *Breathless. Promises. Elope.*

As she turns the leaves, Eudora's cheek
takes on a bit of bloom. Her frowzy hair
thickens and turns gold, her dim eyes clear,
the wattles vanish from her slender neck.

Her waist, emerging from its ring of flesh,
bends to the side. Breasts that used to hang
like pockets rise and ripen; her long legs
tremble. Her eyes close, she holds her breath—
the steamy pages flutter by, unread,
as lover after lover finds her bed.

Although there are many subtle effects with pyrrhics and an initial one-syllable, accented foot (or “headless” iamb), I'd like to draw your attention to line 4: “like *Breathless. Promises. Elope,*” which has eight, not ten, syllables. And where do the stresses fall?

˘ / ˘ / ˘˘ ˘ /
like *Breathless. Promises. Elope.*

(Or maybe ÉLÓPE, if we imagine Aunt Eudora lingering over that word.) And look at the punctuation—a full-stopped pause in three places, turning the feet into something like this:

˘ / ˘ / ˘˘ / /
like *Breathless.* | *Promises.* | *Elope.* |

with two epic caesuras in the line that really force you, whether you read out loud or in your own head, to pause while Aunt Eudora hijacks your inner ear and you imagine what it's like to be her. And the two “missing” feet? (For this line really has three, not four, feet.) They're the pauses that Aunt Eudora makes as she regroupes from the heat of her passion after the words *Breathless.* and *Promises.*

Now look at the end of the poem:

˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /
Her waist, | emerg| es, firm| her slend| er neck|
/ ˘ / / / / ˘ / /
bends to | the side. | Breasts| that tend| to hang|
/ / / / / / / /
like pock| ets rise| and rip| en; her| long legs|
/ / / / / / / /
tremble. | Her eyes| close, | she holds| her breath. |

The second and fourth lines of the quatrain both have nine syllables, rather than ten, and the natural place to mark as the single-syllable foot is in each case the middle, rather than the initial one. In the case of “Breasts” that happens right after a pause, and “close” occurs right before one; we can hear just the echo there of Aunt Eudora's former excitement, before she settles back into

sleep and old age, her passion spent. Note that both those lines also begin with an initial trochee that marks the continued rhythmic disruption, which itself marks Aunt Eudora's continued excitement and change. I read "long legs" as a spondee rather than an iamb because of the two words' similar sounds: the alliterative l- and the final g-, which I imagine the poet (and Aunt Eudora) lingering over for emphasis. The final couplet, on the other hand, is completely regular rhythmically and heightens the irregularity, including the pyrrhics and spondees, that came before. It all works, coupled with the delicate and subtle rhyme scheme, to characterize Aunt Eudora beautifully. Taylor makes her both humorous and sympathetic. Think what a different and more unrelieved comic effect the metrical regularity would have had paired with an exact set of rhymes.

Ronald Wallace tends to employ more variation at the macro level than Taylor, writing some sonnets in iambic pentameter, some not. "In Van Diemen's Land" (from *For A Limited Time Only*) is a traditional sonnet with a combination of English and Italian rhyme schemes whose first two quatrains employ slant rhyme to look like an octet:

In Van Diemen's Land

And when they hit the wallaby, the thud
 reverberated through his hands as if
 they'd blown a tire. But then he saw the blood
 splay out behind the car, and then the whiff
 of death leap up on its hind legs and kick
 him, hard, his wife's intake of breath, *Oh God*,
 transforming the mundane into the exotic.
Oh God, Oh God, Oh God, Oh God, Oh God.

They stopped—what had they done?—surveyed the damage,
 the carcass smeared so far along the road
 no passerby would ever guess its lineage,
 though history, settling in with its old load,
 try and convict them, and stars begin to spark
 the whites of their eyes in the aboriginal dark.

In terms of metrical variation, Wallace deftly uses pyrrhics and spondees to pace the poem. Note the lines in which this variation first, and appropriately, enters the poem:

/ / ~ / ~ / ~ ~ ~ /
 splay out| behind| the car| and then| the whiff|
 / / / / ~ / / / /
 of death| leap up| on its| hind legs| and kick
 / / ~ / ~ / ~ / /
 him, hard,| his wife's| intake| of breath| *Oh God*,

So we have these spondees: "splay out," "leap up," "hind legs," "him, hard," and depending on how you read that first "Oh God," a fifth. It's important to watch for clues in diction, repeated sounds, and the overall significance of words, as

well as punctuation and enjambment, when scanning. Note how diction and sound contribute to the effect and also help suggest where to place stress: the predominance of one-syllable, Anglo-Saxon words, and the repetition of sounds, like p- (in *splay, leap, up*); mostly final d- (in *behind, death, hind, hard, God*); k- (*car, kick, intake*); and h- (*behind, death, hind, him, hard, breath*). All of these choices work toward conveying powerfully and rhythmically the disruption that has just occurred, that terrible sensation, visceral in this poem, of traveling down a road, all well, and then *boom*—the kick of the kangaroo—life happens. What do you do with that “Oh God” line that comes next? It’s much like Taylor’s “Shut up,” but the variation is even wider, as individual “Oh Gods” could be scanned as an iambic Oh GOD, a trochaic OH God, a pyrrhic Oh God, or a spondaic OH GOD. Depending oh how you imagine her, you might hear a rhythmic sobbing in iambic pentameter

˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /
Oh God, | Oh God, | Oh God, | Oh God, | Oh God.

or, the wild swings characteristic of hysteria:

/ / ˘ / ˘ ˘ ˘ / / /
OH GOD, | Oh GOD, | Oh God, | Oh GOD, | OH GOD.

The variations are many and subtle. Mathematically, there are potentially 1024 individually distinct ways to scan this line—not infinite, obviously, not equally good or distinct from one another, and not equally performable, but still a huge and varied number poetically and dramatically. The different possibilities allow us to envision the character as real and nuanced, experiencing a variety of ways she might act and feel at this moment.

Also notable in the poem is the first line immediately following the turn—and quite a turn it is:

˘ / / / / / ˘ / ˘ / ˘
They stopped—|what had| they done?—|surveyed| the damage|

You could read “what had they done?” as iambic, but why would you? Picture yourself in the situation: “WHAT HAD THEY DONE?” Although I could also imagine it being read, “WHAT had| they DONE?|,” iambic definitely doesn’t cut it.

Although his first book, *Up Jump the Boogie*, does not contain a large number of traditional formal poems, John Murillo clearly knows his way around form. His crown of seven linked sonnets, “Renegades of Funk,” in contrast to the sonnet experiments of many younger poets, sticks incredibly close rhythmically to traditional iambic pentameter. But in contrast to less experienced sonneteers, the variation that he uses works to a clear and clever, though subtle, purpose. Scan the opening poem for rhythmic variation:

I.

When we were twelve, we taught ourselves to fly,
To tuck the sky beneath our feet, to spin
The world on fingertips. To pirouette
On elbows, heads, and backs, to run away
While standing still. So when Miss Jefferson—
Her eyebrows shaved then painted black, the spot
Of lipstick on her one good tooth—would praise
The genius Newton, I knew then to keep
Her close, to trust her like a chicken hawk
At Colonel Sanders'. *I refute your laws,
Oppressor! I'm the truth you cannot stop!*
Busting headspins on her desk, a moonwalk
Out the door. Referred to Mr. Brown's
Detention. *All them try'na keep us down!*

Where and why does variation occur?

Take a look:

˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /
Oppres| sor! I'm| the truth| you can| not stop!
/ / / / / /
Busting| headspins| on her| desk a| moon walk|
/ / / / / /
Out| the door.| Referred| to M[is][te]r Brown's|

After eleven lines with no variation, there it suddenly, powerfully appears. And that line, or pair of lines, is a brilliant example of rhythmic variation married to meaning: it's written in trochaic pentameter, but you almost don't even notice because of the headless iamb "OUT" that begins the next line. We could go back and scan "Oppressor! I'm the truth you cannot stop!" a little differently in this light, too:

˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /
Oppressor!| I'm the| truth you| cannot| stop!

That variation acknowledges the epic caesura that occurs after "Oppressor!" and makes "stop!" a single-syllable foot that signals what's to come, that orders the reader to pay attention. We could also alternately locate the single-syllable foot in "Out the door. Referred to Mr. Brown's" in different places: "door," or "Brown's," instead of "Out," scanning, for example:

/ ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /
Out the| door. Re|ferred to| M[iste]r| Brown's|

or

/ ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /
Out the| door.| Referred| to M[is] te|r Brown's|

Each of these possibilities has arguments for and against, and maybe it's the variability itself that is the point. If you know that rap lyrics often scan as trochaic, and that there is always a "flow" of talk riding over and around—sometimes with, sometimes against—the beat of the music, it seems to me that Murillo is skillfully playing the rhythms off each other, causing the poetry itself to moonwalk through these lines, reversing course from iambic to trochaic and back again, or appearing iambic when it is really trochaic, accomplishing rhythmically what "busting headspins" do in Miss Jefferson's classroom. The entire poem becomes a marvelous example of signifying in and through formal verse, or remixing it, a major theme of the crown, which is also self-consciously about prosody and canon: "We studied master poets—Kane, not Keats;/ Rakim, not Rilke. 'Raw,' 'I Ain't No Joke,'/ Our Nightingales and Orpheus. And few/ there were among us couldn't ride a beat/ in strict tetrameter. Impromptu odes/ And elegies—instead of slanting rhymes/ *We ganster leaned them*" (V).

The possibilities for new effects within traditional sonnets are hardly exhausted or even exhaustible: rhythmic variation within the context of regularity could, it seems to me, extend as far as changes in English, as variation in diction and style, and as the individual ear, knowledge, and skill of a good poet, and we haven't even begun to explore the variation possible within the context of irregular rhythms, or non-traditional sonnets, or hybrid poems.

Listen for variation when you read verse: think about its use and meaning for your own work.

More Reading

(not exhaustive, just suggestions of where to begin)

Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip-Hop*. Basic Civitas Books, 2009.

Philip Dacey and David Jauss, *Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry In Traditional Form*. Longman, 1997.

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Lewis Turco, *The New Book of Forms*. UPNE (3rd Edition), 2000.

I gratefully acknowledge the influence of Richard DiPrima, Founder of The Young Shakespeare Players, Madison, Wisconsin, and author of *The Actor's (and Intelligent Reader's) Guide to the Language of Shakespeare* (2010) on my understanding of prosody, especially the relationship of verse as it is written for performance.

✂ On a Double Reverse Sonnet

BY BRUCE TAYLOR

When I began writing poetry I did so in so-called “free verse,” believing as did many young writers that the sonnet is where old poets go to die, a belief that at its essence I may still hold but with many modifications and for completely different reasons. I then assumed, as did many others, that the consternations of my times, never mind my completely unique adolescent slings and arrows, could not and would not fit into strictures of rhythm and rhyme. What I really meant, I know now, was that I wasn’t skilled enough yet at the craft.

As I have aged both as a person and as a writer, I find that about half of what I do remains free verse and about half struggles itself into “fixed forms.” I now have enough “formal” poems to begin to send out a new book of poetry consisting of all forms.

When I was in graduate school—this either really happened or as with many stories I tell, I have told it so often I believe it is true—a poet named Gary Ligi (Guido, where are you now) wrote a double reverse sonnet. This was a class led by my mentor and savior, Miller Williams, who I am not alone in believing is the most underappreciated formalist of our time. Besides being a double reverse sonnet, as if that wasn’t enough, the poem was also an acrostic and when read down the page the first letter of each line spelled out “Miller Williams is so full of shit.”

It was the only time in all my years, in many many workshops, that I ever saw a class rise as one to give the poet a standing ovation, led, of course, by Miller himself. It was, what are the odds, however, not a very good poem.

I used to teach a poetry workshop at UW–Eau Claire in writing in forms, and I always announced that when writers even finish a poem in a difficult form, they should be honored. But then I drop the other shoe: it is not enough to write a sonnet, for instance, even though the act separates you from the mass of humanity who haven’t, never mind the even larger mass not even interested in attempting to do so—it also has to be a “good” poem, whatever that means and to whom.

A “double reverse sonnet” as a label has a nice ring to it, sounds indeed like a dive you’d see in an Olympic competition, one you would assume with a high degree of difficulty (just imagine if you could throw in a half twist in the full pike position). The scoring, and somebody is always keeping score, whether you want them to or not, rewards such a brave attempt with points enough that completing the difficult, at all, is sometimes worth more than doing the easy, perfectly.

Much of the joy in a well done formal poem, for both the writer and reader, comes from the game of it, the rabbit out of the hat, not from up the sleeve, our natural fascination with something hard done so well it looks easy.

It was all that, and the free beer for “the winner” involved, that led a group of us who used to congregate at the Joynt in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to do things like each bring one week six words, one each on a single slip of paper, throw them in a hat and each of us draw out the six words we would have to use by the next week to write a sestina. The free beer also led the more cruel among us to select words unlikely to be easily managed in that damnable form. *Defenestration*, as I remember, gave all the trouble you would expect while trichinosis, somewhat less.

A less devious challenge involved picking a form, common ones only, and a title or starter line and everyone having at it. It got loud there often, often because of us, memories fuzzed, beer was drunk, miscommunications occurred. An edict involving a sestina using propositions resulted in the best attempt being awarded to one using prepositions. Oddness was encouraged, write something in a “three-lined couplet,” which led to my own invention, or at least my own label, that I called “the stuttered couplet,” and which I’ve used more than once. A poem without the letter “e,” a poem shaped in a perfect rectangle, with only one-syllable words, or three, or five.

All of this is game, of course, and challenge but beyond that makes an essential point about form. It’s only valuable if you constantly push back at it, mess with it, stretch it to just before the breaking point. It is a joy to write and read the perfect sonnet, if there is one. By that I mean one that conforms exactly to the prescription, whichever prescription that is. If everyone only followed the rules existing at the moment, there would be none by Shakespeare or Moore, Cummings or Lowell, the list goes on and on (see *Sonnet Central* for just one, albeit extensive list).

I am as proud, even more tickled I must confess, of my own “Lite” sestina (synonyms are allowed), my “envoi-less” sestina (I couldn’t think of one), my use of collapsing rhyme (first and last line, second and second to last, finishing with a couplet) as I am of any of their more mannerly kin.

Someone said: “Form exists to keep the poet from saying everything.” As with any quote whose author I can’t remember I attribute it to Paul Valery. With apologies to Robert Frost, who famously said writing free verse was like “playing tennis with the net down.” A different game indeed, but still one with rules, and what fun to imagine what they could be: points for kicking the ball, hitting it with your head, hitting your opponent, crossing it with dodge-ball—and unimaginable without some sort of form. “Rhythm,” I think I have this one right, Ezra Pound observed, “in poetry is cut into time, as design in art is cut into space.” Dizzy Gillespie claimed that music is ok but what he was really interested in was “noise.”

Form, in all its manifestations, is inherent to language itself and to our world which speaks it everywhere. In English, for instance, my first world, there are somewhat obvious reasons for the following:

The iamb as our basic rhythm. Scan that; it is the beat our syntax most usually falls naturally into.

The sonnet—tricky and conflicted, full of antithesis, exception, second thoughts and the most tentative conclusions—as a receptacle for what would otherwise be mere blathering, our thoughts and feelings about love and God.

Whereas it is the delicate villanelle, that round, in which the two great lines burrow themselves into the reader and remain like a song.

The most basic form of so much poetry, the ode, is said to have originated in its three parts of strophe, antistrophe (antithesis) and epode (synthesis) in the stage movements of the Greek chorus.

So is it form as game, as a made thing, or form as the most intimate expression of our ways in the world? As with most everything else, a bit of both, and most likely lots of other stuff.

So back to the tavern where one evening in what was a more private challenge, just two people actually, the phrase “Love’s Bluff” presented itself as the title for next week. So one poet showed up with a series of smart quatrains that seemed to use “bluff” as something we might do in poker rather than a scenic overlook and ended with the following:

Believing in married love, like true
rhyme, you know, is for kids and amateurs.
Still you want to, you really do.

The other poet, me, took the term more geographically and wrote not one but two sonnets, trying to show off of course, but also something I often do when working with a preexisting subject, something I actually rarely do, and didn’t know which one I liked best.

I wrote two sonnets also, I am remembering now, because I didn’t know which couplet I liked better

this high where they used to come together
when all they ever wanted was each other.

Or

When every day dawned its perfect weather
when things were good and getting better.

So I chose one and used the other, I thought to begin another sonnet. However the couplet nature of the lines constrained me and nearly sent me sulking away, until I thought of turning the second sonnet upside down, much easier than you first might imagine. Then when I was able to end the second poem with the same line I used to start the other, I’ll admit I gave myself an “atta boy.”

So a “Double Reverse Sonnet,” a term that does not Google, and above and beyond when the first letter of each line is chosen acrostic- like, it spells out, absolutely nothing at all—TADA!!!



Love's Bluff

For Miller Williams

A husband is what is left of a lover,
after the nerve has been extracted.

— Helen Rowland (1875–1950), *A Guide to Men*, (1922)

1.

She doesn't kiss him like she used to
anymore, what's worse, he'll bet,
he knows why. There's no excuse to,
there's hardly even any reason left.

They don't dance, they never did he realizes
now not nearly enough, and can't
remember when they stopped, or why,
or what they thought it might have meant.

The city below him sighs itself to sleep
the stars above appear to disappear,
each house a heart if not a heartbeat,
no moment the edge it seems from here

this high where they used to come together
when all they ever wanted was each other.

2.

When every day dawned its perfect weather
when things were good and getting better

she called him "Darling," he called her "Dear"
they'd never lie they swore they'd never cheat
so they kept each other close, but not near,
one of them would die if the other would leave.

Then the kids, the house, he was content
got fat and happy, he won't apologize
if that's a sin he refuses to repent;
she didn't either, he saw it in her eyes.

All is memory now, little but regret
with nothing to do but what he chooses to.
How does he go on when he can't forget
she doesn't kiss him like she used to.

☞ Interview with Philip Dacey

BY KARLA HUSTON

The first time I “met” Philip Dacey was through a jacket blurb he’d written for another author, someone I knew. When I was given a copy of his *The Deathbed Playboy*, I thought, yes, I’d like to see what his writing is about. Over several years, I acquired some nine or ten of his books. Yet I met his poems in a more personal manner when I chose to review *The Mystery of Max Schmidt: Poems on the Life and Work of Thomas Eakins*, where I found pleasure in Dacey’s skill as a writer as well as the depth of his research and his sense of wonder (and humor) as he explored the world of Thomas Eakins, noted Philadelphia artist and friend of Walt Whitman.

Not a writer in forms myself, I am always intrigued by those who are, and even more so by those who can write in form so well that the reader is unaware she’s reading a sonnet or blank verse. Dacey is such a writer. He makes it seem so easy. Easy or not, a Dacey poem is not stiff and Victorian. There is no hoity-toity pretension there.

Others agree. In a review of *The New York Postcard Sonnets*, Larry O. Dean says, “Another key to Dacey’s success is his humility. He may well be keenly attuned, open and receptive to his urban environment, but he’s no poseur, assuming East Village hipster patois, or the cocky posture of a borough lifer.”

Dacey’s writing has been described as “a one-man symphony” by David Smith. Stephen Dunn says, “Dacey plays, as Frost would have it, for mortal stakes.” And “... he demonstrates how form can harness the inchoate, discipline the disparate.” Albert Goldbarth says, “Phil Dacey has been working profitably and pleasurefully for years toward blending literary and artistic biography with lush lyricism, and toward blending the feel of loose, open possibility with the infrastructure of traditional forms.”

Philip Dacey is the author of eleven full-length books of poems, the latest being *The Mosquito Operas: New and Selected Poems*, (Rain Mountain Press, 2010), *Vertebrae Rosaries: 50 Sonnets* (Red Dragonfly Press, 2009) and *The New York Postcard Sonnets: A Midwesterner Moves to Manhattan* (Rain Mountain Press, 2007), as well as numerous chapbooks.

Born in St. Louis, Dacey has received many awards, including three Pushcart Prizes, a Discovery Award from the New York YM-YWHA’s Poetry Center, prizes from numerous magazines (*The Ledge*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Yankee*, *Free Lunch*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Nebraska Review*, and others), and various fellowships (among them a Fulbright to Yugoslavia, a Woodrow Wilson to Stanford, and two in creative writing from the National Endowment for the Arts). He moved in 2004 from Minnesota, where he taught for years at the state university in Marshall, to Manhattan’s Upper West Side.

Dacey doesn’t consider himself “a ‘formalist’ any more than a carpenter who sometimes uses a hammer calls himself a ‘hammerist.’” Yet, he has written

hundreds of poems in “form” and even his free verse owes its music to traditional rhythms.

Karla Huston: Welcome to this email interview. I appreciate your taking the time to talk to me.

Philip Dacey: I appreciate your interest in and attention to my work. I don't know how helpful I can be, but I'll try. I like Randall Jarrell's remark, when asked to talk about his work: “Don't ask a pig about bacon.”

KH: Neruda says in his poem “Poetry”: “And it was at that age ... Poetry arrived/ in search of me.” How did you come to poetry? Was poetry, like Neruda, searching for you?

PD: I began writing poetry at a time of personal and professional drift and uncertainty or worse, had just dropped out of grad school at Stanford, in my twenties, deciding to pick up a Master's there instead of continuing in the PhD program. My Master's thesis was on James Dickey; so I was not totally innocent about poetry but also had no intention of pursuing the craft, didn't know what I was going to do except maybe find a teaching job with that Master's and write the Great American Novel. But I remember the very moment when I began writing a poem, which turned into my first poetry publication, in the *Beloit Poetry Journal*. I had a menial job in the Stanford library and was looking at a fascinating medieval print when I had the urge to describe it, in verse, in lines arranged like some of Dickey's, in, say, “The Heaven of Animals.” Thus did my decades as a scribbler of lines begin. In my mythologizing of that moment, I imagine the Angel of Poetry tapping me on the shoulder and saying, “Hey, Phil, you're one seriously lost soul. Pick up a pen and write what I tell you. I've come here to save you.” In short, I'm grateful to poetry for giving me the life I've had, and if I've worked hard at it over the years, it's out of that gratitude, out of a wish to serve the art. Although my self-deprecating joke (but not entirely a joke) is that if I really cared about poetry, I'd quit writing it and just spend the rest of my life reading the poetry of the dead greats, who never have enough readers.

KH: Tell me more about that early interest in fiction and its relationship to your poetry.

PD: The angel knew me better than I knew myself, as my ability as a fiction writer was always woefully lacking despite the fact that my first professional (i.e., for money) publication was a short story. I eventually made a vow to stop writing prose fiction, a good move because all of my narrative impulse and interest in characters thereafter went into my poems, many of which first-person ones are fictions, though they don't seem to be. For example, after my “Deathbed Playboy” appeared in *The Hudson Review*, a friend of mine, the poet Dabney Stuart, surprised me by sending his condolences on my father's death. He'd read the poem and had no question about its personal nature; I was happy to inform him that my father was a fit 85 years old, and the poem was a complete invention. So “fiction” means prose to most people, but verse can be equally a fiction.

KH: You said earlier that the “dead greats” could never have enough readers. Many

would agree that few writers today read their classical ancestors, and I confess to being woefully guilty of that myself. What's to be gained by reading the dead greats? What is to be learned?

PD: I hope your premise isn't true, that few writers read or acknowledge their dead ancestors, but in any case, by reading them, one can gain, among other things, high standards. Which means we don't overvalue our own work. We judge it against literature that has lasted through decades, even centuries. The work of the giants is the carrot held out before the horse; it keeps us going, but we never reach it, so we're motivated to keep striving. Also to be gained: the sheer pleasure of reading them; they're remembered for good reason. As Auden said, "Many books are undeservedly forgotten, but no books are undeservedly remembered." In addition, there's the sense of continuity bestowed upon the contemporary writer who studies the past, a sense of being part of a long and honorable history; I sometimes speak of "working in the same vineyards where the greats have worked." Our own work may not be for all time, but to be able to work in those vineyards is nevertheless a privilege.

KH: How did you happen to put together *Strong Measures*, your anthology of contemporary American poems in traditional form?

PD: After I received my MFA from the Iowa Workshop in 1970 and began teaching in Minnesota at the state university in Marshall, I realized, before long, that I was feeling a little cheated, as formalist poetry was not fashionable in the late Sixties, and there was actually zero instruction at Iowa in using traditional forms. But I figured that if such forms were good enough for the vast majority of poets, including the great ones who preceded me, they were certainly good enough for me. Who was I to jettison such means? So I decided that my apprenticeship should encompass those means, and in the mid-70s I took my family, wife and two sons, to Spain for a six-month hiatus, during which, besides our holidaying, I set for myself a six-month course of study and practice in traditional forms. So that was the background for *Strong Measures*, but the immediate trigger was a comment made by a friend's question: "Why don't poets ever use rhyme and meter anymore?" Of course I knew the work of current poet after current poet who worked wonderfully in the tradition (Wilbur, Hecht, early Kinnell, Kumin, Starbuck, Van Duyn, etc.), but free verse and the Deep Imagists and the Black Mountain gang and others were the big guns getting the headlines; the formalists were in the shadows, quietly working away. Bly snarled things like, "Sonnets are where old professors go to die." A funny line, but it steered countless young writers away from the challenges and pleasures of traditional verse. (Of course, Bly later changed his tune somewhat and started patting himself on the back for counting syllables or rhyming a word now and then.) So I knew, given my friend's remark, that the folks still using traditional forms needed a platform that would highlight them. Thus began the anthology, which may not have been completed or, if completed, certainly would not have been anywhere nearly as good and successful as it turned out to be if David Jauss, a one-time student of mine, hadn't signed on and agreed to be my co-editor. His help and hard work were invaluable.

KH: Your anthology was published in 1986. It is still mentioned by practitioners of traditional forms and in critical essays and articles as a quintessential text. Are you

surprised by its success and longevity?

PD: Not surprised really when I consider the great input owed to Jauss. (Ode to Jauss?) Folks say they find it user-friendly, given the ease of identifying the forms used or finding examples of forms one might be interested in. By the way, my two sons and I formed a rock 'n' roll poetry trio in the early '90s and named ourselves Strong Measures.

KH: You've dedicated your life to poetry by writing and teaching for 35-plus years (no small feat). Teaching is sometimes the perfect job (if you must have a job and most of us do) as a writer, but being a good teacher requires a load of creativity. As a teacher myself, I wonder how you kept it fresh all those years, "it" being your teaching AND your writing. How did you find that balance?

PD: Starting in the mid-70s, I took many leaves from teaching (mostly unpaid—the trip to Spain took all our savings—though sometimes supported by fellowships/awards/grants). Also in 1989 I began systematically reducing my teaching time (and my salary) from fulltime to $\frac{2}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ until I retired. Those "leaves" kept me fresh as a teacher and let me do my writing. And I agree with Goethe that the only thing that works for a poet is to work. Do you remember Groucho Marx's "You Bet Your Life" and his duck that dropped down each week with the magic word? I always told my students about that and said our magic word for the workshops would be "fecundity." I'm a non-believer in writer's block; if you want to write, get paper and pencil and write down the first thing that comes to mind and follow it from there. World-class lit may not result, but there's never a guarantee of that anyway.

KH: Yes, fecundity—productivity! Ted Kooser said something similar once at a workshop, something to the effect that if you wrote a poem a day for three months, you'd have 90-some poems and maybe only 9 would be good ones. But if you wrote only three poems in three months, what were the chances that any of those would be good?

PD: And no doubt you remember William Stafford's famous remark. He was known for being prolific and, asked about that, said he had "lower standards" than most people. Of course he was both joking and not; he gave himself permission to write anything but simultaneously kept his eye on the prize, a poem that was a credit to him and to the art. He was a daily writer and also wrote particularly well about the writing process. He didn't wait to be inspired. His workaday approach has been an inspiration to and model for many contemporary poets. One has to enjoy the process, and once you know how to engage with it, anything can happen; but if nothing comes of it, you've still had the worthwhile experience of the process, writing for its own sake, engaging with language for the pleasure of doing so. Donald Hall once complained about graduate workshops and the so-called workshop poem, arguing that you shouldn't sit down to write unless you intend to write a great poem, but I'd argue that's a sure way to kill your creativity. The whole notion of play goes out the window. If William Carlos Williams followed Hall's injunction, would we have "The Red Wheelbarrow"?

KH: Can you tell me about why you became a writer of formal verse, a poet who

has certainly dedicated a lot of ink to traditional forms?

PD: Maybe blame the Jesuits, who taught me Latin and Greek and had me reading Virgil and Homer in the original. One picks up a sense of tradition from doing so. But let me be quick to add, as Jauss and I say in our introduction to *Strong Measures*, that formal verse is not superior to free verse. A good free verse poem is better than a bad triolet. The tools don't dictate the quality of the final product.

KH: I've been told by poets who write formal verse that learning to do so, to work within the container of form, within the requirements of rhyme, meter, rhythm will improve their free verse. Is this true and why?

PD: I'd say sure, simply because any kind of serious work with language will have a spillover into one's other writing, but there are plenty of other ways to improve one's free verse, including simply extensive reading and regular, disciplined writing—or call it practice, how to get to Carnegie Hall. Maybe the worst way to teach someone to write a sonnet, though, is to shove one at him or her and say, “Now you write one.” That's like throwing a non-swimmer into the deep end of the pool and shouting, “Swim.” As a teacher, I preferred to break the process into a dozen or so smaller steps, not learning everything at once—so, for example, one step would be writing iambic, nonsense prose paragraphs; another would be having the class hold conversations entirely in iambs; only later would things like the pentameter or rhyme or metrical substitutions or variations be added to the mix one at a time. The students appreciated that step-by-step approach.

KH: Recent Poet Laureate of Wisconsin and someone who also writes in form, Marilyn Taylor says, “A significant feature of the formal poem is that it can provide a vessel, a container, even a ‘capsule’ to fill with material that might be too volatile—too scary, too close to you—to become a poem instead of an emotional cloudburst.”

PD: I'd say yes indeed. It's like handling radioactive material with special gloves. At the same time, one should stress the possibility that the formal means can stimulate the material—help develop it, push the writer forward into territory not imagined or planned—rather than simply containing it or making it safe. Discoveries can be made while working with traditional forms, as the forms act as collaborators with the poets; there's a give and take. The forms are not passive receptacles that we simply pour pre-cooked material into. Formal means can release as much as restrict, and do both at the same time. It's like gravity, a restriction that frees us to dance.

KH: Can you give me an example of how a poem was pushed into a new territory by the form that contained it?

PD: In virtually any poem that uses rhyme or meter (including a simple syllabic meter), something like that has to happen. Sometimes you may not know until you're into a free verse poem that it wants to be more formal, but sometimes you begin a poem knowing right off that you want to apply formal pressure on the material. In either case, you obviously can't know in advance what words you're going to use in what order to accommodate the form, since, for example, we don't think in rhyming stanzas. Therefore the formal requirements lead you (by

the ear, as it were) to discover what both satisfies them but also is consonant with or unpredictably and positively extends the material. In my book *The Deathbed Playboy*, “Eskimo Joe,” about my father, employs Tennyson’s “In Memoriam” stanza, abba iambic tetrameter, as a base from which to operate. I say “base” because the metrical poet can be like a jazz musician, always cognizant of the beat but sometimes playing off it and around it. That would be analogous to off-rhyming. There’s a special pleasure to be had in those slight differences, distances—like glancing blows. The story about my father which explains the title would have been told very differently if I had written it in prose or free verse. Numerous details (his second wife’s perfume, the abandoned dream, the frozen river, the final affirmation, and others) only appeared in the story because of the rhyme scheme. Following a rhyme scheme can lead to bad writing as well as to felicities. The reader is the final judge as to which is present in any rhymed poem.

Eskimo Joe

How can I not remember I
 rubbed noses with my father in
 his lonely bed when I was ten?
 Forty years ago. He’s ninety

as he’s telling me this as if
 it happened yesterday. “Before
 we’d fall asleep. You stayed over
 Fridays. It always made you laugh.”

I don’t forget the little room
 he lived in for a year or so
 after the divorce. Just two
 of us were a crowd. Leave your dream

outside. Was there even a chair?
 And the rented bed was so small
 he’d press himself against the wall
 to give me a place to sleep. To hear

of such touching touches me—here
 at the heartbreak tip of my nose.
 “You know,” he says, “like Eskimos.”
 I see an ice floe and many long years

as someone tries to live on it.
 When Joe married Rose, whose perfume
 meant spring had opened up his room,
 he rubbed his nose deep in her wet

promise, though in this late, dry autumn
 he would stir my memory. What
 I think of is a book about
 beavers I read once and the time

that sociable tribe spent a whole
far northern winter in their tight
domed quarters the wind rushed to bite
through, passing the days in gentle

grooming, low sounds, bodily touch.
The author was fortunate to observe
a particular “expressive
behavior pattern”: at approach,

one creature nuzzled the other’s face.
The air was cold. “Do you remember?”
Now I smell the frozen river.
“Oh, yes,” I tell him. “I do. Yes.”

KH: This is a terrific poem; I see what you mean about the pressure of the rhyme pattern directing the poem in unexpected ways.

Are some forms more popular than others? Are there forms you choose more often than others? You have entire books dedicated to sonnets, like *The New York Postcard Sonnets* or *The Vertebrae Rosaries*, for example.

PD: Blank verse (a term sometimes mistakenly thought to be synonymous with free verse) is, of course, a basic—the go-to—English form, thanks to Shakespeare and others. Unrhymed iambic pentameter has been a workhorse of the poet writing in English for centuries, and I’ve used it countless times. “Difficult Corners” would be an example from *The Deathbed Playboy*. For someone learning the forms, blank verse is a good place to start because iambic pentameter can be employed in other, more complicated forms, like the sonnet. The fact that two of my books in a row featured sonnets was something of an accident—the latter brought together poems from several decades and the former naturally happened to coincide with my stay in Manhattan.

Difficult Corners

You may have seen my brother on TV,
the traffic cop who dances as he works.
Candid Camera had him doing it
to music, a Baryshnikov in blue
stylishly choreographed by Twyla Tharp.

...

So I don’t think sonnets are a special favorite of mine. I’ve a fondness for villanelles, too, and written lots of them—like “Macaroons” in *Deathbed*. I should say that I write and publish far more poems than get into my books and that would be true of my villanelles as well.

Macaroons

I brought four dozen macaroons to school

because Nora in *A Doll's House* loved them so.
How sweet each bite she took against the rule!

Her husband thought she was a child, the fool,
and wouldn't let her eat her fill. His no
was law. She taught him lessons in her school.

...

KH: Are you a purist, expecting sonnets or other forms to march to traditional drums or are you more free with your design à la Gerald Stern's *American Sonnets*, which are 16 to 20 lines long instead of the traditional 14?

PD: I am definitely more of a purist—or more conservative or less nervy—than Stern, though even Stern looks more conservative than Ted Berrigan (my teacher at Iowa) in his *The Sonnets*. But some reviewers have nevertheless chided me for taking some of the liberties I do with the form. My position is that a poem should be judged on not how closely it adheres to a particular form but by the quality of the whole final product. A tennis player who holds the racquet unconventionally is nevertheless judged by his performance on the court.

KH: I'm reminded of Ronald Wallace writing a sonnet-a-day for a year and the essay he wrote to describe it—and the book that resulted: *The Uses of Adversity*. Have you ever been tempted to do something like this? Is there value in it or is it just a personal quest?

PD: The closest I came (not very close) was typing out a well-known poem a day for a year, my first year in New York, one of my projects. A way to get further inside poems I'd been familiar with, but from a new angle, almost as if I were "writing" them. And as I said I did assign myself a long list of forms I wrote in while in Spain for those six months. Wallace's year of sonnets confirms what I, and others, have said about "just doing it." Butt in chair and write. I'd argue it's almost the opposite of a "personal quest," as it seems to me he's chastening the personal self, submitting it to an impersonal and universal discipline.

KH: Have you created a form, like Billy Collins' Paradelle? For example, are your 5x5 poems (5 stanzas of 5 lines each) a form you invented?

PD: No, I haven't followed Collins' example. I believe my 5x5 poems sprang from James Dickey's "Heaven of Animals." It had more than five stanzas, but all but one of them had five lines, with no particular metric governing any line. Actually Wallace Stevens' poem "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage" is a 5x5, but I can't claim that as a precedent. I frequently return to that form—or maybe format is a better word. I've published two chapbooks of them already and would like someday to publish a full-length collection of the best of that sort; I've published many more than appear in the chapbooks.

KH: I was surprised to find when looking through your books that you do, indeed, write in free verse. What prompts a free verse poem for you?

PD: I don't consider myself a "formalist" any more than a carpenter who

sometimes uses a hammer calls himself a “hammerist.” The term “New Formalists,” smacks of exclusivity and clubbiness. I object to it because, as *Strong Measures* shows, the practice of formal poems has been continuous, if in some ways underground (note the irony: the underground is usually associated with radicalism, but the conservative practice of formal writing was underground for a stretch—or at least overshadowed by various free verse movements).

There’s also a danger in dividing poets into free-versers and formalists for the reason that there exists an infinite series of possible gradations between, say, blank verse and free verse. One can operate in any particular poem in some borderland and carefully balance between the two modes; the choice of the poet needn’t be either/or. Finally, can New Formalists ever write in free verse, or can a free verse poet ever write a sestina? The question underlines the silliness of the label.

KH: You’ve spoken about teaching sonnets, for example, by asking writers to create an iambic paragraph—unlined, like prose. What other suggestions might you have for writers wanting to experiment in forms?

PD: One assignment, for the purpose of practice, was an iambic pentameter—blank verse—letter, with content, tone, and addressee wide open. For example: “Dear Santa, won’t you please bring me a bag/ Of answers I can give to questions asked/ by Karla Huston, cross-examiner/ par excellence, so I seem less a dunce?”

KH: I’ve tried to teach meter and rhyme to high school kids and some simply did not hear the regular rhythms in words and sentences, although they all listen to music, however discordant some of it might be. Do some not hear the beats and rhythms? How does one account for regional pronunciations?

PD: I’d distinguish between meter and rhythm, the former being clearly much more regular, subject to counting, to numbers, whereas the latter is like waves on the shoreline—there’s a rhythm there but it can’t be reduced to counting, to a numerical pattern. So prose sentences by definition have a rhythm but no meter. A good dictionary, American Heritage, say, resolves the problem of a word’s pronunciation.

KH: Explain accentual verse compared to metrical verse.

PD: Accentual verse is one of the many kinds of metrical verse. One measures (meters) the line by counting accents. (James McAuley in *The Art of Versification* makes an important distinction between accents and stresses, but we needn’t explore that here.) Anglo-Saxon verse, *Beowulf*, is accentual (alliterative, too, but that’s beside the point here). Four beats/accents to a line, with a break/pause (caesura) in the middle. The number of syllables is immaterial. An excellent modern poem in the Anglo-Saxon metric is Richard Wilbur’s “Junk.” My poem “Ars Poetica” in *Night Shift at the Crucifix Factory* is similarly accentual. Actually, William Carlos Williams’ “This Is Just to Say” is also accentual, with one beat per line.

Here are a few lines from the middle of my poem *Ars Poetica*, a poem which is three pages long:

**Ars Poetica: A Reply To an Actor
Who Complained That Poetry Is Aethereal
And Doesn't Have Sweat In It
The Way the Acting Art Does**

...

I propose this:
 poetry's impure,
Splendidly soiled
 with the solid world:
Our armpits are not
 deodorized by artifice;
Rather, form serves
 to fan the fumes,
So mankind's rankness
 rises to a rare
Garden perfume,
 gross yet grand.

...

KH: Do you have advice for anyone interested in trying his or her hand at writing formal poetry?

PD: I'd say definitely go for it if you're inclined. If you approach the challenge right, you won't regret it. Why deny yourself pleasures and experiences so many outstanding poets have had in the past? Read, besides the McAuley book I mentioned earlier, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* by Paul Fussell. (The second edition has a pointless chapter on free verse that his publishers obviously pressured him to add.) Then, of course, *Strong Measures* is a must for your library! (Smiley face.) I know there's been a proliferation of similar books that are helpful, but I haven't kept up with them. Take it slow. Be patient. Maybe it's like a relationship that can be difficult but rewarding—enjoy the partnering with the chosen form; negotiate; give and take; listen to it and learn; find out where it's leading you. Don't feel you're just “filling in the blanks.” Rather, you're being given an opportunity to write outside the box you're used to and discover a personal capacity for expression you didn't know you had.

KH: This is terrific advice and also some good suggestions for further reading.

You have written many poems about Walt Whitman. It's certainly fascinating and perhaps, a huge irony that you have certain renown as a writer of forms, and yet you have written many poems about Whitman, famously accredited for being one of the first American poets to write free verse. Why Whitman, especially for someone so closely associated with formal verse?

PD: Let me start by quoting from my introduction to my collection of poems about Walt Whitman (now under consideration by a publisher): “Walt Whitman first entered my professional life in the Seventies, appearing in poems with Gerard Manley Hopkins, but before that he had arrived in my life as, I surmise, a kind

of antidote to my Roman Catholic education by Incarnate Word nuns (for eight years) and Jesuits (for the following eight). Only a large presence like Whitman's could have managed to act as a lever countering the effect of such a weight in one's background." The Hopkins-Whitman connection stems from the fact that Hopkins knew Whitman's work and was so attracted to it that he swore off reading it—a little like Miles Davis: "I don't play ballads anymore because I love them too much." As to Whitman being a free-verser, he was that, of course, at least in a sense, but I think of Eliot, "No verse is free for the poet who wants to write well," and the fact that Whitman kept revising his "finished" poems for decades: so much for his "spontaneous me."

KH: And what about your interest in artists like Thomas Eakins, for example? Your *Mystery of Max Schmitt* is carefully researched and wonderfully wrought.

PD: Actually once again there's a Whitman connection. Whitman connected me to Eakins, who painted a well-known portrait of him; the two were friends, Eakins a Philadelphian who lived across the Delaware River from Whitman in Camden.

My first Eakins poem was a verse fiction in which Eakins tells of painting Whitman in the nude, in the spirit of Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric." Let me add the name of Florence Nightingale, about whom I've written and who had in common with Whitman the spending of time beside the beds of dying young men, she in the Crimean War, he in the Civil War. If I ever publish my collection of Whitman poems, that will complete my Victorian trilogy, the other two volumes being those already published about Hopkins and Eakins. Then the next step would be gathering for a book selected poems from those three volumes as well as my various Nightingale poems under the title *Four Victorians*. Dream on, Phil, dream on.

KH: Speaking of dreaming, you moved to New York City in 2004. What prompted this drastic change of scenery for you? The Upper West Side of Manhattan is far from the prairies of southwest Minnesota.

PD: My main goal was to have a post-retirement adventure and see what it was like to live in the City, not just visit it, which I'd done countless times in the past, for both personal and professional reasons; I did stay one summer at Columbia U. but that was for Peace Corps training, pre-shipping overseas, so not really residing there. My mother was born in New York, and we came back every summer by Greyhound bus from St. Louis to see relatives. And one of my sons was living in NYC in 2004, so he was very helpful in shoehorning me in.

Yes, Manhattan is hardly the prairies, but I grew up in St. Louis, in a very small apartment, using public transportation all the time, and enjoying a great city park (Forest Park; here Central Park is at the end of my block)—so in a sense I was "returning home" to the kind of life I knew growing up. The City hasn't disappointed me in any way. I still have moments when I shake my head in wonder that I'm living here.

KH: What, if anything, has your New York sojourn done for your writing?

PD: Nothing about my writing has changed since I've been here, nor did I expect

or look for that. My having more time to write here than in Minnesota has been a function of my being retired, not my living here. I think it's fair to say my coming here was not about professional advancement or something like that. I definitely don't haunt the reading scene or the lit scene more generally. In coming here, I simply wanted to know the city from the inside, learn its systems, how to navigate, develop a life here, a pattern, a routine, and I've done that. My joke now, though it's more than a joke is, "New York City is a great place to live but I wouldn't want to visit here." The truth of that is that a visitor is just getting a very limited glimpse of the city's meaning and nature, like having a great feast and tasting a crumb of it.

KH: Do you plan to become a permanent denizen of New York?

PD: Given what I said about accomplishing my goal, I find the "adventure" is feeling over—the challenge, the uncertainty, the learning are not there as they were before. I've settled in here and don't go exploring the way I did for the first few years, but that means I've come to the end of something, and it's time to move on. Back to Minnesota, 2012 is the plan, to live somewhere in the Minnesota River Valley with my partner Alixa Doom, who lives there now. [Interviewer's note: Doom is also a fine poet.] We've been doing citymouse/countrymouse for years, back and forth, her house in a small Minnesota town and my apartment on the Upper West Side, felicitous rhythm, but one more year of that should put the cap on it.

KH: You've retired from years of teaching. Does a writer ever retire from writing? I'm thinking of Stanley Kunitz who wrote and published well into his 90s and Hayden Carruth who did the same. Bly, Kinnell are in their 80s.

PD: I suppose, by definition, we don't hear about the ones who retire from writing. We just keep assuming another collection will emerge eventually. What's remarkable about Kunitz is how vigorous his work stayed as he aged. His late poem "The Snakes of September" is nothing if not sexy, about two snakes copulating, nor is the poem ironic, making a point about his distance from them by reason of his age; on the contrary, he participates in their love-making. We should all age so!

KH: You've published countless chapbooks and collections, the most recent being *The Mosquito Operas: New and Selected Short Poems* (2010, Rain Mountain Press: www.rainmountainpress.com) and in 2009, *Vertebrae Rosaries: 50 Sonnets*, (Red Dragonfly Press: www.reddragonflypress.org). What's next for you?

PD: I have about ten books in the works. The complete Whitman, *Ice-Cream Vigils. Four Victorians*, as I mentioned. A collection of my 5x5 poems. *The Complete Adventures of Alixa Doom and Other Love Poems* (expanded from a chapbook). *Choreographing Whitman*, a book-length poem in sections. A selected poems, based on my first ten books. A full-length collection of poems about fatherhood and my children (expanded from a chapbook). A collection of miscellaneous poems, currently titled *Invitations to the Cockroach Ball*. A collection of formalist poems that don't show up in any of my other books. I might have forgotten one or two.

KH: I look forward to whichever book happens next. Do you have any other plans besides all those books?

PD: For years now I've been working on a project I call the Poetry Jukebox. The idea is I'd turn myself into such a jukebox, a living one. I'd have memorized 100 poems, from all over the poetry map, and audience members would each be given a sheet of paper with the 100 poems listed on them. I'd be behind a kind of cardboard cutout of a jukebox and after an audience member called out a poem from the jukebox, I'd jump out and recite it, then disappear behind the cutout again. I've gotten close to my goal but the problem is like that guy on Ed Sullivan who spun the plates on poles. By the time he was spinning 9 and 10, 1 and 2 were wobbling and he'd have to run back and catch them. So after working on a lot of new poems I find that many of the old ones have faded or gotten wobbly. Anyway, if I don't pull this off in the next 10 years, I think it's a lost cause.

KH: Poetry Jukebox? Words dropping from the sky a la Groucho Marx? A rock 'n' roll poetry trio called Strong Measures? Did you miss your calling? Thank you Philip Dacey for your time and your wonderful answers to my questions.

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✂ Going Deep: Some Notes on Sentiment & Sentimentality

BY DAVID GRAHAM

Whenever I am faced with one of the perennially crucial, unanswerable questions about the art of poetry, such as “what is the difference between sentiment and sentimentality?” I am typically struck dumb, at least momentarily. Then I am usually tempted to quote a bouquet of aphorisms and advice from my various teachers and muses, some contradicting each other in good Whitmanic fashion—all in hopes of fashioning a collage of notions to stand in creative tension rather than settled firmness. To start with, then, I might quote Donald Hall, who in his key essay “Poetry and Ambition” remarks “Nothing is learned once that does not need learning again.” Certainly this has proved the case in my own life as a poet, in which I find myself often feeling I must start afresh, each new poem calling into question much of what I thought I knew. And it certainly means that I find myself revisiting, testing, and questioning many of the “rules” of poetic composition that I have ever learned.

In a lifetime of thinking about poetry as both poet and teacher, I have also noticed that poets rarely agree on even the most basic of definitions. What is sentimental, for example? Where does it shade into something else? Where is the essential difference, if any, between sentiment and sentimentality, and can it ever be defined? Or is sentimentality like pornography in the famous legal formulation—impossible to pin down in a definition, but obvious enough when you encounter it? Of course, that’s exactly the sort of copout that helps no one but the person making the claim, I think, a gesture toward surety when clearly there is little to be had.

Of one thing I am quite sure, however. Theme or subject based definitions of sentimentality are doomed to fail. That they are also extremely common is a mildly annoying illustration that humans are prone to folly in every age. I would certainly be much wealthier if I had a nickel for every time I heard fellow poets mocking the Grandfather Poem, or solemnly intoning that poems of religious faith are inherently sappy, or rolling their eyes at yet another Birds at the Feeder lyric, or snorting over a Cute Things My Kid Said poem, or advising younger poets to avoid poems on love, dead pets, politics, and on and on. The fact remains that poets will continue to write about love, religion, nature, mortality, politics, and all the other thematic staples for the simple reason that these things are important and engage us. It may or may not be intrinsically more difficult to write a good poem on such themes (frankly, I doubt it), but poets will keep doing so, and the best of them will do so well. Were they still alive, I would look forward eagerly to May Swenson’s next poem about birds at the feeder; or Emily Dickinson’s one about religious doubt; or Robert Lowell’s new Grandfather Poem; or a fresh suite on Irish politics by Yeats. Sometimes I am surprised that it needs saying, but apparently it does, and is another thing in need of continual re-learning: to put it bluntly, it is not themes that are sentimental, but poets, at least in their mediocre poems. In a marvelous essay titled “Dull Subjects” the late

William Matthews took up this idea with sardonic relish, including a hilariously reductive list of the main themes of lyric poetry down through the ages. (For instance, he reduced centuries of poems on mortality to this summary: “We’re not getting any younger.”) His point, of course, was the one I’ve just been making. In his elegant phrasing, he denies the existence of inherently “dull” or otherwise unpromising subjects, saying “dull subjects are those we have failed.”

So far so good. But that still leaves unexplained what sentimentality actually *is*, if it’s not inherent in our themes. How do we avoid failing our own themes? The sturdiest, cleanest definition I know comes from James Joyce, who called sentimentality “unearned emotion.” The notion of having to *earn* one’s own feelings introduces an interesting moral dimension to the discussion, as if a failure of artistry is also somehow a lapse in virtue. Art is tough going, in this vision, and we must work hard to earn each effect. The difficulty is somehow part of the virtue, and by extension fluency and even accessibility become suspect. The problem with this definition, I have come to believe, is related to the problem of high modernism itself, which tends to prize difficulty, challenge, and subversion for its own sake. At the same time, too many modernist poets seemed to distrust or even denigrate emotion itself (I’m looking at you, T. S. Eliot!), as if the only acceptable sentiment is that which is undercut somehow.

When pressed too far (I’m also looking at you, Gertrude Stein!) this attitude manages to sweep away much of the greatest art we have, because it lacks the proper degree of ambiguity, irony, allusiveness, complication, and subversive intent. It leads to the cul-de-sac of a book like *Finnegans Wake*, a brilliantly unreadable work for any common reader, one which was unfortunately composed by the same writer who was capable of something as great and good as “The Dead.” In poetry, this attitude also leads to the problematic dismissal as inferior of much of the historical canon, such as the relatively straightforward lyrics of Herrick or Campion. And it downgrades (with terms like “folk poetry”) the wonderful work of artists as various as Robert Johnson, Woody Guthrie, and even Langston Hughes.

That won’t do. So back to the definitional drawing board I go, perhaps looking to the other end of the aesthetic spectrum, where we find the emotion-heavy Richard Hugo claiming with his usual charm that if you aren’t risking sentimentality, if you’re not nudging right up to the edge of blubbery unchecked emotion, you aren’t doing your job as a poet. To pull back (say, into T. S. Eliot’s doctrine of classical “impersonality”) is to write either blandly or pretentiously—or at least, in Hugo’s way of thinking, it is to devalue the flaming core of what makes poetry moving in the first place. Again, it seems that here is a kind of moral vision—admittedly one I am more attracted to than Eliot’s or Joyce’s—but equally one based on notions of risk and reward. To put it metaphorically, Hugo sees sentiment as the live coal we must handle with care and boldness in order to ignite our fires. If we don’t tend to the coal properly and diligently it dies, leaving us nothing but ash.

As it happens, I find myself at some level in agreement with both Joyce and Hugo, but still unsatisfied. If it is that moral edge common to both that troubles me, perhaps another path might be to explore things more at the technical level,

to look not so much in terms of moral labor and honesty, but more in terms of freshness or originality of diction, figure, cadence, and so forth; to seek precision of observation and depth of treatment. In such a formulation the enemies become threadbare language, ideas, and sentiments, the whole realm of the clichéd and shopworn. The sentimental becomes something close to unoriginal. For a host of reasons I won't detail here, this approach has its attractions, too (and forms the pedagogical basis of most poetry workshops) but ultimately it seems as limited as Joyce's moral imperative.

Probably it's obvious what my next move is. In good dialectical fashion I wonder if there is a way to synthesize the moral with the technical approaches in defining acceptable sentiment. Here again Donald Hall comes to my rescue. In a textbook he once advised that a good poem not only tells the truth, but tells the whole of a complex truth. Easier said than done, of course, but the assumption here seems to be that most things worth writing about simply are complex, certainly in the realm of human emotions, and it is the poet's job to render that complication truly and as completely as possible. Auden remarked somewhere (I wish I had the exact reference) that a poem is "clear statement of mixed feelings," which strikes me as having more than a kernel of truth. So in terms of emotional content a good poem—an unsentimental one, for instance—is that which fails to oversimplify. Here is one path out of the Joycean cul de sac, perhaps—a better way to value complication and difficulty, not for its own sake but for the sake of clarity and depth of emotional resonance.

I'll admit that well over forty years of serious engagement with the craft of poetry hasn't taken me much farther than this, and I confess I must make regular trips back to re-learn what I thought I already had mastered. So let me conclude by meditating a little on something that happened near the start of my poetic career, something I have been re-learning for decades now. In a college writing class long ago we had a visit from one of my favorite contemporary poets, the late Denise Levertov. A classmate asked her about the challenges of writing original poetry, especially for a young writer confronting the vast and intimidating tradition containing Shakespeare, Whitman, Dickinson, et al. In response she said "Originality is nothing else but the deepest honesty." I scribbled that right down in my notebook, where I have been pondering it ever since.

The tricky thing here in this attractive formula, of course, lies in Levertov's careful modifier. One must not only be honest but *deeply so*. In fact, she ups the ante to the maximum with her superlative. Good luck discovering something to say that is not simply honest but of the very *deepest* kind. Again, easier said than done, for sure.

Still, I am drawn again and again to her formulation when thinking about matters of sentiment and originality and the crafting of such in poems. Levertov may not provide a very precise definition of where the elusive line between sentiment and sentimentality lies, in any given circumstance; but she does give me a worthy goal, I believe, and a good set of questions to pose of any poem being drafted. Am I being fully honest with myself and my potential readers? Can I go deeper? What am I leaving out, and does the omission strengthen the poem or weaken it?

At the same time, Levertov's definition performs for me other useful functions. For one, it helps highlight the shallow sort of striving toward originality that really is nothing but a slavish fashionability. Poets in every era are convinced they are at the cutting edge of something brand new, and with few exceptions are treated by future readers as quaint practitioners of a now-exhausted period style. As Ezra Pound noted in one of his best remarks, literature is "news that stays news"—a definition I often think of when I hear fellow poets gushing over this or that flavor-of-the-month poet who is breaking new ground in technique or theme. Levertov reminds me also that I should not even attempt to compete with Chaucer or Dickinson—a contest I have already lost, certainly—but with myself and the best that I am capable of. Her view strikes me as a healthy frame of mind in which to write, if I can achieve it, in part because it also allows me to worry less about how I stack up against my contemporaries—a mode of thought that can lead to the most toxic kinds of envy, anxiety, and even paralysis. And Levertov's formula also helps me to look past the flickering candle flames of competitiveness and careerism without abandoning the valuable kind of poetic ambition.

Many years after Levertov's class visit, I found myself in a workshop taught by the late William Stafford at a writing conference. Some of the other students began speaking about questions of originality, sentimentality, and cliché. I couldn't help but notice that Stafford said little, mostly just listening attentively to everyone without comment. After a while I ventured into the furious stream of opinion to tell my little anecdote and quote Levertov's remark. Stafford smiled, as I had hoped he might, and responded as forcefully as he had to anything so far. "What a liberating remark!" he exclaimed.

Exactly. Ultimately, when I am composing a poem, on any subject really, but perhaps especially on the big themes of family, love, faith, and so on, it is all too easy to worry myself into silence by thinking of all the pitfalls of sentimentality, not to mention all the great poets before me who have written so well on these themes. And thinking haplessly of my own limitations and inadequacies as both craftsman and original thinker. I find it more useful, more *liberating*, to challenge myself with Levertov's aphorism, which opens possibilities for my ambition, because I can always go deeper than I have gone before. Or at least I can try.

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✿ Interview with John Koethe

BY WENDY VARDAMAN

WV: Place seems to figure more and more prominently in your work. In *Ninety-fifth Street* it is everywhere—the California of your childhood, New York City, Boston where you went to grad school, Milwaukee, Europe. How do you use place? For its own sake? Metaphorically?

JK: In several ways. First, I have a natural tendency to write abstractly, and tying a poem to an actual place helps counterbalance this a bit. And second, one of the pervasive themes of my work is the romantic opposition between the individual subjective consciousness and its external objective setting in the world, which is what all those places represent. Beyond this, *Ninety-fifth Street* is really a book about cities. In addition to the ones you mention, there are also Berlin, Venice, Cincinnati and Lagos.

WV: Has your use of place changed over time? It seems to me, for instance, that a poem like “The Late Wisconsin Spring” feels much more like a traditional, even Wordsworthian lyric, whereas the more recent poem, “The Menomonee Valley” is looser, more conversational, more pessimistic—it’s about collapse, rather than expansion. Is that a trend in your work, or just the difference between two poems?

JK: I don’t think of my work as pessimistic, but rather as disillusioned. I think we’re drawn to romantic illusions even though we know perfectly well they’re illusory. I think “The Late Wisconsin Spring,” as well as “In the Park” from the same book, indulge those lyric illusions a bit more than much of my later work, though ultimately those poems undercut them too.

WV: What role has Wisconsin played in your poetry? And I don’t mean metaphorically. Do you feel it’s been a disadvantage poetically to live in the Midwest, as opposed to New York City, where the title poem of your new book is set?

JK: It’s sort of a tradeoff. On the one hand you forego a lot of the networking and career opportunities of living, say, in New York (I was quite conscious of this when I spent last semester at Princeton). On the other hand, I intensely dislike schools of poetry and thinking of poetry as a job or career you’re pursuing, and the relative isolation of living in Milwaukee, which I like very much, helps protect me from this.

WV: You spent a semester at Princeton on a visiting professorship in poetry. How would you compare teaching poetry writing to teaching philosophy?

JK: At Princeton I didn’t teach poetry writing, but rather gave a seminar in the English department on the New York School. My entire experience teaching writing consists of serving as the Elliston Poet in Residence at the University of Cincinnati in 2008, teaching a course on the long poem at Northwestern in

1990, and doing an independent study in the 1970s that produced my one poetry student, Henri Cole. I sort of enjoy teaching poetry writing now and then, but wouldn't have wanted to dedicate my life to it. For one thing, I think you have an obligation to help your students develop in their own direction, even if you don't particularly care for what they're trying to do. Making my living teaching philosophy allows me the luxury of my dislikes, so to speak. Also, philosophy has a clarity and integrity from which I think my own poetry benefits.

WV: There's been an increased professionalization of poetry these last 20–30 years through MFA programs. Do you think the university is the best place for a poet to be? Does it matter how poets earn their living?

JK: Well, I'd want to distinguish between universities and MFA programs. I think universities are wonderful places for poets to be—after all, that's where most of their readers are. On the other hand, I just indicated that I'm uneasy about the professionalization and commodification of poetry through writing programs. I think it's desirable to have other intellectual interests as well.

WV: I read that you only write poems during the spring and summer? Is that still true? Why do it that way?

JK: While I was teaching I'd work on philosophical writing in the fall and winter, and then shift to poetry sometime in the spring. I have a feeling that lying fallow half a year made my poetry feel fresh when I returned to it.

WV: The sense of time in your work is unhurried, not frenetic, very different from many contemporary poets. The pacing of many of the poems underscores that, too, and they often unfold in a leisurely way, reading as though they were composed slowly and with great care. How long do you typically write at the first draft of a poem? How much time do you spend revising work?

JK: I think your observation about the pace of my work is quite accurate. I write slowly, in small bits, in the morning, with lots of revising and then more revising in the evening. Then the same thing the next day until the poem is finished. I rarely complete a full draft of a poem, but rather build it up by accretion. I usually have a sort of architecture in mind for the poem, but not too much of its contents. It's exciting to me to fill it in, to discover, as it were, what the poem is about. This was especially true of a long poem I wrote in the 1980s, "The Constructor," in which I started with the last line and then worked backwards to the beginning.

WV: Do your poems ever involve research?

JK: No, not that I can think of.

WV: You retired in January 2010 from the Philosophy Dept. at UW–Milwaukee—congratulations. What are your plans for retirement, and how might more time affect your writing? Will you stay in Milwaukee?

JK: Well, I plan to continue working on poetry, and also making use of a house I just built in southwest Wisconsin in the driftless region (it's the house I was imagining at the end of "Ninety-fifth Street"). I do plan to stay in Milwaukee, a city of which I'm very fond. I toyed with moving to New York for a bit, but it's too expensive—who wants to retire and go back to living like a graduate student? Better to live in Milwaukee and go to New York a lot.

WV: What writing or poetry projects are you working on now?

JK: Well, I wrote a fair amount at Princeton, and since I've been back I've been preoccupied with reorganizing my apartment to accommodate the stuff from my office at UWM and with the arrangements for my son's wedding, which was last week. I just started tinkering with a poem called "ROTC Kills," a sort of memory poem that takes off from an old poster from the 1969 student strike at Harvard that I have on a wall in my house in the country.

WV: I want to know more about your dual life as a philosopher and a poet. Poets who know your work know you are a philosopher, but do philosophers know you're a poet? How do they respond to that?

JK: I think a fair number of philosophers know I'm a poet—there are really only one or two other philosopher poets that I know of. My colleagues in the philosophy department were very accommodating and generous in recognizing and allowing me to pursue my poetry. Of course, I kept up my end of the bargain by writing a reasonable amount of philosophy too.

WV: Philosophy is a major source of themes, of ideas in your poems. Has it affected your poetry in other ways?

JK: I think the abstract, discursive rhetoric of philosophy has influenced the way I write poetry. I know that lots of people associated with poetry hate that kind of language and think poets should avoid it, but I think it opens up all sorts of possibilities it's foolish to ignore. You can see this sort of rhetorical influence in T.S. Eliot's work, especially in "Four Quartets," a poem a lot of the "no ideas but in things" people loathe. It's no accident that Eliot was trained as a philosopher—unlike Wallace Stevens, say, another philosophical sounding poet who never seems quite as at home with the idiom as Eliot. There's a popular stereotype of philosophical writing as murky and unintelligible, but actually just the opposite is true of good philosophical writing.

WV: Does poetry impinge on your philosophical writing? Are there areas of overlap in the writing of philosophers and poets in general, or do you find the two types of writing very different?

JK: Well, I suppose the current paradigmatic philosophical writing style is extremely detailed, rigorous and explicit, with few broad strokes. My own philosophical style is somewhat looser and more essayistic, though whether this reflects the influence of poetry I'm not sure. It probably just reflects a preference for the essay over the academic paper.

WV: Have you felt equally successful in these two fields and equally engaged?

JK: I think I'm better known as a poet than as a philosopher, and probably have a deeper attachment to poetry. But I wouldn't want to exaggerate the difference—I have a great love of philosophy, and I'm a respectable philosopher, though I'm not a luminary.

WV: Why do you write poetry rather than just philosophy? (or vice-versa?)

JK: I've always loved literature and something else. In high school it was modernist fiction plus math and physics. Then it was poetry plus philosophy. I just wanted to pursue both.

WV: In "Moore's Paradox," *North Point North*, you write, perhaps ironically or facetiously, about a dislike of poems about philosophy, and yet your poems are always about major philosophical problems: identity, memory, belief, God, time, perception, the mind, epistemology ... though not, it seems to me, ethics. Are the beliefs in your poems your beliefs, or do they belong to a persona?

JK: You're right—ethics isn't much reflected either in my poetry or in my professional philosophical work. What I meant by that somewhat facetious line is that I don't like poems that present themselves as vehicles for conveying or doing philosophy, as some (though not all) language poems do. The themes you mention are ones I think philosophy and poetry share at some deep level, but they approach and develop them very differently. Philosophy is subject to severe constraints of consistency, coherence, argumentative rigor, addressing of objections and so on, with the aim of arriving at the truth of the matter. Poetry isn't subject to these constraints, but is free to inhabit and explore ideas and themes without worrying too much about their correctness, as long as they feel sufficiently powerful to move us. Another way to put it is that I try to put myself, through an act of the imagination, in the position of someone who does believe them, and to discover what that's like. I tried to spell this out in a recent essay called "Poetry and Truth." So I'm not sure you could call them beliefs, but whatever they are they don't belong to a persona.

WV: At the end of the poem "Ninety-fifth Street," you talk about "two versions of myself/ And of the people that we knew, each one an other/ To the other, yet both indelibly there: the twit of twenty/ And the aging child of sixty-two, still separate." So there's that question of whether we are the same person over the course of a lifetime and in what sense, and although you simplify it here to a dualism, twenty or sixty-two, those lines imply a calculus of endless other selves spilling across time. Philosophically speaking, where, if anywhere, do you locate identity? Is that different when you think poetically?

JK: It's a question that obsesses me, but to which I don't know the answer. At one extreme the self is a real thing existing throughout a person's lifetime (or afterlifetime if there were such a thing). At the other it's fleeting and momentary, or not even real at all. The first is probably a deep and inescapable illusion, while something like the latter is probably true but unbelievable. I sort of oscillate between them in my poetry, taking them up and inhabiting them as I described earlier.

WV: Writing about the “regret/ And disappointment” that hangs over your poetic landscape, you say “The happy and unhappy man inhabit different worlds,/ One still would want to know which world this is,” which reminds me somehow of William James’ essay, “The Will to Believe.” Do we have the capacity to choose which world to occupy? To exercise belief rather than doubt?

JK: “The happy and unhappy man inhabit different worlds” is a quotation from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* which has always puzzled me. He can’t mean it literally, given what he means by “world.” In any case, I don’t think belief can be voluntary. I think we’re often drawn to believe things we know at a higher level to be false. My favorite example of this is philosophical dualism, the idea that the mind or self is something real and distinct from the physical body. I think it’s deeply embedded in our self-experience, even though we know it can’t be true.

WV: You write about the profound effect on you of the play *Hamlet* in your poem by that title in *Sally’s Hair*. Did going to see *Hamlet* really change your life? Can you imagine your own poems having that kind of effect on a young person, perhaps even through misreading? How would you feel about that?

JK: The idea that seeing Richard Burton’s *Hamlet* in 1964 changed my life was just a mildly amusing conceit I was toying with in that poem. It isn’t true of course, but the fact is that something shifted around that time, and since I don’t really know what it was I just thought I’d blame it on Burton. As for my own poems affecting someone in a drastic way, I guess it would be fine as long as it wasn’t for the worse. I suppose like most poets I get letters now and then to that effect, but I never know what to make of them.

WV: I’d also like to ask about the intersection of science and poetry, math and poetry. There isn’t a lot of work done on these borders, but it seems that it’s becoming more interesting to poets—or perhaps poetry is become more interesting to scientists. You originally planned to study physics at college. Have you maintained an interest in science and math? Would you like to do more with them in your poems?

JK: I’ve maintained an interest in them, but I wish I’d continued to study them, since philosophy of mathematics and philosophy of physics interest me very much, but I don’t know enough mathematics and physics to pursue them seriously. As for poems, there are some glancing references to scientific and mathematical themes throughout my poems, and I did write a short poem called “Strangeness” which had a bit to do with a phenomenon called quantum foam.

WV: Are there any poets you would point to, currently or from the past, who put their scientific/mathematical minds to use, and does that manifest itself more as an interest in facts from those fields, in their concepts, in the material world itself, or in the metaphorical uses of various facts and theories?

JK: Lucretius aside, not much comes to mind, though Douglas Crase, George Bradley, Richard Kenny and James Richardson, all poets I admire a great deal, have keen scientific interests. Emily Grosholz, one of the few other philosopher poets, works on the history of science and mathematics, but that hasn’t been

reflected in the poems I know of hers.

WV: In the interview you did of John Ashbery (1983), you asked him about the changed poetry landscape from the 50s to the present—I'd like to ask you the same question. How has the poetry world changed since you began publishing in the 60s to now?

JK: Well, the most obvious change has been the explosion of writing programs and the resultant great increase in the number of poets and books. While there are many very strong poets writing, I keep thinking that poetry is becoming more of a craft like ceramics, something you can just take up and learn if it appeals to you (which isn't to say that there aren't great ceramicists). One result of this proliferation is that there's not much consensus on who the important poets are now. Another change that strikes me is in the kind of ambitions poets have. When I was teaching the seminar on the New York School at Princeton last semester I was struck by how the original members of that school (which really wasn't a school) aspired to and attained, I believe, a kind of greatness and a transcending of their influences, whereas the New York poets that followed them didn't seem to have that sort of ambition (I'd make an exception for Douglas Crase).

WV: Could you comment on the nature of Ashbery's influence on the current poetic landscape and on your work specifically? Where would you say you part company, poetically speaking?

JK: Ashbery's work divides into a number of phases, consisting roughly of the books before and after *Flow Chart*. His work in the second phase, while still quite wonderful, is more aesthetic than meditative and quite influential on a sort of generic poem a lot of younger poets seem to be writing. The most important phase of his work for me is the period from *Rivers and Mountains* through *A Wave*, in which he wrote some of the greatest meditative American poems of the twentieth century. I think his main influence on me was stylistic—the long, supple sentences with lots of clauses and qualifications, the meandering way a poem can progress, the sense of an abstract and indefinite landscape or atmosphere. A main difference is that Ashbery is more interested in creating the sensation of thought, whereas I'm willing to go along with some actual thought (which I'm not saying is a virtue).

WV: One of the last images in *Ninety-fifth Street* is of Ashbery "whenever I look up I think I see him/ Floating in the sky like the Cheshire Cat," (79) a grin, perhaps, without the cat. You begin the book with a poem about Chester, a cat who very definitely does not have a smile, and I'm wondering—a round about way to ask you about your own sense of humor—which image you'd prefer someone to associate with you? Do you think of your poetry as humorous?

JK: I'm certainly not a comic poet, but I do think there's quite a bit of subdued humor in my poems—reflected in a certain casual, throw-away manner, for instance. The critic and poet James Longenbach told me that when he teaches my work to his students at Rochester, he tells them that the humor in a Koethe poem is like the vermouth in a dry martini, which seems pretty accurate to me.

WV: Besides modernist poets like Eliot and Stevens and then Ashbery, or a novelist like Proust, what writers, artists, or philosophers have influenced your poetry? Do you have new influences as you get older, or is that more part of being a young writer?

JK: I think most of your formative influences are encountered when you're young, though I did find myself responding to Phillip Larkin as I got older. Besides the writers you mentioned, I'd include Elizabeth Bishop, James Schuyler, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Pynchon, F. T. Prince and Kenneth Koch in his late elegiac mode. I'm sure there are others, but those come to mind. And Ludwig Wittgenstein has certainly influenced me both intellectually and stylistically.

WV: Are there any contemporary poets you particularly enjoy reading?

JK: Quite a few, including Frank Bidart, Henri Cole, Douglas Crase, Mark Strand and Susan Stewart.

WV: Poetry has many partners these days, and although these relationships have existed in some cases for a very long time, it is now possible, because of the nature of the internet and powerful software, to bring them together in one online journal, sometimes within one single work. I'm thinking of visual poetry, poetry animation, audio and spoken word performance. What do you think about the nature of poetry under these influences and given the possibilities? Will it change, or is there something fundamental about it that will prove unalterable? Do any of these possibilities interest you?

JK: I have to confess that these sorts of resources don't interest me. I've often described poetry as an artful form of talking to yourself, and if that's right then it will be around as long as people are drawn to do that, which is to say as long as they're self-conscious.

WV: You've spoken previously about the fact that you don't write for an audience. Was that a conscious choice on your part, or something you drifted toward naturally? What do you think about poetry that is consciously written for a reader?

JK: I think I've always thought of poetry as a kind of inner soliloquy, reflecting the capacity for self-consciousness that makes us human. But I wouldn't want to be essentialistic about poetry. If someone thinks about an audience and writes poems directed at it, that's fine, though such poems aren't likely to lodge themselves in my mind.

WV: Rachel Hadas, in a review of *Falling Water* (1997), said in praise of your poetry: "At a time when so much poetry stands on a soapbox and orates or lies on a couch and weeps, or else breathlessly buttonholes the hapless browser, these poets (it sounds so modest) speak. That is, they do not weep or scream." Others take your work as gloomy, acutely aware of failure and futility. How do you see it?

JK: Well, I certainly don't see it as gloomy (nor do I see it as mourning a lost childhood, as Charles Simic suggested in a recent review of *Ninety-fifth*

Street). I earlier described it as disillusioned, by which I meant that I want to avoid and deflate facile consolations and celebrations. A lot of our impulses and aspirations are futile (and a lot of them aren't)—that isn't gloomy, that's just life.

WV: It seems to me there's an amazing unity of voice and aesthetics, along with control, in the body of your work. I'd note that besides a set of philosophical themes and a unifying narrator, there's also, among other characteristics, an abundance of references to modernist writers and an almost total absence of pop culture references, in contrast to the work of many (maybe even most) contemporary poets, including Ashbery. Is that deliberate, or is it something that just doesn't interest you?

JK: I actually think there are a lot of pop culture references, though certainly not as many as in someone like Ashbery. Just off the top of my head, I can think of references to Lou Reed, the Velvet Underground, Peggy Lee, Mark Knopfler, numerous movies, the novels of Raymond Chandler and the Drifters. Now Wallace Stevens—there's someone whose work is devoid of any reference to popular culture.

WV: There's a particular narrative strategy in many of your poems—the distance/absence of a personal narrator or of feeling, or the movement between the impersonal and the first person, in e.g., “Home” or “Belmont Park.” Thus the beginning of “Home”: “It was a real place: There was a lawn to mow/ And boxes in the garage. It was always summer/ Or school, and even after oh so many years/It was always there, like the voice on the telephone.” Your use of “it” and “there was” here is quite striking, especially as that choice creates tension with the expectations that a title like “Home” sets up. Could you comment on this strategy?

JK: I do try to oscillate between a subjective first-person perspective and an impersonal, *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective. I think of this as a vestige of the movement of thought Kant called the sublime, one that lies at the heart of romanticism.

WV: I'm wondering about the fact that you don't write poems about the experience of being a father—is that a deliberate choice?

JK: I guess my poetry isn't terribly interpersonal, but I can think of passing references to fatherhood in “Falling Water” and “Ninety-fifth Street” (though not really about the experience of it).

WV: Have you ever written a deliberately fictional poem? And by that I don't mean simply a persona poem whose narrator is not the author. I mean a poem that constructs a fictional character who inhabits a fictional world. I'm also wondering if you've ever written a narrative poem about a historical person.

JK: Not about a historical person, but the second section of “Mistral” in *The Constructor* imagines and describes a fictional character. It was inspired by a photograph of James Merrill wearing an elegant shirt on the cover of a book of his selected poems.

WV: Your voice has a characteristic minimalism when it comes to rhetorical device, rhyme, sound play. It seems very pure and mostly devoid of ornament, sculptural almost. Is that a fair characterization?

JK: I think so, though there's quite a bit of assonance and internal rhyme and half-rhyme I rely on to hold things together. But I do try to avoid highly charged rhetoric and figurative, poetic language, and usually look for a lower-keyed alternative.

WV: You also sometimes speak about your writing using architectural metaphors—*building* and *blocks* for instance—could you comment on your approach to writing, how you go about the process of assembling a poem?

JK: I usually start with an idea of the poem's architecture, by which I mean an abstract image of what it's going to look and feel like—length, stanza structure or lack of it, longer or shorter lines, the kinds of rhythms and cadences involved, emotional intensity, density of language, formal or colloquial diction, in fact almost everything but the content, though I'll usually have at least a vague idea of that too. Then I start to fill it in, usually at the beginning of the poem, though not always. I'm heavily dependent on the shower and shaving, when I get my ideas for anywhere from one to about ten lines, which I'll then write up and work on. I look at them again before and after dinner, and fiddle with them some more, and then repeat the process each day until the poem is done. Then I'll keep going over it until I'm satisfied with it.

WV: Your poems are written sometimes in free verse, but they are often quietly metered, or in syllabics. "The Distinguished Thing" in *Ninety-fifth Street* goes back and forth between prose and verse. There's occasional, but generally not regular, rhyme, which reminds me of Eliot's practice. How do you decide to use rhyme on the occasions that you do? Does the idea of working with traditional forms, such as the sonnet, interest you? What about prose poems?

JK: Sometimes I'll just feel like writing a poem in rhyme, like "What the Stars Meant" in *The Constructor*, a poem I'm quite fond of. Or sometimes a variable rhyme scheme is a way of holding a long poem written in sections together, as in "The Secret Amplitude" in *Falling Water* and "The Unlasting" in *Sally's Hair*. Traditional forms like sonnets don't appeal to me much, though I do write short, sonnet-like poems. Often when I write in forms, they're of my own devising. As for prose poems, I usually don't care for them because of their soft surrealist connotations. But as you noted, I did use prose in "The Distinguished Thing," and I recently wrote a poem in prose called "Like Gods," which is probably the only explicitly philosophical poem I've ever written. But it might be better to call it a poetic essay than a prose poem.

WV: I'd also be interested in knowing how you came to the use of syllabics, which is something I'm doing a bit of research on right now.

JK: I sometimes use syllabics to counteract my tendency to slide into a natural iambic rhythm. But I've also written in the kind of regular stanzaic structures with lines of varying numbers of syllables that Marianne Moore uses—it gives

you something that feels like both poetry and prose. The first section of the title poem in *Domes* is written in that kind of form, though I haven't done that for a long time.

WV: Is there anything in particular you would like readers to notice about your poetry that they generally don't?

JK: Well, I know my work has a reputation for being somewhat cerebral, and while I suppose it can be, I think the most important thing about it is its emotional intensity. Eliot said somewhere that what is sometimes regarded as a capacity for abstract thought in a poet is actually a capacity for abstract feeling. I'm not entirely sure what he had in mind, but I think it applies to my own work.

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✂ Beyond Happily Ever After: Working at the Endings of Our Poems

BY SARAH BUSSE

As a poet, occasionally I have been gifted with the last line of a poem dropped into my head ... with the challenge being, to write backwards from there. Much more often, endings of poems can be some of the trickiest territory. When—and how—should I wrap this one up? How do I get out gracefully?

Reading over submissions as an editor, my suspicions are confirmed: endings give many of us trouble. Here are three common pitfalls I see poets fall into at the very end of what may otherwise be a fine poem. Note: I am guilty of at least most of these (and more) myself, at various times, in various drafts. I speak from experience. And to prove it, I've included a few examples from my own poems and early drafts, since I'm the only poet whose failures I have general access to (with one very notable exception below); I ask your indulgence.

The “E-puff-any”

My first teacher in graduate school, Ed Ochester, gifted me with this great word when he was critiquing my first poem on my first day of my first graduate workshop. Although it wasn't easy to hear at the time, he was right. The draft I had brought in did try too hard at the very end. I wanted it to lift into some sort of numinous resonance and glitter that the rest of the poem just couldn't support. It's tempting to pan the camera angle out right at the end, towards sun sparkling off leaves, birds flying across the horizon, stars wheeling overhead ... but a lot of poems can't hold up to that sort of burden. Look over your draft, and if you notice the focus changes right at the last few lines, ask yourself if that last parting shot is really necessary.

This was especially risky for me in a poem I wanted to write for an old boyfriend who was ill. So help me, the idea came to me one morning, looking up from the harrowing email update of his travails to find an absolutely stunning sunrise. How could there be such a gift in the world, when there was so much pain as well? Yes, I know, an age-old question. Still worth a poem, I thought. Here's how I wound up a very early draft:

...If we build God between us
Then here is one more brick, rose pink,
To lift, a two-minutes' airy gift.

Well, I was a religion major in school. Old habits die hard. I worked on this one for two years. In my final draft, I decided to leave whatever gods might be in attendance unspoken, and to deliberately turn the volume down at the end:

But that was in the middle
of your long dying, not at the end
and now that I've managed

to write it down you're dead.
(from "No Title Here")

The Moral

Maybe you have a great poem, and you want to make sure the reader "gets it." So, you restate in the last stanza or the last few lines the point of the whole poem. Oops. The reader will get it all right, like a 2x4. Although it's tempting to make sure our points get across, a good poem will do this work without us having to repeat ourselves at the end. This sort of summation effectively tells the reader you don't trust him to be smart enough to get the poem, and (worse) you don't trust your own poem to do the work of communicating.

We can see a real master struggling with this very issue in one of Emily Dickinson's poems. Here is a version from 1859:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—
Untouched by Morning
And untouched by Noon—
Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection—
Rafters of satin,
And Roof of stone.

Light laughs the breeze
In her Castle above them—
Babbles the Bee in a stolid Ear,
Pipe the Sweet Birds in ignorant cadence—
Ah, what sagacity perished here!

Did you feel that little moral in the last line hammer you over the head? Apparently Emily did too. A version from a couple of years later:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—
Untouched by Morning—
And untouched by Noon—
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection—
Rafters of Satin—and Roof of Stone!

Grand go the Years—in the Crescent—above them—
Worlds scoop their Arcs—
And Firmaments—row—
Diadems—drop—and Doges—surrender—
Soundless as dots—on a Disc of Snow—

Interestingly, not only did she (happily) erase the moral, she increased the scope of her second stanza, thereby going for something more complex and rewarding than the easy sentiment of the first version. Now, instead of a happy little nature scene, we have the wheeling of planets, the surrender of kings, and all "Soundless as dots"... May all our rewrites be so successful.

The Joke

Sometimes poets will undercut a fine poem by ending on a joke-y note. There's nothing wrong with humor in poems—in fact, I love to see a truly funny poem come our way. It wakes up the pulse. Like a sudden breeze in spring, it lightens us. But it's rare for a poem to work as a “serious” poem, and then end with a joke in the final lines. It suggests the writer isn't completely comfortable with herself.

What if you recognize something in those three all too clearly—what do you do about it? Here are a few suggestions to try when revising.

1. Chop it

I remember the editor of *North American Review*, Vince Gotera, once told a room full of poets that the best advice he could give them would be to cut off the last half of their poem. Most of us have the tendency to go on too long, it seems. If it's too hard for you to scratch out the last stanza with your pen, get out your scissors and literally cut it off—a pair of scissors can be a very liberating revision tool.

2. Remember that camera reference?

I believe it was another teacher, David Mason, who posited that poems actually have a lot in common with movies—in some ways more than novels do. Novels get bogged down in narrative. The text has to get us through a scene, show us the characters moving and thinking and progressing. A poem can cut quickly and sharply, like a film. So think like a film editor and think about camera angle throughout your poem. Up close? Pan out? Sweep over the vista or focus in? As I said before, it can be a flag if you notice your poem trying something new only at the very end.

3. Punch up the language

If you're worried the reader won't get it without you restating your point at the poem's close, consider your verbs and nouns carefully. Have you said it strongly, or exactly, enough in the first place? If every line is honed and every gesture counts, the reader should be able to follow you through the poem just fine. And don't think it's a problem if the end of your poem deliberately sends the reader back to the beginning. One of the pleasures of reading a good poem is to loop around at the end, to see, now that we know the end, how the poem starts. Have you ever read the first chapter of a novel over again, just to see what clues the writer was dropping that you didn't pick up the first time through? Which great writer was it that said, the dangerous man is not the man who has never read the classics, but the man who has read them once, and believes he has read them?

But what if you really, really, love that ending, even if you suspect it's not working for you? Try putting it at the front of the poem instead. It will cast the whole draft in a new light and, who knows, it may work better. An early draft of my poem “After a Piano Recital” ended with these lines:

We have been transported, now are—where?
What are coffee, cookies, now?
I'm one of the first to leave, as we disperse
into the cold twilit November of a tattered year.
Something will—does—endure.

In later versions, I knocked off the statement of faith—maybe I'd lost it? Or maybe I thought the poem could carry the message. I still liked those two active lines in the middle, but realized the poem would be better off opening with them. With that move, I found the voice of the poem:

I'm one of the first to leave as we disperse
into the cold twilight of a tattered year.
Beethoven walks beside me in the furious
arpeggiated passions of his score....

I started a poem with him, but for this article I like ending with that figure of Beethoven walking beside us, in all his refusal to compromise. Be ruthless with your drafts. Do whatever it takes: risk raggedness, risk sincerity, risk the small gesture. Risk.

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✂ 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.

Published in Verse Wisconsin 106

✂ What a Poet Carries: Observations on Working with Elementary School Writers

BY CX DILLHUNT

This discussion is based on a presentation of a Fireweed Press poets (Robin Chapman, as moderator with Sandy Stark, CX Dillhunt, Richard Swanson, and Wendy Vardaman as the panel) at the 2011 Wisconsin Book Festival. The event was titled “Elbows and Onions: Making Wisconsin Voices Heard.” The author was asked to speak on “engaging children in poetry.”

I believe there is a certain way to teach children, one that they have taught me. It is more certain than anything I have ever known as a writer, as a poet, as a teacher. They have taught me not to trust metaphor, but rather to know the words—what is, they wonder, the difference between the thing itself and the word itself? And even to say, let alone suggest, *metaphor* is to overstate. They know no difference—the word, the thing named are a perfect balance. What they know is remarkable.

I am in my eighth year of teaching K–5 writers. Or, I should say “coaching,” as Michele Monahan calls it. This is my fourth year in her fourth grade class as a coach. As my name tag says, “Mr. Dillhunt, Volunteer Writing Coach.” And that is what I am. Together with Mrs. Monahan and other writing workshop teachers and coaches, I have learned my role. I am a coach—I am a writer who loves being with others who love to write. I have learned to listen to students, I am learning to work with them as fellow writers. Like any coach, any team, we’re in it together.

At some point as coaches and teachers, we grew tired of hearing and saying words like “Good!” and “Nice job!” or even saying things like: “Yes, that’s what I wanted,” and “Yes, you did what we asked for.” And even a “Way to go!” with an approving smile seemed somehow hollow. We knew, the students knew, something was missing.

So, that’s where we started. We wondered what would happen if we learned a way to really listen to students, to treat them as fellow writers. The first thing we worked on was a new set of questions and observations. Instead of saying, “That’s good” or “Yes, you did the assignment,” we started with questions for the writer. New questions even we’d not heard before, questions like:

- This is you, isn’t it?
- What did you learn from writing this?
- What does this say to you?
- What did this writing time teach you?

I think it took me the greater part of a year to rid myself of the old observations and questioning. One trick I learned was to write these or other questions on a Post-it note and tell the student, I’ve got some questions to ask you as a writer,

glancing and choosing what to say, what to ask. Referring to the students as writers when the assignment is given, and again when conferencing with them, is part and parcel of changing the questions or observation.

Eventually, the new form of inquiry and honesty (recognizing that they are fellow writers, regardless of age or grade level) will quite naturally lead you as a coach to more critical questions. What I call writer-to-writer questions. These have more to do with getting the student to understand process, their own process. We found ourselves asking:

- What is this?
- How did you do this?
- Where are you at this point?
- Where are you going with this?
- How'd you decide on that?

My favorite, which seems to lead to the most observations about self and the writing process itself, is the simple question of asking any writer at any age how it was done: “How did you do this?” And perhaps more important for the developing writer: “How did you know how to do this?” Ask, they will tell. They will tell because they know. Writers think about such things. It’s just that we’ve forgotten to ask. These are questions that are difficult to ask or to understand as an instructor, even if you are a writer.

Children understand writing and they understand themselves as writers. Our goal is to get them to talk about it. As an instructor, as a writing coach, as a fellow writer, it’s all about how you behave—how you take the time to listen and ask specific questions.

If you write every day, or often, you get it. If you belong to a writing group, you not only get it, but you have a good working model of what we’re trying to do in a writers’ workshop or in any writing group, in writing sessions in the elementary school.

You need to do the assignments yourself. If you are a writer, think of the daily writing as a prompt, something to encourage you to write, to somehow find what to write about. Regardless of your background or interest in writing, to work with children, to have a sense of what they are up against and what they are learning, you too must write.

You need to know, first, how you write, how you as a teacher think and process information, how you argue, how you tell your world to others. You must remember, you are having a conversation. You are sharing: writer to writer, learner to learner, curious among the curious. You are part of this workshop, a member of a group of fellow writers, a writing group.

When I ask, “How did you do that?” I hear the 4th grader who says, “I’m not sure, but when I’m writing it’s like putting my fingers in my brain.” Or the 3rd grader working on his own form for a poem who says, “I can feel it and the pencil won’t stop.” And another 4th grader sitting not writing when I asked her if

she needed help getting ideas, said, “No, I’m still listening to myself.”

When asked, students will also be very specific about their editing process; the other day a student explained, “I go back and do all the paragraphs and stuff later. I have to keep writing as fast as I can.” As a fellow writer you can ask, “Where are you with this piece, in the process, what are you thinking right now?” When they are given the time, all students will write. Especially if they are asked *how* they get their writing done. And yes, it’s contagious.

What children need is time to write, everyday. Sometimes the prompt or assignment can be as simple as write from where you left off last time, reread it aloud and start writing. What they also need is a community of fellow writers and time to discuss their writing. Again, referring to them directly as writers, as poets, doesn’t shock them at all. Questions one-on-one or in a group should always begin with, something like “As a writer, how do you ...” or “You’re the poet here, what do you see ...” Also, referring to their piece of writing as a breathing, living thing, doesn’t surprise them either. Don’t hesitate to ask something like, “What does this poem want to do next?” or “Listen, what do you hear?” or “Is this doing what you wanted it to?” And my favorite: “What does this character want to do next?”

Oh, and what does a poet carry? Well, I often start with what this poet carries. I reach into my pocket, pull out two pens, and ask, “As a poet, why do I carry two pens?” As an adult, of course, the answer is obvious, something about running out of ink. But that’s not the first answer I hear from children. Usually I hear something about “lending” or “giving” or “for a friend.” They also guess that they might be favorite pens.

I also pull out a pack of Post-it notes and then show them my two writing notebooks. I ask them if they keep a notebook, a journal, a diary, anything at home that’s not for school. I show them my notebooks, flip through pages, pass them around—the little one I say is for my daily haiku, the larger one for notes and drafts and anything written. Yes, they notice it’s full of Post-it notes and taped-in pieces of paper. I don’t have to say much to explain my approach, but I do explain, this is how this writer writes.

Here are some basics for coaches and teachers interacting with writers:

- Don’t assume that a writer needs help.
- Ask if you can have a conference or if the writer is busy.
- Start with a question or by asking if you (or the writer) can read the piece aloud.
- Have a conversation no longer than five minutes.
- Thank the writer for sharing and feel free to repeat an insight from the student.

I believe everyone is a writer and needs time to write. I believe that writing sharpens our wits, makes us better thinkers, better at interacting with others. I believe that writing is a conversation between the creator of the work and the listener of that work and that the first listener should always be the writer.

We must learn to listen to ourselves; we must learn at an early age that just as we each speak and interact with others in our own way, we also write in our own way. Children must be given the time to practice and to learn the process of their own way of writing.

Here are some final observations and reminders about writers:

- Writers, especially children, know how they do what they do; ask them
- No need to define poetry to children, though they love to learn new forms.
- Children, like all writers, need fellow writers; be sure to share your work, too.
- All writers want to share their writing; set up poetry readings in grade school.
- Some children also like to see things published: hung up, in a booklet, typed.

When I asked a 4th grade haiku writer how he did what he did he explained: “I can smell it and hear it at the same time in my head. But some times I can’t get it out so I just keep writing until I find it again.”

Writers' workshops and writing groups may or may not produce art, but that is not the goal. It's a practice that improves our sense of self-worth and humanity. If you can write and know how you write and know what steps you go through, you can become the writer you want to be—in business, in science, in medicine, as a poet, as a journalist, or any combination. It's a process that begins in elementary school.

Let's give our children time to write and time to share their writing and their personal strategies for getting there. Let's listen. It'll make all the difference.

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✿ Teaching Akhmatova

BY GREG WEISS

Her poems exist in the context of eternity, I can't really explain it.
—Angela Ball

I was watching Anatoly Naiman and Helga Landauer's *A Film about Anna Akhmatova* (2008) and was really struck that despite the Russian government murdering her husband, imprisoning her son for seventeen years, and monitoring, censoring, and starving her, Anna Akhmatova was a proud enough Russian that outliving Stalin was a great thing to her. I don't fault less proud Russians in the least, but I've been trying to apply her personal sense of patriotism to the ongoing Mississippification of Wisconsin.* To state the blindingly obvious, contemporary Wisconsin isn't yet in the same ballpark as Stalinist Russia, and in fact seems like it's headed more towards Tsarist. Maybe they'll put that on the *Welcome to Wisconsin* signs.

I've been trying to view Wisconsin's desecration in the context of eternity, but that seems too much like a poem Robert Frost would write about my leaving my farm after the storm and plowing my fertile furrow elsewhere. But of course Frost's advice, at least sometimes during the Depression, was the same as mine to the Wisconsin teachers: Strike—if they don't think they need your potatoes, let them have a go without them. The cops and firefighters should strike too, let them fight their own fires.

✿

I teach World Lit at the University of Southern Mississippi each Monday night from 6:30–9:15. Tomorrow, Tuesday, I'm subbing for Dr. Nicolle Jordan's World Lit section. Dr. Jordan taught me two courses on eighteenth-century English literature, which I don't have much natural affinity for or interest in, and is one of my favorite teachers, a mensch, so this afternoon I read pages 1–68 of R.K. Narayan's 1958 novel *The Guide*, tomorrow's assigned reading for her class.

Although I often don't read Introductions, I thought it might be worthwhile to read Michael Gorra's to *The Guide* because (1) it was short and (2) it was likely I might not read the whole book, so maybe this would help fill me in. As I found some of Gorra's arguments interesting, I figured I'd start my World Lit class that night by reading them aloud to my kids and seeing what happened.

I began with a part in which Gorra relates an anecdote, passed along to him by the novelist Anita Desai, about a writing workshop in which a white man who had been raised in India and an Indian woman who was studying in the United States both submitted stories set in an Indian kitchen. The white man described the physical details of the kitchen quite precisely, while the Indian woman didn't describe them at all. When Desai mentioned this, the Indian woman said that everyone—at least in India—knows what a kitchen looks like, there's no need to describe it. Kristin Miller, a quiet girl who comes to class in scrubs, said that she

thought the Indian woman was respecting the reader's intelligence.

Gorra then argued that, like the Indian woman in Desai's workshop, Narayan didn't, metaphorically speaking, describe kitchens, that there was a distinct lack of details in his writing. However, critics such as V. S. Naipaul respond that the refusal to detail amounts to an elision of reality, and most often of hardship. So, I asked my kids, how did those two concerns relate to each other: on the one hand, Narayan is respecting the reader's intelligence by not telling him things he already knows, but is he at the same time limiting his intelligence by omitting facts?

I was met with silence. So, what about "The Schooner *Flight*," which we'd read two weeks before? Did they feel like Derek Walcott objectively presented the facts, or that he editorialized? Overall, the latter. But in relation to *Requiem*, which we'd read the week before, the class was evenly split. Gracie, to whom I taught English 102, offered that *Requiem* featured a lot of detail, and cited the opening section, in which another woman in line asks Akhmatova if she can describe the situation, and Akhmatova says that she can.

"All right," I said, "but you can't really name any details of anything that happens in the poem—you don't know what the prison looks like, you don't even know if it has bars, you have no idea what any of the other women waiting in line look like—"

Morgan, who never talks in class, cut me off: "But that's not the point. I don't want to be bothered with stupid, pointless details." She felt strongly about it. I asked them if they ever wanted detail.

"Newspaper articles use detail," said Alexandria, "because they're trying to persuade you of something. You use detail to persuade people that something actually happened. Akhmatova isn't detailed about setting or what people look like, but she's very detailed about how people feel."

"I agree with that," said Morgan.

❧

In 1949, after her son Lev had already been in prison for ten years, he was sentenced to another seven. Akhmatova, in an attempt to free him, wrote overtly Communist poetry. In "In Praise of Peace," for instance, she calls Stalin "The true master of life,/ The sovereign of mountains and rivers." That level of deliberate self-degradation, although in the service of love, is literally obscene. It also did not hasten Lev's release.

On *Letterman* last night Dave was interviewing Charles Barkley about the upcoming NCAA basketball championship, for which Barkley will be a commentator. After a couple of little jokes, he asked Barkley if it was difficult to comment on college basketball, since he usually covered professional basketball.

"No," said Barkley, "the only hard thing is learning all those names. But

basketball is basketball. A lot of people think they know about basketball because they know a lot of players' names."

I've always admired Barkley, and loved how he distinguished between knowing players' names and understanding basketball as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. This is Russia for Akhmatova: she understands it beyond its players. And yet she gave in—maternal grief overwhelmed understanding. But not permanently, and she never included those poems in her catalogue.



My UW–Madison friend Liz's mother has been a special ed teacher for twenty years, and Liz—at least now—would like to teach elementary school for her entire life. As a result, we both feel extremely strongly and personally about the idea that teachers are worthless. She and I are in an NCAA tournament pool together, and she has named her bracket—you have to name it—"The Workers Are Going Home," in honor of the lyric from Weezer's "My Name Is Jonas." When I see it I begin to cry, and I don't even really like Weezer. I post on Liz's Facebook wall that I agree with her, that these Republicans want to turn Wisconsin into Mississippi, and that I would know what a disaster that is better than almost anyone. When I tell my wife Nicole about the interaction, minus the Weezer and crying, she tells me that I have it a little wrong: the Republicans may have convinced some voters that teachers are worthless, but it's because teachers are so powerful that Republicans are trying to outlaw them; it's like Frederick Douglass said—once slaves started learning to read it was only a matter of time.



My class's favorite part of *A Film about Anna Akhmatova* was when Naiman, before entering Akhmatova's dacha, tells the camera that the tour guide is a liar. He then walks to the door, and she lets him in and shows him around. She tells him things he believes to be false—like what purposes different rooms served—and he makes faces at the camera behind her back. She, for her part, says that the tour consists of facts about Akhmatova and the house, as well as recitations of her and Akhmatova's poetry.

"Do you think," said Alexandria, "that she tells the people on the tour which poems are hers and which are Akhmatova's?"

I have many favorite parts of *A Film about Anna Akhmatova*, but one of them is when Naiman says that it has been reported that he was Akhmatova's secretary, but that was false. What would happen, he said, is that she would dictate a poem and he would type it. The first time he asked her if she wanted to do another one, but she said that she had a rule: Only do one thing a day. Anyway, said Naiman, I performed secretarial tasks for Akhmatova for four or five hours a day, but I was not her secretary.



On January 30, 1911 in Kiev, Akhmatova wrote the following poem:

The heart's memory of the sun grows faint.
The grass is yellower.
A few early snowflakes blow in the wind,
Barely, barely.

The narrow canals have stopped flowing—
The water is chilling.
Nothing will ever happen here—
Oh, never!

The willow spreads its transparent fan
Against the empty sky.
Perhaps I should not have become
Your wife.

The heart's memory of the sun grows faint.
What's this? Darkness?
It could be! ... One night brings winter's first
Hard freeze.

We read this the week after we discussed Gorra's Introduction to *The Guide*. I tell them that there are adjectives in the poem, but basically no details. Why is that?

"Because," says Morgan, "she wants you to focus on the action."

"But," I say, "there isn't really any action—the whole poem can be summarized as, 'The sun's going down, winter's coming, perhaps I should not have become your wife.'"

"Maybe," says Andrew, "the poem is about feeling like there's nothing going on, and so there's nothing going on in regards to details or plot."

Morgan says, "What about 'Perhaps I should not have become/ Your wife?'" She seems to really like Akhmatova.

"So that's the whole poem?" says Andrew.

"Doesn't it say it all?"

The class starts to murmur a little bit, so I say, "What do the rest of you think?"

More murmuring, but nobody says anything. I write on the board:

Perhaps I should not have become
Your wife.

I give them a second to read it, then have them vote on whether or not they think it's a good poem. (We do a lot of voting.) All of them think it's good, and

Andrew says, "I don't know if it says it all, but it says a lot. Do you think it'd be better if that stanza was the whole poem?"

I write on the board:

The willow spreads its transparent fan
Against the empty sky.
Perhaps I should not have become
Your wife.

We vote on whether we like this as a poem, which we all do, and then whether we like it better than the two-line version, but we can't decide. So I give them an hour to rearrange the poem, as a class, however they want to, adding and deleting whatever they like, then go up to the fourth floor and walk from my desk to the water-fountain over and over, and the same with the bathroom. I try to read, but I've been reading all day; I call Nicole, but she's at the bar with a friend. After an hour, I walk back into the class and say, "Will one of you read me all of your revisions of the poem?"

They all stand up with their books in their hands. The realization that they're going to recite their poem together crosses my face, and they laugh at my surprise. I sit down, and Trell—who was a regional R & B star for a couple years before enrolling at USM—looks around the room. Everybody's quiet. He says, "1, 2, 3, go," and they begin to slowly read:

The heart's memory of the sun grows faint.
The grass is yellower.
A few early snowflakes blow in the wind,
Barely, barely.

The narrow canals have stopped flowing—
The water is chilling.
Nothing will ever happen here—
Oh, never!

The willow spreads its transparent fan
Against the empty sky.
Perhaps I should not have become
Your wife.

The heart's memory of the sun grows faint.
What's this? Darkness?
It could be! ... One night brings winter's first
Hard freeze.

They watch me closely for a reaction and smirk and grin, but in an inclusive way, as though they think that I'll enjoy this, which I do—I have to bite my lip to keep from crying tears of joy at the sight of thirty World Lit students choosing to recite their rewritten poem aloud like first-graders. So many people are so scared of poetry, as though it's an unpredictable dog, and they declaim

Akhmatova's sad song exultantly. When they finish, I say, "So why did you decide to do it Akhmatova's way?"

"Well," says Trel, "we started talking about how a woman saying 'Perhaps I should not have become/ Your wife' is like the beginning of winter, in that it doesn't seem like things are likely to, at least for the most part, get warmer for awhile. It's a depressing thing to say. And then, at least here in Mississippi, but I think most places, sudden darkness is freezing and scary, which is also how 'Perhaps I should not have become/ Your wife' is—it sounds like she's going to kill him. So it all comes together."

❧

Note

* I'm referring to the bill recently passed by Wisconsin's newly elected Republican governor, Scott Walker, along with the Republican-majority state House and Senate, to essentially outlaw teacher's unions. All teachers would be put on one-year contracts and could be fired without cause.

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ON RECORD—
POETS AS HISTORIANS,
STORYTELLERS &
WITNESSES

✿ Enrichment & Repair: How Poetry Can Refresh Our Vision

BY THOMAS R. SMITH

We are accustomed to hearing that poetry is useless, accomplishes nothing, in the words of Auden, “makes nothing happen.” That may be true, though I believe that even in the arena of politics and great social change, not to speak of more personal realms, the poems of Neruda and Akhmatova, among others, have indeed made a very great difference in the lives of people and societies.

I want to say a little about two related aspects of poetry that in my experience have the power to change lives for the better, if not the reader’s than certainly the poet’s (though poets’ most fervent wish is that readers will somehow be better for the fact that the poet has written).

I am going to address the subject of how poetry can help repair our world and the accomplishment of that repair by way of what I call the process of enrichment.

First, an example of repair.

In 1942, the French poet Francis Ponge published a collection of prose poems titled, in Beth Archer’s translation, *Taking the Side of Things*. These were prose poems about the most ordinary, least literary subjects imaginable: a crate, a candle, an orange, a pebble.

The same year, while Ponge and his family hid from the Nazis in a rural French village, Ponge became fascinated with common hand soap—in short supply during wartime—and wrote a book-length prose poem celebrating it, called, unsurprisingly, *Soap*. Given its obsessive subject matter, *Soap* is amazingly readable—in fact it foams and bubbles, so to speak, with Ponge’s humor, wisdom, enthusiasm and delight in his subject. Here is a brief sample:

There is nothing in nature comparable to soap. No stone is so modest nor, at the same time, so magnificent.

To be frank, there is something adorable about its personality. Its behavior is inimitable.

It begins with a perfect reserve.

Soap displays at first a perfect self-control, though more or less discreetly scented. Then, as soon as one occupies oneself with it ... what magnificent elan! What utter enthusiasm in the gift of itself! What generosity! What volubility, almost inexhaustible, unimaginable!

One may, besides, soon be done with it, yet this adventure, this brief

encounter leaves you—this is what is sublime—with hands as clean as you’ve ever had.

(Lane Dunlop, trans.)

Ponge’s poems may be somewhat esoteric, perhaps even difficult, for those unfamiliar with the prose poem form. Uninitiated readers may ask, “What did Ponge think he was doing in these strange hybrid paragraphs?”

Ponge wrote insightfully about his philosophical approach, never more clearly than in a 1950 essay on the painter Braque’s drawings. What Ponge says Braque is doing in his art happens to be an exact description of what Ponge is doing in *his* art:

Never, it would seem, from the time the world is a world, never has the world in the mind of man—and precisely, I suppose, from the time he began seeing the world as no more than the field of his action, the time and place of his power—never has the world *functioned* so little or so badly in the mind of man.

It no longer functions at all except for a few artists. And if it does function, it is only because of them.

Here then is what some few men feel, and from that moment their life is traced out for them. There is only one thing for them to do, one function to fulfill. They have to open up a workshop and take the world in for repairs, the world in pieces, as it comes to them.

From then on, any other plan is wiped out: it is no more a question of transforming the world than explaining it, but merely putting it back into running order, piece by piece, in their workshop.

(“Braque-Drawings,” trans. Beth Archer)

Here we have the key to Ponge. Each of his prose poems takes a piece of the world—which for Europeans was badly broken by two world wars—into his writing workshop for repairs.

And how does Ponge “repair” these pieces of the broken world? He does so by attending to them, paying attention, not only to the factual aspect of them, the reality of them, but also by honoring them with the application of a sophisticated, linguistically savvy wit that might be said, in the best sense, to *play* with them. Thus in Ponge we sense a curious mixture of the grief of loss and brokenness balanced with the joy of a playfulness that brings the poet back into a living relationship with what was lost, which may finally be less the thing itself than the poet’s relationship to it. In other words, writing *Soap* helps restore imaginatively the actual soap that is lost to daily life through wartime shortages.

The term I give to Ponge’s way of repair is *enrichment*. Enrichment is a value-added approach to poetry. It stands in direct contrast to the kind of poem, all too common in our time, in which the poet adds no imaginative dimension to an experience, but merely reports it in a journalistic way. I believe that the

motivation to write such poems is wholly honorable—in a world where we are surrounded by 24/7 misinformation and outright lies, there is value in straightforward reporting or witnessing, in honestly saying what happened. But true creative repair demands more of the poet than mere reportage. True creative repair depends not only on reportage but on imaginative enrichment.

The English literary scholar Jonathan Bate has said, “Freshness of vision is life.” Too often our overly journalistic poems reflect the staleness we paradoxically feel amidst the unceasing barrage of the “new.” Imagination freshens all subjects to which it is applied, lifts all boats of the commonplace. Even poems about grave contemporary issues and events can and must be freshened with the enlivening element of imaginative vision.

That freshening of everything Ponge’s vision touched is his great project. In our hemisphere, Pablo Neruda spectacularly succeeded in enlivening his subjects, enriching them with the freshness of metaphor. Neruda’s protean series of *odas elementales*, odes to elemental or ordinary things, applies a kind of Midas touch of imagination to a stunningly diverse range of subjects, most of them as mundane as waves, socks, cats, and dictionaries. Perhaps surprisingly, given the poets’ temperamental and stylistic differences, Neruda is one of the purest practitioners of Ponge’s way of repair, whether he knew of Ponge’s work or not. Since the first of Neruda’s three collections of odes appeared in 1954, it’s likely that the cosmopolitan Chilean had encountered Ponge’s *Taking the Side of Things*, a popular and influential book in its day. The ode, I should add, was a form that by the middle of the last century had fallen out of favor with English-language poets, the horrors of modern mechanized mass slaughter perhaps having reduced Westerners’ inclination to praise.

Here is one of Neruda’s odes that shirks neither the demands of truth nor of imagination:

Ode to Salt

I saw the salt
 in this shaker
 in the salt flats.
 I know
 you
 will never believe me,
 but
 it sings,
 the salt sings, the hide
 of the salt plains,
 it sings
 through a mouth smothered
 by earth.
 I shuddered in those deep
 solitudes
 when I heard
 the voice
 of

the salt
in the desert.
Near Antofagasta
the entire
salt plain
speaks:
it is a
broken
voice,
a song full
of grief.
Then in its own mines
rock salt, a mountain
of buried light,
a cathedral through which light passes,
crystal of the sea, abandoned
by the waves.

And then on every table
on this earth,
salt,
your nimble
body
pouring out
the vigorous light
over
our foods.
Preserver
of the stores
of the ancient ships,
you were
an explorer
in the ocean,
substance
going first
over the unknown, barely open
routes of the sea-foam.
Dust of the sea, the tongue
receives a kiss
of the night sea from you:
taste recognizes
the ocean in each salted morsel,
and therefore the smallest,
the tiniest
wave of the shaker
brings home to us
not only your domestic whiteness
but the inward flavor of the infinite.

(Robert Bly, trans.)

I would like to stress here that in laying out these thoughts about enrichment and repair, my intent is to reach beyond the aesthetic properties of poetry into that area in which poetry is actually of use in our lives. What I am saying here about the practice of poetry can apply to any of the arts. I believe that these capacities for enrichment and repair are a crucial part of the reason human beings do art, beyond the appeal of the aesthetic or the lure of beauty, which of course is also important. And in this respect there is a basic practicality to art often overlooked in the superficial view.

I'll bring one more poet into our discussion, the English Romantic poet John Clare. Clare's whole development as a poet crystallizes around the process of repair, a process in which, literally, his sanity was at stake.

The loss against which Clare struggled was the removal of access to his rural environs through an act of Parliament called Enclosure. Clare, a self-educated man who made a living at farm labor near his native village of Helpston, was 16 years old when the Enclosure Act of 1809 declared certain common lands private and made off-limits countryside Clare had roamed freely since boyhood. The radical insecurity of losing his literal grounding in the land of his childhood seems to have unhinged Clare; consequently, he spent the last 27 years of his life in and out of mental asylums, though fortunately this does not appear to have diminished his creativity. Clare wrote thousands of poems, many of which have not yet been published.

In the sonnet "The Gypsy Camp," written during Clare's last long asylum stint, we can read his own radically tenuous position on earth in the displacement and unprotection of the gypsies:

The snow falls deep, the forest lies alone,
 The boy goes hasty for his load of brakes,
 Then thinks upon the fire and hurries back;
 The gypsy knocks his hands and tucks them up
 And seeks his squalid camp half hid in snow
 Beneath the oak which breaks away the wind
 And bushes close with snow like hovel warm.
 There stinking mutton roasts upon the coals
 And the half-roasted dog squats close and rubs,
 Then feels the heat too strong and goes aloof;
 He watches well but none a bit can spare,
 And vainly waits the morsel thrown away.
 'Tis thus they live—a picture to the place,
 A quiet, pilfering, unprotected race.

I find Clare, in his failure to maintain mental equilibrium, a poignant example of the *limits* of poetry's capacity for repair. No poet has wielded in his work the particulars of his native place in more thorough, knowledgeable detail than Clare, and perhaps no one has so thoroughly memorialized a place with its customs, flora and fauna. And still that wasn't enough. Though poetry enriched Clare's unenviable situation through a mad sort of imagination, it wasn't enough to significantly repair the damage inflicted on his mental balance by Enclosure.

Clare was also a sufferer of what Glenn Albrecht, an Australian professor, has named *solastalgia*. This strange word (which I encountered in Richard Louv's recent book, *The Nature Principle*) combines Latin and Greek roots for "comfort" and "pain" to define "the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault." It is an emotion many of us feel today as development encroaches on the places that have been dear to us in the past, as development can be said to have encroached on John Clare's place in the early 19th century. In Wisconsin, the political events of the past few years may deliver a sharp stab of solastalgia for the state we thought we'd known all our lives, which now seems as vanished as Clare's free fields and woods. Solastalgia is a concept that urgently needs to enter the mainstream of contemporary thought.

As human beings, we live increasingly in the midst of loss, some of it the inevitable result of change over which no one has control. We lose not only to human-made change but to natural change. If we live long enough, we may lose our health, and we will certainly lose our youth. Many elderly people sense that they are exiled from their former, vital selves, from a vanished homeland of their personal past. They find the present, to paraphrase Cormac McCarthy, "no country for old people." The practice of poetry, I am suggesting, can be useful in facing such inevitable loss.

At the very least, writing "The Gypsy Camp" gave John Clare a way of sharing his loss with others, even with you and me. That is a consolation. That there is a *you* to hear us at all is a consolation. That we can write poems to memorialize our losses is a consolation—even if we are so unlucky as to be writing them in a mental institution.

William Wordsworth posited that the original function of poetry was *epitaphic*—it marked a location where someone or something had passed or was lost. Though scholars roundly disagree with Wordsworth, there is a grain of emotional truth in what he says.

Marking a loss is part of how we repair that loss inside us, to the extent that we can. For a while, as we make our epitaphic art, we are reunited with the object of our loss. A poet friend of mine who lost a child provides an example of this process from her grief work. "One of the metaphors they use at the Center for Grief is that of a lovely piece of pottery that is shattered. Rather than throwing the shards away, one can keep them and fit them into a mosaic, thus creating a new bit of art from the pieces." That is what Ponge and Neruda do in their poems, and what we all must do to move through life's losses.

I don't mean to suggest that this process I call enrichment and repair heals every injury life deals us. It doesn't. I am not invoking *closure*, that word that so bedevils people who've sustained crushing losses when it's uttered by well-meaning would-be comforters. No matter how we reduce the pain and introduce a certain amount of repair through enrichment, if the loss is deep enough, there will be scar tissue and subtractions. Things will not return to the way they were. The loss, especially, of another human being cannot be "repaired." That loss will remain. But poetry may be instrumental in helping us live through it and with it.

Originally given as a talk at the The Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets fall conference in Stevens Point, October 29, 2011.

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✂ Interview with Brenda Cárdenas

BY WENDY VARDAMAN

WV: Do you see yourself as an academic poet, a community poet, or both?

BC: I don't mean to buck the question, but I try to resist such categories and divisions, so I'd say that I see myself as both in that I am a university professor, so I do work in the academy, and I am also an active member of several communities (both local and global). In addition, during different periods of my life, I spent a lot of time organizing community arts events, working for community arts and cultural organizations (I haven't always been an academic), and doing my part as a social-political activist.

Furthermore, as a reader, I do not privilege poetry that has been deemed "academic" by others, nor do I dismiss it. That term means different things to different people. Some see "academic" poetry as that which is especially difficult, obscure, and/or erudite, whereas others see "academic" poetry as that which is overly crafted and self-indulgent without depth, risk, or inventiveness—what Silliman has called the School of Quietude. So what is academic poetry? The same question applies to the term "community poet." For some people that term implies poetry that is accessible (which is another problematic term, especially when it means transparent), outwardly political, or that lives in the terrain of "spoken word." Yet, we know of many poets who write very profound, inventive poetry and who are quite committed to community. We might hear complex, nuanced spoken word from the voice of one poet and clichés that rely on the gratuitous manipulation of readers from the voice of another performance poet.

My work varies from quite accessible (perhaps to a fault), to deceptively simple (with more there than meets the eye upon a first read), to more demanding of the reader. It also varies from poems that lend themselves to oral performance (and have been called spoken word) to those which are so tied to the page that they lose meaning/nuance if the reader doesn't see them perform on the page. Some of my work is also translingual and so privileges a bilingual reader. Such a poem might be "difficult" in a very different way for a monolingual academic than it is for a bilingual reader who has never studied literature. I'm both an academic and a community poet. Community—and I do not take that term lightly—on multiple levels and in many incarnations is paramount to my essence as a human being. I also love learning. Why else would I have spent my life in college?

I want to be challenged, my mind to be stretched, to be left with more questions when I read a poem, but I also want to recognize a glimmer of something—to find some way into the poem. Ultimately, as a person and poet, I want to grow and play an active role in my own and my community's (daily) transformation.

WV: Tell me about how you became interested in poetry. Did you write poems as a child, and if you did, who or what inspired you to do that? How and when did you decide to become a "professional poet"?

BC: I became interested in stories as a small child because one of my aunts and a few of my grandparents were especially imaginative and prolific storytellers. My nuclear family lived in a two-flat upstairs from my Aunt Elia and Uncle Karel (a Mexican American married to a Yugoslavian immigrant—imagine the mix of languages in that household!) until I was about six years old, and then we moved next door to my maternal grandparents; that grandma was quite the sparkplug, never lacking for vivid euphemisms. My paternal grandparents and another aunt, uncle and set of cousins lived less than a mile away, so I spent a lot of time with family and especially with adults. I have fond memories of all the kids gathering at the feet of my grandfather Cárdenas to listen to his stories about growing up in Mexico, folktales like the Llorona legend, or tall tales he made up. My aunt could keep me occupied with a box of buttons and endless stories while she sat at her sewing machine crafting entire four-piece suits. My parents and aunts also read storybooks to me from time to time. They say that long before I went to school and learned to read, I would memorize the stories they read to me, sit down with the book and turn the pages, pretending I was reading.

I began writing stories as a child. My aunt Elia used to make me blank books by binding together with yarn the scrap paper my uncle and father had brought home from work. My fifth grade teacher assigned free-writing time, which I cherished. While my peers moped and complained about it, I would fill pages and pages of my composition book. This forward-thinking teacher also held one-on-one conferences with each student. I never forgot the time she told me that I should be a writer. At home, I often hid at the back of a small closet, sitting on top of my mother's shoes with a flashlight in hand, filling notebooks. For me, this was a very personal, private endeavor, and I didn't want my brothers to know I was writing lest they tease me for not being out shooting hoops or dodging the balls they loved to whip just past my head.

The specific genre of poetry came later in high school. A class in American authors introduced me to Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, William Carlos Williams, e.e. cummings and others. I took a creative writing course then and had an awful little poem about the seasons published in the high school newspaper. Later in college, I was further inspired to write poetry in my creative writing classes.

I still don't like to think of myself as a "professional poet," as I do not make a living from writing and publishing poetry. I make my living as a professor, and although my teaching in a creative writing program is certainly directly related to my writing, I write when and because I am inspired to do so by living, because I witness and/or seek to understand something that I feel can only be adequately addressed by poetry, or because I see a challenge with which I want to wrestle. While my writing is often grounded in the world around me, I don't believe in only writing about what I know, but rather in exploring and learning through writing. It is also one of the few activities that can both take me out of myself and push me much deeper into myself for long stretches of time—one of the few in which I become fully immersed. When I'm really engaged in the process, it's a bit like a trance. I won't even hear someone who is calling my name. Some people have this kind of experience when running or meditating, and I've recently fallen in love with gardening because for me, it can be

incredibly meditative. But nothing collapses time for me, and nothing challenges me like writing. It can be as frustrating as it is marvelous, and I do suffer from writing paralysis at times, which is painful, as it is the process of writing, as opposed to the product, that is most important to me. The phrase “professional poet” always seems more tied to business and product. I do publish poems and give readings/talks, so I realize that is a kind of professionalization, but I wasn’t involved in such activities on a regular basis until I was in my late twenties.

WV: What poets and writers or other artists have influenced you? Do you have favorites?

BC: There are countless poets, writers, and artists who have influenced me at different times in my life. Due to a fairly broad aesthetic, I do not have one or two favorites. I appreciate strong poems in a number of different styles created from many different approaches. What matters is that the piece works—that it does what it attempts to do so well that it appears effortless, that it resonates, makes me want to revisit it, inspires me to continue questioning or thinking through something.

But to answer your question more directly, in college level Spanish language and literature courses, I read and appreciated the work of Federico García Lorca, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, and Rosario Castellanos. Back then I was also reading American poets like James Wright, William Stafford, Philip Levine, Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich, Lucille Clifton, Ruth Stone, James Schuyler, Frank O’Hara, Jack Spicer, Amiri Baraka, Philip Whalen, Charles Simic, Wendell Berry (so many men!!) among many others, as well as some of the great Latin American fiction writers like Gabriel García Márquez, Juan Rulfo, Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, and Miguel Ángel Asturias.

Down the line in the early 90s, I developed an interest in Native American fiction and poetry, much of which I still love: Leslie Marmon Silko (I think *Ceremony* is one of the finest American novels ever written), Louise Erdrich, Louis Owens, Joy Harjo, and Simon Ortiz. I was left breathless by Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and *Beloved*. (Who wasn’t?) And I finally found Chicana poet Lorna Dee Cervantes’ *Emplumada*, which had a strong influence on me just as I started to get more serious about my own writing. Her work led me to a number of other US Latino/a poets and writers that became quite important to me. There are far too many to name here, but some key works were Tomás Rivera’s poetic novel, *Y no se lo tragó la tierra / And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, which is, shamefully, one of the books recently banned from the Tucson Public Schools; Alurista’s poetry volume *Spik in Glyph*; Carlos Cumpián’s *Coyote Son*; Carlos Cortez’s body of work (both prints and poems); Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands / La Frontera*, also banned in Tucson; and Victor Hernández Cruz’s early books like *Snaps*, *By Lingual Wholes*, and *Tropicalization*. Eventually, I came to more Latino/a poets—and I’d like to simply say poets here (without the Latino/a qualifier)—who are among my favorites today: Juan Felipe Herrera, Cecilia Vicuña, Maurice Kilwein Guevara, Demetria Martinez, and Frank Lima. I also became inspired by the work of Tim Siebels, Li-Young Lee, Ai, Wanda Coleman, Etheridge Knight, and June Jordan, among others at that time.

Although they've been around since the 1930's, when I was in school, no professor assigned the Objectivists—poets like Charles Reznikoff, Carl Rakosi, and George Oppen. I knew the names and had read a poem or two but finally came to digging into a pile of their books much later in life than I wish I had. This is true as well of other greats like Jackson Mac Low, to whose work my husband introduced me, not to speak of visual and sound poets like Steve McCaffrey, bpNichol, Mary Ellen Solt, Johanna Drucker, Derek Beaulieu, and Tracie Morris.

Finally, over the past ten years or so, I've also become quite fond of the poetry (and translations in some cases) of Craig Santos Perez, Mark Nowak, Haryette Mullen, Valerie Martinez, Peter Gizzi, Daniel Borzutzky, Paul Martinez Pompa, Rosa Alcalá, Shin Yu Pai, Tracie Morris, Tom Pickard, Claudia Rankine, Ed Roberson, Edwin Torres, Lisa Jarnot, Arthur Sze, Elizabeth Willis, Cole Swensen, Emmy Perez, Adrian Castro, Thomas McGrath, Cathy Park Hong, Jaime Saenz, C. D. Wright, Terrance Hayes, Susan Howe, Roberto Tejada, Christian Bok, G. S. Giscombe, Kevin Young, Thomas A. Clark, Anne Carson, Nikky Finney, A. Van Jordan, and do I have to end this list (there are so many more)?

Notice I didn't even begin to get into visual and performance artists, many of whom have had a major influence on me and my work, especially Guillermo Gomez-Peña, Coco Fusco, and Ana Mendieta.

WV: Favorite Wisconsin or Midwestern authors?

BC: Wisconsin poets Lorine Niedecker, Maurice Kilwein Guevara, Timothy Yu, Karl Gartung, Kimberly Blaeser, Dawn Tefft, and Roberto Harrison (I know he's my husband, but he's brilliant just the same); Chicagoans Gwendolyn Brooks, Carlos Cortez, Daniel Borzutzky, Ed Roberson, Paul Martinez Pompa, Simone Muench, Kristy Odelius, Nina Corwin, Tony Trigilio, Garin Cycholl, Edward Hirsch, Tychimba Jess, and Patricia Smith (the last three now in other places); originally from Michigan, Toi Derricotte, and this list too is missing many.

WV: You're from Milwaukee, but left for grad school, spent more time away in Chicago, and then returned. What brought you back to Milwaukee?

BC: Oh, it's a long story, but suffice it to say that I had family and friends in Milwaukee and was teaching full-time at a community college in Chicago with a huge teaching load but not a high enough salary to get beyond living paycheck to paycheck (to own a residence or save for travel). We had just gone back to work after a pretty long and brutal strike to save our health insurance during which I had been active and vocal. Although I was tenured, my job was not in danger, and the strike was certainly well worth it, the aftermath was pretty ugly. I landed a job teaching at MATC in Milwaukee, which paid a lot more money than the school in Chicago, so I decided to head home where I had aging family members and old friends. After a few years, I was quite fortunate to be hired at UW–Milwaukee where I teach now. I lost quite a bit of that MATC salary moving over to UWM, but I'm happy there—the students and courses I have the opportunity to create and teach are great. I also met my husband once I

returned to Milwaukee, so I ultimately made the right decision although the present political situation with the extreme right wing running Wisconsin is incredibly ruinous and depressing. Financially, the move back to Milwaukee was a giant disaster. But in very personal ways and in other aspects of the academic profession, it was a great decision.

WV: How does being a poet in Milwaukee compare to being a poet in Chicago? Do you ever feel isolated or at a disadvantage as an artist living in the Midwest? Have you spent any time outside the Midwest?

BC: I've been on the Midwestern tour my whole life—born and raised in Milwaukee; moved to other parts of Wisconsin during my twenties, including the Appleton area; returned to Milwaukee to teach high school for about three years; then went to Ann Arbor, Michigan, for graduate school and spent five years there; moved from there to Chicago for about nine years; and then back to Milwaukee. I seem to be perpetually bound to the Midwest.

In terms of the comparison you raise between Milwaukee and Chicago, I'd say that Chicago's arts environment is richer in that it is more aesthetically and culturally diverse and lively than any other Midwestern city's. There are so many different poetries being written and published locally in Chicago, and there are venues that host readings in bookstores, cafés, libraries, bars, parks, galleries, houses, festivals all over the city on any given evening, but that makes sense given Chicago's size, literary history, and cultural diversity. At the same time, Milwaukee has Woodland Pattern Book Center, which for me is the crown jewel of the Midwest. Hands down, it has to be one of the two or three best bookstores in the nation for purchasing poetry, and for the past 36 years it has showcased readings and workshops by poets and writers from all over the country and world, along with giving us visual art shows, a film series, and concerts by musicians/composers from Marilyn Crispell's contemporary jazz piano to Alash—an incredible group of Tuvan throat singers. Without WP, I might feel much more isolated in the Midwest. Of course, writers on the coasts, especially on the East coast or in San Francisco, live in the laps of publishing and more public support for the arts, so they have that advantage, but those are also very expensive places to live. In some ways, a bit of isolation can be good for a writer. It is, after all, a solitary activity. And I believe there is a big difference between a community of artists and a "scene." I'm really not at all interested in the latter and find myself wincing in reaction to folks who seem like scenesters to me no matter where they live.

WV: How often do you travel professionally, and what are some of the conferences or workshops you like to go to? Are there any particular conferences that you'd recommend to poets in Wisconsin who haven't gone to many regional or national events?

BC: I travel professionally quite often (almost too much) but not to distant enough places. Ha! In other words, I travel all over the country and very often within the Midwest, but wish I were going to conferences, workshops, and readings in Latin America, Europe, and Asia. It may be time for me to start checking out those opportunities! In 2010–2011, I traveled to Kansas City, MO

(twice); Goshen, IN; Tempe, AZ; Washington, DC; Bethesda, MD; New York, NY; Chicago, IL (several times); Greensburg, PA; La Farge, Appleton, Horicon, Fort Atkinson, WI, for readings and to Denver, CO, and Pittsburgh, PA, for conferences/residencies.

The only conference I attend regularly is the Association for Writers and Writing Programs (AWP), which is held in a different city each year, and which I'd recommend to poets who have never been to a large international writers conference, even if simply to give them a sense of what it's like when thousands of writers descend upon a city all at once. Hundreds of readings and panel talks are part of the official conference itself, and hundreds more offsite readings take place in venues all over the city; they are often some of the long weekend's best events. One could spend the whole conference in the book fair alone learning about what has been published in the past year. At the same time, the AWP conference is so large that it becomes exhausting and overwhelming at times. Plus, one has to tolerate a fair amount of posing and "networking" (to put it nicely), which shoves the whole "professionalization of the arts" in one's face. For this reason, some poets I know stay far away, but I've always learned something valuable about literature or writing or heard some amazing poet whose work I was not familiar with before the conference, so I usually attend.

I had a once-in-a-lifetime experience attending the Cave Canem Annual Writing Retreat as a visiting Letras Latinas poet in 2010. Cave Canem is a writer's organization co-founded by Toi Dericotte and Cornelius Eady that describes itself as a "home for black poets." I was incredibly fortunate to be chosen for a particular collaborative exchange between Letras Latinas, a Latino/a literary organization, and Cave Canem, but I would highly recommend this organization to any African American poet who might read this. Its week-long workshop/retreat is serious, intense, challenging, and more about community than just about any such experience I've ever witnessed. [For more on Cave Canem, read Bianca Spriggs' essay.]

I've heard great things about Split This Rock and Canto Mundo but have never applied to attend either of them because I always seem to have a huge event to tend to in the summers (in the summer of 2011 I got married, and the summer before, I was going up for tenure, to name a few). I'm hoping that's it for awhile where giant life changing events are concerned so that I might apply to those workshops/retreats in the future.

WV: Tell me more about your involvement with Letras Latinas and Cave Canem, and the partnership between them. What are the benefits of those organizations to their members? Are there any regional equivalents, and if not, would that be desirable?

BC: I spoke briefly about Cave Canem above. My involvement with that organization came through a collaborative effort between it and Letras Latinas and took two forms: my participation as a Visiting Poet at its 2010 residency/retreat in Pennsylvania and performing two poetry readings with several Cave Canem fellows at the American Poetry Museum in Washington, DC, and at the Bethesda Writers Center in MD.

Letras Latinas is the literary division (or wing) of the Institute for Latino/a Studies at the University of Notre Dame. My chapbook *From the Tongues of Brick and Stone* was published by Momotombo Press, which is an imprint of that Institute. It was chosen for publication by Francisco Aragón, the Letras Latinas director, who had read my work online and in an anthology of Midwestern Latina poetry that I had co-edited several years before.

Francisco, an exceptional poet and translator himself, is a tireless promoter of poetry in general and especially of US Latino/a poetry, which he feels helps expand and strengthen that body of literature. Letras Latinas is involved in so many projects that I cannot name them all here. Suffice it to say that they include a chapbook press, a first book prize, a second or third book prize, co-sponsoring and organizing the Palabra Pura reading series in Chicago as well as readings all over the country that each feature between two and six poets, a writer's residency prize, and collaborations with a number of other literary organizations, including Cave Canem, Con Tinta, and various publishers. See latinopoetryreview.blogspot.com for the best and most up-to-date information. Most importantly, Letras Latinas has really helped make US Latino/a writers aware of each other and helped make them visible to other US writers, critics, and publishers. The organization has inspired many Latino/a writers to become cultural workers who organize their own events (readings, workshops, etc.) or form their own organizations. It promotes collaboration. And it has really helped emerging writers get their work in the public eye via publication, performance and reviews. Cave Canem does all these things for its fellows too, but it has been doing so for much longer, and it is independent of any academic institution. It is an independent not-for-profit organization.

I do not know of any regional equivalents to these, but there are a few Midwestern organizations that do *some* similar work although not on the same scale. I'm thinking of the Gwendolyn Brooks Center at Chicago State University; the Guild Complex in Chicago, especially its Palabra Pura series, which pairs Latino/a and African American writers for readings; Contratiempo in Chicago for Spanish language writers; Kansas City's Latino Writers Collective; and some of the efforts of Woodland Pattern Book Center in Milwaukee (which I spoke about above) and Latino Arts (United Community Center) in Milwaukee.

WV: Becoming a poet, remaining a poet, are uphill battles with few rewards for most of us. What are some of the challenges facing Latino/a poets in particular, and what can be done to promote and to support their work? Are there ways—*aesthetically*, for example—that the poetry establishment or poetry journals create barriers to Latino/a writers, and what can we do to change that?

BC: Although Latinos/as are the fastest growing population in the United States with some 48 million people, and some aspects of Latino/a cultures have made their way into U. S. popular culture—certain foods, music, holidays, words and expressions—the American versions are usually watered down facsimiles of the original, detached from their full contexts and easy for non-Latinos/as to consume without understanding their complexities. Worse, we need look no further than the severe anti-immigrant legislation that targets Latinos/as in

Arizona or attacks on ethnic studies and the Dream Act, to see the right wing's malicious attempts to disenfranchise any Latinos/as except the wealthiest in the US, regardless of their legal status.

Latino/a writers are similarly often marginalized within the larger literary establishment. It was 2008 before a Latino poet, Juan Felipe Herrera, who had over 30 books published at the time, won the National Book Critics Circle Award. He has since also won the Guggenheim and was just named California's Poet Laureate—so deserved and well overdue. It is especially difficult for those who write in Spanish (even if their work is translated) or translingually, but even English-language Latina/o poets who might use allusions to non-Western myths, legends, literary texts, and histories, find that it is not uncommon for non-Latina/o readers to view the work as esoteric and inaccessible. A Spanish-language subtext (such as references to an idiomatic expression or the purposeful use of Spanish syntax) may very well exist beneath the English surface of a Latina/o poem, adding a layer of meaning or nuance to the poem and often resulting in witty word play, but this is lost on the non-Latina/o reader who does not wish to do the work necessary to read for such possibilities.

Some Latina/o poets are caught in an internal tug of war regarding when, how, and even whether to write about or refer, at least directly, to their cultures and ethnicities in their poems. For good reason, one might fear essentializing culture in this way and purposefully resist falling prey to auto-ethnography. We are all so much more than our ethnicities. At the same time, a poet doesn't want to be barred from incorporating cultural elements in her work. And then there are those who posit that one's world view is so affected by culture that no matter what a Latina/o writes about, she/he is writing a Latina/o poem. In my lifetime, I've seen more and more Latina/o poets break through these barriers and see their work published. This is partly due to their own persistence and partly due to the tireless efforts of Latino/a organizations, editors and presses.

One thing we can all do to support Latina/o poetry is to fight against the demolition of ethnic studies courses and programs in public schools, colleges and universities. Another is to apply equal reading practices to Latino/a literature that we would apply to any other literature. If one is willing to look up "foreign" words and literary, mythological, Biblical, and historical allusions when reading a poem by, say, T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound, then she/he should be willing to do the same when reading the work of a Latina/o poet. We also need non-Latinas/os to review the books of Latina/o writers and vice-versa. This is something that Letras Latinas has encouraged in the *Latino Poetry Review*, an online publication.

WV: You co-edited *Between the Heart and the Land: Latina Poets in the Midwest* (2001). Do you have any plans for a follow-up anthology or a second edition? Are there, broadly speaking, particular characteristics of Midwestern Latina poetry?

BC: I do not currently have concrete plans for a follow-up *Between the Heart and the Land* anthology although I have thought about it, especially because, since the first edition, I have learned about the work of so many more Midwestern Latina poets, and new poets have begun publishing their work over the past ten

years. At the present moment, I feel it is more imperative to work on my own writing, finish another book, and get to work on a new translation project I have before me. But I very well may consider editing a second edition in the future.

I'd have to write a long essay to adequately answer the second part of your question regarding specific characteristics of Midwestern Latina poetry, and I'm fairly certain that a new book of critical articles on Midwestern Latino/a literature is forthcoming from the University of Illinois Press (edited by William Barillas), which will speak to that question. In the 2001 anthology that I co-edited, I noticed an even stronger sense of cultural loss, isolation and being between ("neither here nor there") than I had found in Latina writing from the coasts or the Southwest at that time, although those themes are certainly present in many Latina/o texts. As one might expect, I also saw some of the work marked by the Midwestern landscape and environment—farms, fields, the Great Lakes, winter and its elements, along with the urban poems of Chicago. Most poets in the 2001 anthology wrote completely in English or in Spanish with far fewer code-switching between languages or using the Caló of Chicano/a poetry from Texas and California. Of course, Latina/o poetry has changed quite a bit over the past ten years and is now much more diverse in terms of subject/theme and aesthetic approaches. That would be as true in the Midwest as elsewhere.

WV: Appreciating the sophistication of writing that isn't familiar often requires new knowledge and the willingness to move in different directions, even to expand our notions of what poetry can be. Is there anything readers who are new to Latino/a poetry should keep in mind? Which Latino/a poets would you recommend to a reader just starting out?

BC: I already spoke to this question to some degree in my answer to your question about the barriers that Latino/a writers face. Readers should keep in mind that many Latino/a poets (albeit definitely not all of them) are bilingual to some degree, so even when writing in English, they may do so with two languages present in their minds. Those languages influence one another, and both may influence the poem even when it appears to be written in only one or the other. The scholar Frances Aparicio wrote an excellent article about this subject titled "On Sub-Versive Signifiers: US Latino/a Writers Tropicalize English," and one of the best and most apparent examples of this occurs in the early poetry of Puerto Rican poet Victor Hernández Cruz. I would also refer folks to the work of scholar Doris Sommer in her books *Bilingual Games* and *Bilingual Aesthetics*.

Readers should also keep in mind how diverse the field of Latino/a poetry is today, both in terms of the many different Latino/a cultural backgrounds of the poets (not only Chicano/a, Puerto Rican, and Cuban-American, but also writers whose Latin American roots are in Central and South American countries) and in terms of subject matters and poetics. By this I mean that while some Latino/a poets may write directly about cultural issues and use cultural signifiers in their work (with various levels of complexity), which most readers can readily identify with minimal investigation, many others steer clear of those signifiers that readers have come to expect in them—the tortillas, curanderas, Quetzalcoatl, coquis, flamboyans, papaya, and congas. Some may include issues of Latin

American history or politics in their work, such as J. Michael Martinez's book *Heredities* into which he collages translations of Hernán Cortés's accounts of his conquests, but with aims that move far beyond the exploration or reclamation of personal cultural identity. Others' work may be most influenced by experimental movements in the arts, such as the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E project or Dada and Oulipo, and here I think of the work of poets like Edwin Torres, Mónica de la Torre, and Rodrigo Toscano. Some of Torres' work uniquely blends a Nuyorican performance aesthetic of sorts with the influence of Dada, Futurism, Lettrism and visual poetry.

So it's difficult to say which poets I might recommend to readers unfamiliar with Latino/a literature. To some degree that depends upon the readers' aesthetic leanings and willingness to do some research on allusions they may not understand, to keep a Spanish-English dictionary on hand, or to read translanguaging passages for more than their denotative meaning. If the reader's objective is to get a broad background in Latino/a poetry and to obtain a sense of some of its foundational texts, then I'd suggest starting with the work of Alurista, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Demetria Martinez, Pedro Pietri, Silvia Curbelo, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Cecilia Vicuña, Ray Gonzalez, and Maurice Kilwein Guevara although that list is way too short; I'll always suggest my favorite Latino/a poet whose longevity and breadth of work speaks for itself—Juan Felipe Herrera. But I'd never suggest stopping with these, and instead to move into some of the aforementioned poets who have more recently begun to publish.

WV: I'm interested in knowing more about Sonido Ink(quieto), the spoken word/music ensemble with whom you created the 2001 CD *Chicano, Illnoize: The Blue Island Sessions*. How did you start working together? Are you still performing?

BC: Sonido Ink(quieto) is no longer performing together. We stopped in early 2003 or so simply because each member had a number of different interests and obligations he/she wished to pursue or had to tend to: I was working on tenure at a community college with a colossal teaching load, the other poet Aidé Rodríguez was finishing a Master's degree in Latin American Studies, and the musicians had all come out of *punk en español* and were involved in revitalizing that scene in Chicago by forming new punk bands. In addition, two of the musicians, Ricardo and Juan Compean (brothers), are visual artists as well as musicians (or I might even say, they are visual artists first), and had become quite productive in that arena at the time. We live in various cities now but keep in touch.

How did the group form? Basically, I had collaborated with other poets, musicians, and dancers on various projects before but, at the time, was doing solo readings in Chicago that folks characterized as performance poetry or spoken word. The Guild Complex asked me to be part of a performance art/poetry showcase, and I didn't want to simply stand up on stage and do a lively reading of my work. I wanted to mix elements into an inter-arts show, so I approached José Casas, a friend and the former guitarist of the *punk en español* band Los Crudos, to ask if he'd consider collaborating. He was happy to but felt we needed to add drums. At the time, I was working as the Youth Initiatives

Coordinator for the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum's radio station WRTE—Radio Arte (90.5 FM), a completely bilingual, youth operated radio station (which is an amazing story in itself). The station served youth from 14–21 years old, and one of our oldest students Jesús Ortiz was an excellent drummer who agreed to join José and me. I also asked fellow poet Aidé Rodríguez to be part of the newly forming troupe. The four of us performed together for that Guild Complex showcase in front of three huge abstract paintings by the artist Jeff Abbey Maldonado whose work had influenced the mood of some of our pieces. That was before we even had a name.

After another performance or two, we invited Juan Compean to join us on bass guitar, his brother Ricardo on saxophone, and another radio station student Sal Vega on turntables. Because Jesús, the drummer who we fondly referred to as Jesuscio (Dirty Jesús), had been influenced as much by hip hop as by punk and ska, the group's style became fairly eclectic. Some of the music tended more toward garage rock or punk and some toward hip-hop or rhythm and blues. Some tracks were soundscapes with José using spoons, lighters, and other objects to play the electric guitar. At times, the guys wrote music for poems that Aidé and I had already composed individually; at other times, Aidé and I wrote to music the guys were improvising during the free jams that often evolved from our rehearsals. Then we'd adjust word and music as we collaborated. The CD was a full-on DIY project. We recorded in the radio station, mixed the CD on a computer ourselves with the help of an experimental composer who worked quite a bit with digital equipment, and the Compeans designed the CD jacket, etc. A friend who worked at a printing press even printed the jacket for us at 3:00 in the morning, and we assembled ourselves.

We performed mostly around Chicago and the Midwest, everywhere from coffee houses (which was very weird for the guys) to punk bars to colleges and even Ladyfest Midwest, but also did a tour of three universities in California. I'm proud to say that, along with some paid gigs, we donated many performances to fundraisers for various grassroots organizations. It was a 100-percent Pilsen, Chicago home-spun group, which is why we titled our CD "Chicano, Illnoize: The Blue Island Sessions." The radio station where we recorded is at the intersection of Blue Island and 18th Street, which is the main drag through Pilsen. Those were the days of high energy to say the least.

WV: What are some of the differences between creating poetry for the page and for the stage? Do you have a preference for one over the other?

BC: I used to have a preference for performance poetry—the stage. Now I have a preference for the page, but I try to resist closing myself off to either. And although I understand that a flat reading is best for some people's work (and appreciate the argument that the work should speak for itself without relying on too much inflection from the poet), I simply cannot do a flat reading. Poems live too much in sound for me—in the music and rhythms of language and in the juxtaposition of languages and sounds. I hear the lines that I write—hear them before I visualize anything—and I speak them aloud over and over again as I compose and revise.

Some of the obvious differences between creating for the page vs. the stage are the attention the poet pays to the poem's performance or layout on the page, to tone and voice, and to cadence and pace. But I really feel that the best poetry lives (and works)—and may live (and work) quite differently—in both places. One might say that the manifestation on the page and the one spoken aloud are two different versions of a text or even two different texts, but they each should engage the reader/listener. An exception might be visual and sound poetics, which must rely on the printed page or the oral performance, as these are inherent to the respective forms, but even here a good poet will resist relying on the easy trick or gesture. And some consider ways to translate the visual poem to sound or a sound poem to the page. Consider bpNichol and Steve McCaffery who were prolific in both visual and sound poetics.

WV: Have you done other collaborative projects besides the anthology and your work with Sonido Ink(quieto)? What do you like about collaborative work, and how can poets get started if they've never tried it?

BC: Yes, I've done a number of collaborative projects. When I was a graduate student, I co-founded a diverse spoken word poetry troupe; there were eight of us from many different cultural/ethnic backgrounds, genders and sexual orientations, who performed together, often choreographing our voices for particular interpretations of each other's poems and, in a few cases, co-writing poems. Also through a graduate course in collaborative arts, I met and worked with another poet, a textile artist, a composer, and a digital artist to create a pretty elaborate installation piece titled "Mas Cara" in which the poetry took various forms—it was recorded with an original musical score as well as on film.

After graduate school but before moving to Chicago, I collaborated with dancer Evelyn Velez Aguayo on the performance art piece "Oh Goya! Goya!" which was included in *Corpus Delecti—Sex, Food, and Body Politics: A Season of US Latina, Caribbean, and Latin American Performance Art*, curated by Coco Fusco for the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, England. In addition, the jazz fusion band Poignant Plecostomus composed music to several of my poems, and we did a few shows together.

Once in Chicago, I was fortunate to be selected as one of the cast members of Ping Chong's (a renowned experimental theater director) *Undesirable Elements, Chicago*. The script was comprised of the personal stories of the cast members, which Chong collaged together with historical facts, songs, and choreographed movement.

Around the same time, the visual artist Jeff Abbey Maldonado created six different linoleum cut prints and gave one to each of six poets so that we could write ekphrastic poems in response to his prints. In turn, each poet gave Maldonado a poem that he would respond to with a new linocut print. The project resulted in a calendar that contained a different print-poem set for each month, along with three art exhibits/poetry performances at places like the Chicago Cultural Center and the Field Museum. It was only after those experiences that I co-edited the anthology with Johanny Vazquez Paz and started working with Sonido Ink(quieto).

Much more recently Kelly Anderson of Danceworks in Milwaukee choreographed a dance to my poem “Sonnet for Thunder Lovers and Primary Colors,” and two dancers brought the piece to life. Finally, my husband and I have done some preliminary work on a large poetry translation project we plan to complete together.

So I guess you could say that I really value both collaborative and inter-arts work, and my experience has been fairly broad. Some projects have involved two or more artists bringing works they’ve already created to each other to serve as inspiration for new pieces, and other projects involve actually composing/creating together. I find collaboration exhilarating. So many ideas and so much material are generated when different minds and talents blend. They might intersect, overlap, link, or diverge in wildly different directions. Collaboration means learning from one another, negotiating, sifting and mining, merging visions and allowing them to mutate into something new, both letting go of control and directing when necessary. Those moments when collaborators feel completely in sync with one another are intense and beautiful, and the moments when they seem to be on different planets are transformative as well. Collaborators feed one another’s creative impulses, help each other stretch past their self-imposed boundaries and shake loose what may be stuck or blocked. I’m very much a people person, definitely not a loner, and gravitate toward syncretic spaces, objects and consciousness anyway, which may be a few reasons why collaboration is more joy than agony for me. Surely, it’s not for everybody.

How to get started? Mmmmm ... Find a fellow poet or artist whose work inspires and intrigues you and who is open about sharing ideas, opinions, etc. Someone who is like-minded in some ways, but whose approaches to art and their effects are different from your own. Have a conversation about projects you’ve been considering. See where it goes. I’ve heard about a number of collaborative poems that were written online via e-mail exchanges, so while I prefer meeting face-to-face with my collaborators, that isn’t necessary.

WV: You were Poet Laureate of Milwaukee 2010–2011. Congratulations, that’s an illustrious group! What does the Poet Laureate of Milwaukee do? Did you have any particular project or goals as the city’s laureate?

BC: Thank you. It is certainly an honor to have been awarded this position. The Poet Laureate is required to make five poetry-related appearances per year with at least some of them taking place in the greater Milwaukee area. The events might include doing readings of one’s own work, giving workshops or talks, organizing readings/performances by other poets, or hosting an event by a well-known visiting poet. In reality, the Poet Laureate receives far more than five invitations to appear at local events, institutions, etc., and while it is virtually impossible to honor all the invitations, especially if one works full-time as I do, I have appeared at many colleges, universities, high schools, bookstores, interest groups, special events—even at a law firm. During my first year, I also organized a special panel discussion for Central Library titled “Earning Our Daily Bread: Poets and Their Day Jobs.” The panel included published poets who are not academics and who have a variety of careers to support themselves: Frank Lima, a poet-chef; Nina Corwin, a poet-psycho-therapist; William Fuller, a poet-trust

fund officer; Sue Blaustein, a poet-food safety inspector; and Karl Gartung, a poet-truck driver. The event drew a full house at the library.

I also organized *Cantos Latinos*, a bilingual reading and discussion by Latino/a poets, for the spring of 2012. It included Francisco Aragón, Xánath Caraza, Maurice Kilwein Guevara, Roberto Harrison, and Emma Trelles, each of a different Latino/a heritage. For the two years, of course, I did readings and workshops, as my schedule allowed, around the city, state, and nation.

WV: Madison established an unfunded Poet Laureateship in 1977. Milwaukee, under the auspices of the Milwaukee Public Library, established its laureateship in 2000. Racine and Kenosha recently appointed poets laureate—do you think more towns should do that? Is there any way that poets laureate of communities in Wisconsin could work together for larger ends? Or perhaps work with the state Poet Laureate (currently Bruce Dethlefsen) ?

BC: It's interesting that you mention this since the Wisconsin legislature and governor in their biennial budget cut the funding for the state Poet Laureate [the position is now housed at the Wisconsin Academy, a nonprofit]—the small amount the person in that position used to be paid for his/her vast efforts. Such a cut is repugnant to me; it says that the arts are not valuable and being an artist is not work, and it shows that the current state government has no regard for those things in life (like the arts) that feed our creative intellects and mental health. The small stipends that poets laureate are paid certainly are not going to balance the budget! So, I'd say that until the politicians and the citizens that elect them show more respect for arts and literature and for the services that leaders in those areas provide, we should re-consider having poets laureate for even more towns. While I congratulate the poets laureate of Racine, Kenosha, and any other town that might choose to appoint one, I also feel that instead of putting efforts and dwindling resources into many small laureateships, we might consider pooling our collective energy into supporting long-standing, nonprofit literary organizations that have a proven record of serving communities in similar ways. Their funding has also been slashed, and if we do not support them now, we are going to find ourselves in a vast wasteland. In addition, we might channel resources into helping fund new small presses. But the trick is finding new, creative ways to garner and stretch resources—publishing cooperatives and the like.

WV: It seems to me that for a fairly small state with a necessarily small number of poets, there's a lot of separation among our poetry communities—e.g., between university- and community-based poets, between Milwaukee and Madison, between page and stage. Is that your impression or not? Are some gaps more disturbing than others? Are there things we can do to bridge our differences, to promote communication and mutual interest?

BC: I don't feel that the gaps are as wide as you sense they are, or, maybe I should say that if those gaps exist, it may be at least partly because people are so preoccupied with creating categories and niches and boxing themselves or other people/poets into them. Certainly, I feel that we would all benefit from attending a larger variety of poetry events (readings, talks, etc.) in multiple

locations, as we are physically and financially able. I'd love to see more university students and faculty at the events community organizations sponsor and more community members at the events the university sponsors and opens to them. I try very hard to go to poetry events all over Milwaukee, and when I can, to other parts of the state, but I certainly miss many events I'd like to attend. Travel is an issue for a lot of people, both due to the cost of gas and the hours their jobs demand of them. So we need to be creative: tune into radio or web broadcasts of readings happening in other locales, find out about the upcoming readings in a geographic area we happen to be traveling to anyway and make an effort to attend. But all of this starts with reading as widely as we can to begin with—buying and reading small press books, subscribing to local literary magazines/journals as diverse as *Verse Wisconsin* and *Cannot Exist*, and asking local libraries to purchase such books and magazines.

WV: Many of your poems involve code-switching—between English and Spanish (for example, “Al mestizaje” or “Abuelo y sus cuentos: Origin of the Bird-Beak Mole”), between academic and vernacular (“Cartoon Coyote Goes Po-Mo”). Could you talk about what you hope to accomplish, aesthetically and poetically? Do you come at it in an academic/linguistic or a personal way, or both? Do you worry about asking too much of your readers? Can you point readers to some other contemporary poets who they might also like to read?

BC: Yes, many of my poems do involve code-switching between various languages and registers of language—what I tend to call translanguaging. First, language is symbol and sound, and I'm very drawn to the musicality of poems—the way different sounds rub up against one another and how that affects or recasts meaning, in terms of tone, timbre, and nuance. That music might be harmonious or dissonant, meditative or unnerving, playful or edgy or playfully edgy—the list goes on and on—but we feel what we hear in the body. Paying attention to sound is one way to embody a poem. This is true even when I write a poem in one language or one register. However, since I have two languages at my disposal (as well as bits and pieces of others) and various registers, as do we all, I enjoy discovering what new musics arise in the juxtapositions between, say, a Spanish syllable and an English one—in translanguaging assonance, consonance, alliteration, rhyme—or in one of the working class regionalisms I grew up hearing next to theory-speak.

Along with such play, I have always been drawn to the spaces between languages, cultures, countries, emotional and mental states (like waking and sleeping, for example)—the interstitial spaces, and the hybrid or syncretic ones that result when the two merge. For me, this is to embrace the transformation, flux, and becoming that is life. In such bringing together is the recognition that disparate elements both complement and resist one another in rich and intricate ways. My poems in part seek to explore such terrain and manifestations of being. Even more obvious, I suppose, is the notion that to be a Latina, period, and especially in this country is to be transcultural, and some of my poetry seeks to both honor and complicate that. Certainly, I have socio-political aims as well. Spanish is no more a foreign language in the United States than English or any other non-Native American language. It was actually present in the US long before English, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo supposedly protected the Spanish language

of Mexicans living in the conquered territories. Yet people have been punished in myriad ways for speaking their language. My poems embrace the notion that we should all speak multiple languages.

In some poetry that uses codeswitching, the languages other than English are heavily contextualized: The poet translates them within the line or uses only the most common “foreign” words. I feel that in my best translanguing poems, the two languages or “codes” are so interwoven together, it becomes difficult or impossible to separate them, thereby resisting the notion that English is the real language in the poem and Spanish mere decoration. That may ask too much of some readers, but my job and goals as a poet are not to please all readers or make their participation as easy as possible. In other ways, many of my poems are quite accessible (and perhaps even too much so). It’s a give and take.

I’ve already suggested a number of contemporary poets to those who read this interview. In terms of others who write translingually, in addition to some of those already mentioned, I’d suggest Craig Santos Perez (Chamorro, Spanish, Japanese, English), Barbara Jane Reyes (Spanish, Tagalog, English), Urayoan Noel (Spanish and English), Lucy Tapahonso (Diné and English), and Regine Rousseau (Haitian Creole and English).

WV: Some of the poems in *Boomerang*, “Empty Spaces,” for example, and “Our Language” speak to the interesting issues that surround translanguing code-switching: “We work in English,/ make love in Spanish/ and code-switch past our indecision.” Are you a different poet in English and in Spanish? Does your voice shift working in (and between) the two languages? Does one language allow you to articulate things you can’t say in the other?

BC: That’s a difficult question to answer. My first impulse was to say that I am not a different poet working in one language than in the other—if I were, I probably wouldn’t mix them so freely. Yet, the more I think about it, the more complicated the answer becomes. Because I was educated in English and was raised hearing English alone, Spanish alone, and a blend of the two languages and speaking either English or an English/Spanish blend in particular contexts, I’m more fluent in English than in Spanish. I have more vocabulary at the ready in English than in Spanish, and I need to speak Spanish (without using English) for about three days before I really start thinking fully in it (or dreaming in it). So my English language poems may very well be more spontaneous (at least in early drafts) and nuanced than my Spanish language ones. At least that is probably true for monolingual poems. You may have noted that I write few monolingual poems all in Spanish (I believe there are only three in *Boomerang*).

Interestingly, many of my translanguing poems that mix the languages tend to refer to (and on some level, to be about) language itself and/or culture; several (but not all) are more narrative. On the other hand, some of the English language poems tend to be quieter and more contemplative, which is interesting if we start thinking about issues of silence and speaking (permission to speak and resistance to being silenced), “official” or “academic” languages and “unofficial” or “home” languages. Of course, there are exceptions to this pattern like my series of meditations titled “Sound Waves,” which mix the languages. But my

voice does tend to shift: It is often more energized in Spanish, perhaps darker and more detailed in English, and most playful and layered in a translingual blend.

To answer the last part of your question, yes, definitely, one language allows me (or anyone) to articulate things I cannot say in the other. Some cultures do not have words for particular concepts because those concepts do not exist in that culture; on the other hand, they might have ten or fifty words for another concept (for all the slight variations within it), which do not exist in the next language/culture. Languages are gendered in different ways as well. Due to one's own closeness to a particular language (it being a first language, for example), words may also feel different in that language than in another—as though their expression of the idea is richer or fuller. The poet Francisco X. Alarcón once wrote in a poem, “Un beso/ is not just/ a kiss/ un beso is/ more dangerous/ sometimes/ even fatal.” Certainly, someone who grew up with Spanish as the main language, especially if he/she was educated in Spanish or spoke only Spanish in the home, would answer this question very differently.

WV: Do the rhythms/characteristics or typical forms of each language affect the poetry you write in the other language?

BC: Yes, most likely, especially in subconscious ways (of which I'm trying to become more conscious) like the syntaxes of the languages and the typical grammatical forms for expressing certain concepts. For example, in English, we have possessive forms of words that require an apostrophe whereas in Spanish we say that one thing is of the other—the boy's clothes/la ropa del niño. I use many “of” phrases in English (sometimes too many). The different cadences of the two languages affect how and where I might switch between them in a poem as well.

WV: Your recent book, *Boomerang*, begins with a prose poem and includes numerous examples of formal poems, like “Sonnet for Thunder Lovers and Primary Colors,” which has some wonderful sound effects, as does “By the Skin of Your Breath,” written in sapphics. Could you talk about your interest in form?

BC: I became interested in traditional European forms when, many years ago, I took a graduate course in prosody taught by Richard Tillinghast who is quite an expert in that area—in the theory and the practice, both of which were aspects of the course. I found that working in these forms taught me to think more deeply about the vessel holding the words and ideas—how that container might mirror, underscore, and help shape what is being expressed as well as when the entire notion of “a container” for a poem is way too closed and limiting. This is true also (and, perhaps, especially) when the poet has created a form for a free verse poem. Working in traditional forms was challenging, and the process helped me tighten my poetry, which was important for me since I tend toward the lush and verbose rather than the minimal. (By the way, that propensity makes me love what I don't do well, so I really enjoy reading the super spare poems of others.)

Now, where traditional forms are concerned, I'm more interested in shifting or splintering or breaking them open to a degree, so as to make them my own or

make them do something new when that fits a particular poem's context. Long after that graduate course, I also learned about non-Western forms like the ghazal and pantoum and more experimental forms/procedures like visual poems, Oulipo and aleatory poems, which I feel are equally valuable to understand and try; they present constraints that have different goals and often lead to more surprising results, as well as to ruptures in normative grammar and syntax.

WV: Do you teach form to your students at UW–Milwaukee? What's their response to that?

BC: Yes, I do teach form, especially in a particular manifestation of the capstone course for upper level undergraduates subtitled "Structures and Constraints from Traditional to Experimental," and I include much of what I spoke of above. At the outset of such a course (or unit of study) some students are eager to try various forms and procedures, whereas others (probably the majority) are a bit more hesitant—not quite buying into it—and often for good reason. They are usually not objecting to the forms' difficulty but rather to their political conservatism. Traditional forms seem old fashioned to them and out of favor in the literary world. Therefore, it's very important to me that the students come to really understand each form and how it works, but that they seek to make it their own and make it new—to experiment with it. By the end of the course, the vast majority of the students feel that their poetry has improved, their knowledge about poetry has grown, that they sit down to write with many more tools at their disposal, and that they think about communicating and making meaning in much more complex and divergent ways. This is true even if they intend to write most future poems in free verse.

WV: Whereas I used to read books that were either written in free verse or written in form, more and more poets include both, and it seems to me that's a kind of code-switching, too. Do you see it that way?

B.C.: Perhaps. It's also a way of acknowledging that traditional forms (or formal verse structures) may be the perfect vehicles for poems that almost seem to naturally roll into (or evolve into or succumb to) them, but that those forms can be equally as mundane or awkward when used over and over again and less inventively in some cases than in others. In other words, it may be a way of simply finding the best mode, shape, and "language" for each poem.

WV: What do you consider your biggest success poetically? Your biggest failure?

BC: My biggest success may be that my poetry seems to have reached a fairly diverse audience, even with its translingual elements, and by that I mean a culturally diverse audience as well as one that consists of readers both inside and outside of academe. It has crossed into both the spoken word and the print worlds. I very much appreciate being invited by community groups and organizations as well as by academic institutions to present my work, and I've been told that it is work that brings people and elements together and builds bridges.

My biggest failures are 1.) that I haven't produced enough work at my age—that I find it difficult to maintain a regular writing practice (in large part due to so

many obligations of my job) and tend to work in fits and starts and 2.) that my work isn't yet quite as challenging for readers as the poetry I currently like best to read; in other words, my own writing hasn't caught up yet with my reading, or my taste as a reader has surpassed what I currently do as a writer. But there is so much that I want to try, and so many ideas swirling around in my head that I'm committed to turning these failures around before I'm finished with this life.

WV: What poetry projects are you working on right now?

BC: I don't like to talk too concretely about projects in process, so suffice it to say that I just completed a few ekphrastic poems written in response to glass art and plan to write three or four more for that series, and I'm also starting on a series of ekphrastic collage poems that respond to an artistic rendition of a particular element of Mexican popular culture and that incorporate text from a classic Mexican novel and a scholarly book on the subject. I've also written a number of urban nature poems over the past few years and have realized that I've been creating a bestiary of sorts. My husband and I are about to begin a large translation project involving the work of a Panamanian indigenous poet.

WV: How has the political situation and groundswell of activism in Wisconsin over the last 1½ years changed you and your poetry? What does that activism and these events mean for poets and artists and for the the role of the arts in activism?

BC: I've certainly never kept quiet about my own socio-political views—solidly on the left—and I have been an activist—albeit with varying degrees of participation—since high school when I was suspended for refusing to say the Pledge of Allegiance due to some atrocity or another that our country was committing. I have worked since I was 16 years old at various jobs in both the private and public sectors, serving for the past 23 years in the field of education (through not-for-profit community organizations as well as schools, colleges, and universities). I've always supported unions and have been a union member whenever it has been an option. Among other activities, that has meant walking picket lines on an ugly month-long strike when a community college system for which I worked threatened both to diminish employees' health insurance and to raise our already ridiculously large teaching loads. Although I wrote no poems about that strike, I remember sitting on a hillside with my colleague-comrades, placards slung over our shoulders, with our laptops on fire, writing letters to the editor. I was eventually invited to read a piece on public radio that I'd written in response to a commentator's misinformation and attack on public employees. Long before that experience, I was also once fired from a part-time job for helping the full-timers start a union. I'd do both all over again ... in a minute.

So there was no question that I was going to be engaged in the Wisconsin uprising. I wrote a personal essay while traveling back and forth to Madison during those first few weeks of protest, which was published in a number of print and online publications. I also wrote a few overtly political poems during the course of the first several months. Although as a young poet I had written several such poems, I've grown away from manipulative didacticism and toward appreciating more complex, nuanced, and subtle socio-political critique. What

is a poem after all if it loses its mystery? Yet more than once at offshoot protests in Milwaukee, I was handed the mic and asked not only to speak, but to deliver poetry. There exist thousands of poems about labor and class oppression, but I could find few that seemed both appropriate to our particular context and able to invigorate a rally until I turned to Thomas McGrath. Here was the bold poem that the situation called for, but how many times could I recite “A Little Song about Charity”? So I finally wrote a few of my own Wisconsin protest poems. They served a particular purpose and record a particular moment.

While I do not see this as a marked change in my poetry or poetics, engagement in the Wisconsin struggle has fueled my anger and commitment to activism. I greatly appreciate those folks who do activist work by day and write well about it by night. Yet, for lack of time due to the demands of my job (remember, I’m one of those public employees who sits around doing nothing all day except leech off the taxpayers), when I have to choose between the two, I think it’s more important to be “on the ground” than behind my computer. At the same time, I’m so livid about the right-wing attack on our civil liberties in the US, which is coming at us in myriad forms, that I’ve recently begun imagining a long collage poem I hope to write, which will treat one of those attacks. It will not be about Wisconsin, but it will definitely be political.

We’ve all watched (or chosen to ignore) the left become steadily weakened by the bullying tactics of the far right and also, to some extent, by a “failure of the imagination” or lack of long-term vision since at least the beginning of the Reagan years. There’s a long complex history there that I do not have room to explore and is better left to the experts. Suffice it to say that while the US has always been a brute colonizer and its claims of democracy more illusion than reality, since the partisan Supreme Court’s passage of Citizens United with its designation of corporations as people, the country’s plutocracy has become so blatant that it seems to have rendered feeble, if not powerless, any vestiges of democracy. The Wisconsin uprising and the Occupy Movement that swept the nation simultaneously (some would say in Wisconsin’s wake) might be seen as reactions or challenges (depending on how one breaks down their various motives, philosophies, failures and successes) to that brute capitalism with its plutocratic and, yes I’ll say it, fascist forms of governing. There have been many excellent articles published in the aftermath of the Wisconsin recall election regarding the failures of the anti-Walker camp (Democrats, unions, etc.) and our tactics or lack thereof. Some pundits and activists have also written thoughtful pieces that are more optimistic in their assessment of the mass mobilization of people in Wisconsin against the “divide and conquer” agenda: the sheer numbers of ordinary folks who turned to grassroots activism, sometimes for the first time, in this particular moment, including some who are now committed to such participation for the long haul. As a friend said to me in the midst of my pessimism, “It’s not like we recall a governor every few years, let alone with 900,000 signatures.”

Yet Wisconsin’s governor and his billion-dollar blitzkrieg did manage to convince the middle class guy down the street and the working class woman on the next block, whose earnings have stagnated or steadily decreased over the past several years, to blame their lack on me, the sanitation worker, fireman, bus driver,

and clerk at city hall (although our wages have done no better). All the while, those neighbors' employers' profits have risen exponentially, largely due to not paying their fair share of taxes, which has ultimately manufactured a debt crisis. Walker managed to draw a picture of a teacher, rather than a corporate banker, pounding the foreclosure sign into her neighbor's lawn. If, as activists, we cannot expose those lies and open our neighbors' eyes to the fact that they are voting against their own interests; if we do not really reach out to help those in despair (which also means climbing down from the ivory tower for those who work in one); if we do not turn toward creating and supporting more local cooperatives and sustainable ways to live; and if we do not use our creative energy toward developing newer and bolder activist strategies, which include moving beyond electoral politics, I believe we will remain conquered.

The arts and the skills of the artist/writer are necessary components of any such vision, movement, and action. What does that mean? For some, it may mean finding ways to merge the artistic projects to which they are drawn anyway with those that directly aid such efforts, thereby multiplying the ways in which they use their talent. For others, it may mean re-envisioning their processes toward more inclusivity, pooling resources, and creating new infrastructures that we haven't yet managed to imagine. Ultimately, for me, the aim has to be toward building community with all the complexity that entails, including a major education component. It may mean braiding together elements of organizations like Growing Power, groups like the Overpass Light Brigade, and movements like Occupy but also expanding on them. We have many inspiring models to draw from, but we also need to keep inventing. I think it was best said by one of the founders of the OLB in a diary post on the Daily Kos web site: "Perhaps we wake up, look to ourselves, and realize it is the same as it ever was. Institutions aren't going to deliver us. In a one party system, all else is resistance. Visibility, creativity, bodies in space, the power of purposeful play, engagement, community ... all semaphore for a way to live, cloud-tags for the practice of everyday life. We awaken, not to a wake, but to a wakening. We're still here, and we insist on essential visibility."

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❁ Frank X Walker in Conversation

BY CX DILLHUNT AND DREW DILLHUNT

DD: You've described poetry as an act of "conjuring." Reading your work, it's also clear that giving voice to historical figures—especially those who haven't been fully or fairly represented in official histories—requires the painstaking work of a historian.

How do you think about the interplay between your work as an objective historian and a visionary poet? Is there a place where research ends and conjuring begins?

FXW: I'm always honored when schools and colleges use my Historical Poetry as supplemental textbooks when studying history or when looking for texts that can be used across multiple disciplines, but I have no illusions about the fictitious nature of my work. No matter how effective the speaking voice or individual poem may come across, it is its roots and references to actual history that give these kind of poems legitimacy. And at the same time, it is the poetry that gives it its emotional strength. In my opinion it is only successful if together they provide for the reader a sense of authenticity. Once the historical poem hits the page, its history and poetry must live in the same place at the same time and communicate in a credible way.

There is absolutely a place where the research ends and the conjuring begins. The research always comes first. The poet/researcher must first exhaust themselves with the details. They must become an expert on their subject before sitting down to write the poem. They must discover and know more about their subject than they ever plan to share in the overall narrative.

My students have come to trust my formula of Memory, Research and Imagination when conjuring their own historical poems.

❁

Real Costs

York's slave wife

Somewhere out dere
 he learnt t'touch me
 like I'm a woman
 an not just some woman.
 Me.

In our marriage bed
 he seem as interested
 in pleasing me as he be
 in spillin' hisself.

I knew he come back
 changed

when new words
fall out his mouf like
love an freedom
an manhood.

An dere come a look
in his eye
like he own all three
free an clear
an don't need no papers
t'prove it.

But it scare me
'cause I sent dat look
in many a black eye
b'fo white hammas
nailed it shut
o' left it frozen open
an swingin'
t'teach da rest
what anything dat smell
like courage cost.

I have no doubt
he give his life t'stay
wit me
so I don't tell 'im dat Massa
takin' me back
down south.

I just kiss him soft t'sleep
an stare at him long enough
t'call up his face
when I gets old an thankful
he still be breathing
somewhere
when winta come.

©FRANK X WALKER, *When Winter Come: The Ascension of York*, The University of Kentucky Press, 2008

DD: Your persona poems impart a depth of history impossible to achieve through nonfiction alone. What about poetry makes it such an effective form for historical narratives? Where have you encountered the most resistance to the idea of conjuring history through poetry?

FXW: I think the overall narrative would also succeed if staged or filmed. But I think poetry is particularly effective because a good poet, especially if she is a capable reader, can summon the power of the stage and the screen onto the page. I think its absolutely more effective than traditional history because it humanizes

the subjects by allowing the speakers to emote, making it easier for the reader to empathize with the subjects.

The most resistance to the idea seems to always come from those who have not experienced Historical Poetry. There seems to be a certain resistance born out of a possible perceived contradiction in terms. The biggest advocates are often those who become captivated after hearing it or reading it for the first time. History buffs become new fans of poetry, and readers who love poetry express their delight and surprise at an historical narrative holding their attention.



Queer Behavior

Lewis went into a terrible depression. In courting a wife, his advances were rejected. Jefferson appointed him Governor of Upper Louisiana, but he proved utterly unsuited to politics.... His decline eventually ended in suicide.

—Stephen E. Ambrose,
Lewis & Clark: Voyage of Discovery

Why a fancy, educated man, who worked directly with the president, traveled without harm to the ocean returned as a hero, made chief of all the new territory be given to such deep dark sadness, I can't say.

But something give Capt. Lewis cause to question all his success, something bigger than all them books something heavy as a mountain burrowed deep inside him like a groundhog an emptied out all his joy.

After watching how careful he conduct himself 'round the men an learning how much he frown on lying with Indian women, I starts to think 'bout the things the men whispered 'round the fire.

I thinks not on if it true, but on how hard it must be to live life like it not, to walk 'round under a mask to ignore your own nature, to smile an laugh an dance for the pleasure a others while crying all on the inside.

Maybe his sorrow was born from fear a his feelings or maybe he be even more afraid a what others might think or say. I knows well how a thing like death seem welcome when you can't hold the ones you love.

Ol' York say, if ain't nothing in the barn but roosters won't be no eggs for breakfast. But I ain't signifying I'm just speculating on what ignorance an whiskey say when they see how he carry hisself an how clean

an orderly he like his things. An it stand to reason
to ask if blue blood an education an manners can explain
all his odd ways or if he just seem a lil' less manly
standing next to a rugged man like Capt. Clark.

All I can rightfully say is he was rich an white an a man
in a land where them three things mean nothing but power.
Why else would he take his own life, unless one a those
things wasn't true, unless he too was a slave.

© FRANK X WALKER, *When Winter Come: The Ascension of York*, The
University of Kentucky Press, 2008

CXD: You add a choir of supporting voices to the existing historical record—York's hunting shirt and knife, the waters of the Columbia, and the bullet that ended Medgar Evers' life. This seems to be an essential part of what you've described as "reaffirming the power of literacy and the role of mythology and storytelling in the exploration of the truth." Where do these voices come from? How do they work to help fill gaps in accepted historical narratives?

FXW: The idea of using multiple points of view to relate the story is old hat in fiction. When I began reading from the first York book and opened the floor for Q&A, I found that readers were already very interested in the voices that weren't included. They wanted to know what his wife thought and they wanted a closer look at Sacagawea. When I sat down to write the York sequel, I sat down looking for all the missing voices I could imagine. Voices I believed I wanted to hear from and that I believed would enhance the narrative. Readers seem to enjoy the human voices, but they really love the personification of objects that were already present in the story, i.e., York's hatchet and his knife. It's a slight deviation from the proverbial fly on the wall. Now I simply apply my mother's saying that there are two sides to every story and then there's the truth. I am finding that if I increase the sides to the story in a credible way, readers feel like it's even closer to the truth.

DD: What is it that draws you to the particular historical figures you've chosen to conjure? How do experiences in your own life inform these choices? How important is it for a voice to come to you at a particular point in your life?

FXW: Now we're getting deeper into conjuring, because I really feel like it's a lot like dating in as much as the historical figures have to also choose. One of us could choose the other, but if we both choose each other you get something really special. I also think the poet has to be truly invested in the subject at an emotional level to really do it justice. I developed a personal stake in telling the York story because I was embarrassed that I had multiple degrees, considered myself well versed in Kentucky's African American history, found out York had lived in the same city I lived in, and yet I had never heard of him. Part of my personal motivation was to eliminate my own ignorance and deal with that embarrassment. I believe that because I was raised by women, have been blessed with six sisters, and survived multiple failed relationships, I actually lived the research material I needed to create most of the authentic sounding female voices in my historical

poetry. I know that spending real time outdoors in the northwest and along the Lewis and Clark trail allowed me to finish the book when it was clear something was still missing. That missing element was the landscape. I say all of this to say that the journey that is the combination of the research and teasing out the poems and building them into a whole narrative is not something that only exists on the page. A poet's real life will intersect with her work somewhere on the page and off the page in both unexpected and expected ways. The inner journey from the York narrative resulted in a buffalo tattoo and a chance to share the Nez Perce world with my teenage son and ultimately create a rite of passage for him. The Isaac Murphy inner journey resulted in a bicycle club called the Isaac Murphy Bicycle Club that rewards inner city kids who complete classes on bike safety, healthy eating, and history with free bikes, helmets, locks, and organized opportunities to ride the local bike trail. I don't know what Medgar Evers has in store for me, but given that 2013 is the 50th anniversary of his assassination and JFK's as well as the March on Washington, I've got a feeling the activist in me is going to need an extra pair of shoes.

CXD: How does this historical conjuring compare to the writing process you employ when working from personal experience—as you do in *Black Box* and *Affrilachia*?

FXW: Historical conjuring takes longer than writing from personal experience. Given that there is no requirement that the next poem have a relationship with the previous one, I have a lot more freedom when writing from personal experience. The personal poems are often born out of inspiration and contact with other people and the real world. I don't have to stop writing one to work on the other. When I finished the Medgar Collection, I also had completed another manuscript of poems that will continue the *Black Box* and *Affrilachia* experience.

CXD: How have your persona poems influenced the poetry you write about your own experiences, and your family? Are you always yourself, or do you find yourself conjuring different versions of yourself?

FXW: I haven't really thought about how the persona poems have influenced the poetry about my own experiences. I still write primarily from my point of view. I think there have always been multiple selves; especially the distinctly dichotomous voices of young innocent Frank and old jaded Frank X. I know I have focused more on forms in my historical poetry to make sure there is another level of activity happening that helps earn the work the title of poetry. I'm especially drawn to new contemporary forms like the contrapuntal, hinge, and dictionary forms, all of which make an appearance in *Turn Me Loose* alongside extended haiku, persona, list, and a few generic sonnets. So as a result there are more form poems showing up in my other work.

CXD: And when you're conjuring the voice of a historical figure such as York, or later with Isaac Murphy and the many voices in your forthcoming book *Turn Me Loose: The Unghosting of Medgar Evers*, where does your own voice enter into the poetry? How do you decide how much of your own voice to allow in?

FXW: I try really hard to stay out of the way and not let my voice, politics, prejudices, or values surface when I'm writing Historical Poetry, but I think it's

probably impossible to not enter in some way, especially when something as simple as selecting the epigraph or titling the work can reveal all of those things about the writer and more.



Sorority Meeting

Myrlie Evers speaks to Willie and Thelma de la Beckwith

My faith urges me to love you.
My stomach begs me to not.
All I know is that day
made us sisters, somehow. After long
nervous nights and trials on end
we are bound together

in this unholy sorority of misery.
I think about you every time I run
my hands across the echoes
in the hollows of my sheets.
They seem loudest just before I wake.
I open my eyes every morning

half expecting Medgar to be there,
then I think about you
and your eyes always snatch me back.
Your eyes won't let me forget.

We are sorority sisters now
with a gut wrenching country ballad
for a sweetheart song, tired funeral
and courtroom clothes for colors
and secrets we will take to our graves.

I was forced to sleep night after night
after night with a ghost.
You chose to sleep with a killer.

We all pledged our love,
crossed our hearts and swallowed oaths
before being initiated with a bullet.

© FRANK X WALKER, *Turn Me Loose: The Unghosting of Medgar Evers*,
University of Georgia Press, 2013

DD: You've described Byron de la Beckwith—Medgar Evers' assassin—as the hardest voice you've ever tried on. How was it possible for you to inhabit de la Beckwith? What can you tell us about that process?

FXW: It was the hardest for me, because I'd like to believe we were really far

apart especially when you consider our values. I really wanted to get inside his head and understand what fueled his passion, why he hated who he hated as well as why he loved what he loved. Unfortunately and fortunately there is no limit of research material on hate speech, the KKK, white supremacy, and so many images and so much material available that provided his own words. One of the devices I used to get into that space was to type in hate speech on YouTube and listen to as much of it as I could stand.



After Birth

“Killing that nigger gave me no more inner discomfort than our wives endure when they give birth to our children.” —Byron de la Beckwith

Like them, a man can conceive
an idea, an event, a moment so clearly
he can name it even before it breathes.

We both can carry a thing around inside
for only so long and no matter how small
it starts out, it can swell and get so heavy

our backs hurt and we can't find comfort
enough to sleep at night. All we can think
about is the relief that waits, at the end.

When it was finally time, it was painless.
It was the most natural thing I'd ever done.
I just closed my eyes and squeezed

then opened them and there he was,
just laying there still covered with blood,
(laughs) but already trying to crawl.

I must admit, like any proud parent
I was afraid at first, afraid he'd live,
afraid he'd die too soon.

Funny how life 'n death
is a whole lot of pushing and pulling,
holding and seeking breath;

a whole world turned upside down
until some body screams.

© FRANK X WALKER, *Turn Me Loose: The Unghosting of Medgar Evers*,
University of Georgia Press, 2013

CXD: What about de la Beckwith makes him an important figure to give voice to? Why was it important for Medgar Evers' own voice to remain largely silent in the book?

FXW: I think Beckwith provides an unexpected point of view and voice and like many of today's villains in popular culture seemed to really grab and hold people's attention when I read from the work early on. By the same token I felt like there was so much available in Medgar's own voice that having him speak might result in something almost too predictable. And his absence extends the metaphor of him as ghost and sets up the vehicle, which allows his unghosting.

CXD: You coined the term *Affrilachia*, now an official entry in the OED. At the end of your poem *Affrilachia*, in the book of the same title, you write, "if you think/ makin' 'shine from corn/ is as hard as kentucky coal/ imagine being/ an Affrilachian/ poet."

Here it is more than a decade since your collection *Affrilachia* was published. What's changed? What hasn't?

FXW: In the twelve years since *Affrilachia* I would say more people recognize, claim and use the word. I've lost count of how many colleges now consistently use the book in their Appalachian Studies courses, but because so many places and scholars are still discovering the word and slowly recognizing the need to speak about the region's true diversity, it is still the best seller of all my books. What hasn't changed is the need to continue working against the pervasive negative stereotypes and caricatures associated with the region or the need to educate people about important Affrilachians like Nina Simone, August Wilson, Bill Withers, Angela Davis, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, James Brown and many others.

DD: More recently, you've observed, "Our biggest problem is convincing people that the idea of Affrilachia doesn't have geographic boundaries."

How do you respond when someone asks about Affrilachia? How do you ensure this word you've brought into the world is filled up with the meaning you intended for it?

FXW: I used to think that the only insurance I had was the OED definition and the ongoing work and activity of the members of the Affrilachian Poets, but I recently became a board member of the Appalachian Studies Association. I hope to use the opportunity to further promote our ideas about inclusiveness in the region. I have answered the Affrilachia boundary questions so often that I actually enjoy dispelling myths about the region and teaching people how important out migrants from the region are and how their presence has influenced the cities they've settled in.

✂

Affrilachia

(for Gurney & Anne)

thoroughbred racing
 and hee haw
 are burdensome images
 for Kentucky sons
 venturing beyond the mason-dixon

anywhere in appalachia
 is about as far
 as you could get
 from our house
 in the projects
 yet
 a mutual appreciation
 for fresh greens
 and cornbread
 an almost heroic notion
 of family
 and porches
 makes us kinfolk
 somehow
 but having never ridden
 bareback
 or sidesaddle
 and being inexperienced
 at cutting
 hanging
 or chewing tobacco
 yet still feeling
 complete and proud to say
 that some of the bluegrass
 is black
 enough to know
 that being “colored” and all
 is generally lost
 somewhere between
 the dukes of hazard
 and the beverly hillbillies
 but
 if you think
 makin’ shine from corn
 is as hard as kentucky coal
 imagine being
 an Affrilachian
 poet

DD: You were recognized by Oxford American as one of the most creative teachers in the South. How does teaching inform your work as an artist?

FXW: Teaching is my most favorite work. Working with young writers keeps me and my language fresh and up to date. Part of my motivation to write Historical Poetry is because so many of those students come to my classrooms with such incomplete educations. I hope *Turn Me Loose* will help educate a whole generation of students who have no idea who Medgar Evers is.

CXD: What's next? Writing? Teaching? *Pluck!?*

FXW: Next? I'm currently editing my first novel, which I completed this summer. I hope to spend the rest of this year polishing it up and to send it out early next year before the new book takes over my life and schedule when not in the classroom. I'm currently on loan to African American & Africana Studies as the Program Director, but next year I'll return to the English department full-time and help launch a new MFA program. *Pluck!* [Journal of Affrilachian Arts and Culture] is still going strong. I imagine we'll be moving in the direction of many other journals and developing a larger web presence but hopefully earning enough subscribers to continue printing and distributing a hard copy. That's the plan, but we all know how plans go. Whatever happens, I hope it includes writing, teaching, traveling, biking and golf.

Published in Verse Wisconsin 110

✿ Community: Poetry and Photographs as Family Memoir

BY LINDA ASCHBRENNER

My two sisters and I have much in common—we read, swap books, write poetry. However, we are not the tightest of communities. My sister, Mavis Flegle, older by 14 years, lives 40 miles away, yet I'm lucky if I see her four times a year. (She bonds with two cousins in the UP, spends much time with them.) My sister, Elda Lepak, closer in age, lives 1,000 miles away in North Carolina. We email each other, sometimes twice daily. Despite this separation of years and miles, we are compiling a family memoir in poetry and prose: *Three Sisters from Wisconsin: Our Finnish American Girlhoods with Recollections of Michigan's Upper Peninsula*.

After retiring from editing/publishing the poetry journal *Free Verse*, I thought we three should collect our many family poems. After all, we had each been writing on the same topics for years; a book seemed the logical outcome. I would publish it with my Marsh River Editions Press. I had purely selfish reasons for wanting to work on this book; I wanted to learn things only Mavis knew as the oldest child. What happened during the 15 years before I was born? I wanted more information about Mom and Dad, our grandparents—everything I missed.

I thought this project would be painless; I thought it would be a quick and easy. Not so. We first looked through all the poems we had ever written, hundreds and hundreds of poems, and pulled those about our childhoods. We had an assortment: prose poems, couplets, rhyming poems, some serious, some light-hearted and whimsical. New poems were needed to round out the collection. We assigned topics—ice skating, the Rothschild school, the attic playroom, camping in the UP, our sauna, Finnish food, berry picking, poems about aunts and uncles. We wrote these new poems and sent them to each other—they went back and forth for some time. The logistics were easy. The hard part was the emotional impact while reading these recollections: three siblings, two parents, four grandparents—gone. Childhood, so long ago, no chance to live our lives over, except through this poetry.

For a few years, we were reflecting, remembering, writing family history, and taking some creative leaps in certain poems as we riffed on themes. As the youngest child of a youngest child, I felt a connection to the 19th century. Our four grandparents were born in Finland in 1863, 1869, 1880, and 1881. Between 1890 and 1903, they emigrated to Michigan's Upper Peninsula where they married and raised families. My parents met in the UP, married in 1934, and then moved to Rothschild, Wisconsin. They had six children—only the three of us survive.

Is it easier for someone with bins stuffed with happy memories of jolly, caring, loving parents to write about the past? Even though we felt like boarders growing up in our house, were we being fair to Mom and Dad in our poetry? What about their own impoverished lives as children of Finnish-speaking immigrants? What

about the lives of our grandparents? Conditions in Finland were horrible—famines, epidemics, wars, unemployment. Who were we to complain? As children, we had a roof over our heads and food on the table. So what if our parents didn't see to our medical care and told us we'd be on our own once we finished high school. And, so it went, ethical considerations: what to include in this book, what to leave out, what to gloss over. We didn't think *what works as a poem*, we thought *what works as something we can live with, if published*. History should stick to the facts, the truth, therefore history told through poetry assumes truth in our poetry. We were, however, dealing mostly with feelings and emotions, our own emotional truths as we looked back many decades.

Who will read this book? Perhaps, just us and a few relatives. That's enough for us—or me—to use caution. Elda wrote one poem about a deceased aunt that I thought was a bit unflattering. “You can't have that poem in this book,” I droned. “Think how her grandchildren and great-grandchildren will feel.” (An assumption that they or anyone will read this book.) Perhaps in error, I encouraged Elda to come up with a replacement poem. “Surely, your one poem in this book about this aunt should be something future generations will want to read and feel some spark, enthusiasm, and understanding of her life.” However, since when is *kindness* a criteria in poetry? We should be considering *kindness*? We were less kind to Mom and Dad. Is it because we have ownership of our relationship to them and not to our aunt? We are allowed to be unkind because they are our parents? Perhaps we are allowed to be truthful, as we see the truth from our own perspectives. But step lightly if the subject is a deceased aunt.

Another problem: few records, few facts. We had our own memories, but we wanted more data about the lives of our parents and grandparents. Mom and Dad were reticent. This was complicated by the fact that they rarely talked to us at all, about anything. The Finnish are said to be quiet people, but our parents took it to the extreme, except when Dad was shouting at us or Mom felt a need to scream. But stories about family history? Very few. We did ask some questions, but they were often brushed aside. Our parents were reluctant to talk about the past. Our grandparents spoke only Finnish, our parents spoke Finnish and English. We kids, unfortunately, never learned Finnish. Three of our grandparents had died by the time I was born—and no language reaches any of them now. Questions took me to online genealogy websites, ship and census records, family trees.

Growing up during the 1930s through the 1960s, we sisters thought we were modern, living in a modern era. We had all we could do to keep our lives going without compiling the life histories of our parents. Too bad we didn't. But could we have written this book decades ago? No. We were too close to what we were living. With time, we have perspective, wrinkles, some ability to filter and understand. It's just that Mom and Dad and grandparents aren't here to answer questions, if they would.

Last summer, when we three sisters gathered at my house, we sat around the kitchen table, each with our tidy pile of poems, with duplicate pages to go around. We each read one poem in turn, and round and round we went. We suggested stronger titles, better verbs, different line breaks—the usual stuff.

More often, time was spent discussing the emotion and memory behind each poem: why were Mom and Dad so distant? What was in their own childhoods that made them the way they were? I was delighted with Mavis' poems—her memories about visiting grandparents I never knew, how Mom washed clothes before she had an automatic washing machine, how Dad pickled herring. I loved Elda's account of the ice man coming to our street, her adventures in the neighborhood, how we got a TV and phone in the 1950s. All delightful and news to me. And while we were together, we played Scrabble, cooked meals, and devoured a luscious lemon meringue pie. Was this a sign? Add sugar and fluff to lemons?

We wanted photos in the book. Photos! Photos took us months, and we are still grappling with photos. My father had cameras as a young man in the 1920s and took amazing, historic, wonderful photos in the UP where he worked as a lumberjack and lineman. He had photos of cars, trucks, trains, and hay wagons during the 1920s and 30s. His pictures show camping trips, construction on Victoria Dam, early Ontonagon, gatherings on the shore of Lake Superior with his siblings, pictures of his wedding day. Dad even took a few pictures when Mavis was young. Then Dad ceased to take photos. Why? No time? Or was photography too expensive with a family to support? Were we kids not worthy of having our photos taken? I have no recollection of Mom or Dad ever taking my photo during the first 28 years of my life. Only a smattering of photos of us exist as youngsters—taken by aunts and uncles or Mavis when she was in junior high. We kids started taking our own pictures as soon as we could.

Mavis recently told me Dad developed some of his own photos. Why didn't I know this? Many of Dad's photos are crisp and clear, nearly 90 years later. They have fared much better than some of the color photos I took in the 1960s and 1970s. So much for progress.

Mom, too, had photos in two small albums of her life before marriage. Mom's and Dad's albums were kept in a bureau drawer in their bedroom when we were growing up. As a child in the 1950s, I occasionally looked at these pictures, mystified about this long ago past. I have no recollection of Mom and Dad ever taking out the albums to look at them, or sitting down with us and discussing each page, picture by picture. I did find one note in an album in Mom's handwriting: *Linda, looking at pictures asked, "How many revelations do we have?"* Was I four? Generally though, Mom didn't want me looking at her belongings. I've been experiencing lots of revelations lately. Mostly, I want to scan every photo from these ancient albums—just to save and share them.

Discoveries! Because of this book, we are digging through dusty boxes and bins looking for more photos. Elda never knew Mom and Dad had photo albums. (Yes, I was the one more likely to poke through forbidden drawers.) Elda and I never knew Mavis had taken pictures of us as toddlers. Now, I am spending many hours scanning photos taken by Dad, Mom, Mavis. Elda is scanning photos a cousin sent her, and we are both scanning photos from our grade school albums. If we hadn't worked on this book, we would never get to this, all this compiling of family history. We are still recruiting a few more photos from cousins, as we work with Dad's negatives from the 1920s.

The old photos of Mom and Dad remind me of pictures on Facebook—happy young people, smiling, hanging on each other, having fun. Were their pre-marriage years their happiest ones? I like to think they appreciated us and their grandchildren in their later years.

A friend asked me why we are doing this book. My answer: *Just to say we were here, this was our past, this was our family, these are our stories.*

In the process of assembling our book, I became interested in the experiences of others who had Finnish ancestors. I ordered stacks of books and could happily spend the rest of my life reading history books about Finland and the UP, reading family memoirs. But I had to stop reading, for now, at least. I had our own book to complete. Our book presently lingers as computer files, all the poetry and photos in limbo. In time, our completed book will join the other memoirs here in this dusty and cozy room overflowing with the one thing we three sisters love—books. Our book will nestle in among the others. *This was our past, this was our family, these are our stories.*

Published in Verse Wisconsin 109

✿ Jeanette and Justice: Skirting Oblivion

BY SARAH BUSSE

My friend Jeanette Hinds died almost two years ago. I didn't know until my holiday card was returned with a nice note from her daughter, Jane Ellen. Jeanette and I were in a poetry critique group together more than ten years ago, while I lived in Rochester, Minnesota. There were eight of us, and we called ourselves the Group of Eight—we were too busy writing poems to come up with a better name. We met at Jeanette's house, in her family room with its color scheme straight out of the early seventies. We ranged around the coffee table, sinking into the couch, propped on folding chairs. Jeanette always sat in her chair, to the right of the fireplace.

When I knew her she was in her seventies, a matriarch with six grown children, several grandchildren and (I think I remember) a few great grandchildren already in the clan. It was clear to me that her life was supported by three pillars: family, faith, and poetry. And between those, she knew her priorities and lived out her values; family was always her “number one job,” she said. As a young woman trying to figure out how to fit writing into my life and also maybe have a family, she was one example, a role model of the possible.

After learning from her daughter that my Christmas card would never get to Jeanette, I searched my bookshelf for solace, and turned intuitively to Donald Justice's essay “Oblivion” (in *Oblivion: On Writers and Writing*, Ashland, OR: Story Line Press, 1998).

One of my favorite prose musings on poetry and the life of poetry, Justice explores through three examples (Weldon Kees, Henri Coulette, and Robert Boardman Vaughn) what can happen, or fail to happen, to writers who are committed to their art yet passed over by fame, critical attention, or even publication. There are lovely passages in it:

There is a randomness in the operation of the laws of fame that approaches the chaotic, and I believe that the various degrees of oblivion to which these three poets have been consigned are no more proportionate to the real value of their work than the fame of some others is to the value of theirs. The success of these three—what there was of it—ought to be measured in terms of the poems they wrote or perhaps by no more than a splendid phrase here or there, almost lost now. It may help to remember that underlying all this was the almost spiritual type of dedication I have been trying to identify. It is too dismal to concede that success is measured only in terms of notoriety and riches and such toys. (55)

Jeanette lived that life, a life of dedication to poetry which threaded through and around her other loves. Upon her death, several of the poets who knew her wrote poems of homage, and these, along with some of her own poems, were collected into a chapbook *Elegy for Jeanette*. That is one mark and measure of poetic success, surely.

But reading Donald Justice didn't help me on this particular day. As much as I love his essay and am usually comforted by the idea of undeserved oblivion, I found myself restless as I read it over this time. And my unease could be traced, I realized, to one passage early on, where he tries to define the class of people he's considering, stating they are all

artists, far less visible, but true artists nonetheless. The news magazines and the academic establishment on which we so heavily depend for our opinions simply have no organs for seeing this underworld or underclass of art. (54)

Fair enough. But then he goes on to say:

Do not mistake me. I do not have in mind the productions of societies of amateurs, literary clubs, workshops; I mean the real thing. (54)

Ouch. My friend Jeanette was all of those: an amateur who belonged for years to the League of Minnesota Poets, a participant and leader of their workshops. She taught literature and poetry classes at the Rochester Federal Prison for years. She worked hard at her own writing and believed in choosing just the right word, paring away all extra. Yet it's clear to me from his own statements that Justice would exclude her from his company of "real" artists.

The Justices of the world write off my friend and her chapbooks as not worth much time or consideration. They do it gently, but they do. Some days, I have been a Justice too. I believe in excellence. I believe that the muse is not democratic. Jeanette's poems—I can admit this as I read them over now—often do not achieve excellence, as Justice would understand it. They are perfectly competent, but they lack the *true strange* of the masters.

But I can't write Jeanette's poems off today. I can't dismiss her example, because as I read over the poems in her book I am struck by this: they would speak to so many. They are heartfelt. They are, if not simple, simply stated, and moving. They are the work and words of a woman who gave a great deal of her life to poetry, who helped others find the real joy of working with words. And I can imagine many of my non-poet friends relating much more easily to her work than to the better known and widely revered poets that line my bookshelf. This is a poetry that speaks to congregations, to occasion, and also to the quiet one by the window, reading for the first time.

Jeanette published two books in her lifetime, a small chapbook titled *Traveling On*, which she had printed for (and dedicated to) her church on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary. Her second book, and the stronger one, is *My Mother's Keys*. These poems she began to write upon the occasion of her mother's death. Her daughter had taken a series of photographs of objects around the old farmhouse, as well as photos from the day of the farm's auction and the funeral. Jeanette used those pictures as a starting point for her poems. She was determined to capture on the page her own sense of what her family had been, its values, hardships and tender moments. Well aware, as an only child, that she was a hinge between generations of the past and the future, she saw this work

as mainly a legacy she wanted to pass on to her own children and grandchildren and was less interested in selling copies of the book to outsiders, although some of us encouraged her in that direction. Many of these poems came through the Group of Eight's workshoping sessions. When I read them, I can't help but remember our back and forth over certain words and phrases, line breaks, titles.

✿

What Angels Leave

Monet's *Grainstacks*

 painted under varieties of light;
 Grant Wood's Iowa farmland
 female contoured;
 Grandma Moses' sleighs and steeples
 in primitive primaries...

 unaware of gene pools
 she carried them; we all carry them

 back; back
 to some Cro-Magnons equipped with saliva and clay
 crawling through dark caves
 to create rhinos or bursts of bison
 depicted with extra legs
 to denote speed.

 unaware of gene pools
 she carried them; we all carry them

I remember her hooked needle crocheting
 from a dense center—
 looped stitches
 interlocked row on row
 variegated threads: circled pastels
 bold red, blue, and yellow
 or
 beige oblongs glinting gold,
 or
 rectangles carefully bound.

beyond routines of work and food and sleep,
 beyond a muddy February funeral day—

 her small doily
 held in my hand
 solid-color
 green as lifetimes of grass,
 endures.

—JEANETTE HINDS
 from *My Mother's Keys*, Lone Oak Press, 2002

Jeanette's poems are exactly as her mother's doilies, which she writes of in "What Angels Leave." Based on Jeanette's description of them, I'm pretty sure I would have found her mother's doilies less pleasing than I find Jeanette's poems. And yet their fact cannot be denied, any more than I can pass by the many quilts of my own grandmother or the words of my friend. What do we make of all this *making*? Is it all great art? No, and I don't think Jeanette aspired to produce "great art." And yet, there it is. And much of it, lovely. Much of it speaks to what is uniquely human: the urge to beauty even after our work is done.

Many of us, in our multiple and various lives, our daily ins and outs, are dedicated makers. And those of us fired by ambition to dream of going further, making something greater, longer lasting, seem to me this day to be the odd ones. Could ambition be a mental illness? Jeanette knew her place and her priorities. She did not feel limited or constrained by her roles as mother and teacher, wife and church worker. She considered those roles her real work in the world and the poems were secondary. Not less worthy of her hard work and attention, but secondary. These years removed, married and with my own two children, I can see that although I too seek balance in my life, I have followed a different path from Jeanette. I think Jeanette may have known a peace in her choices that I do not know.

Today, I am forced to acknowledge additional uneasiness in the face of her example. What is real value in a poem? The literary establishment(s) of our culture will never take a second look at the poems of Jeanette Hinds. They are unaware of her existence. But are these small and solid, secure and workaday poems less worthy? Jeanette was a workshopper. She was an amateur. She spent hours making centerpieces for the conference tables for LOMP conferences and coordinating their poetry contests. And yet her example stands before me, a woman who wrote poems that have been real comfort to others, even as her example and teaching have touched many. If that's not "the real thing," what is?

My thanks to Jeanette's daughter, Jane Ellen, for her kind assistance, and also to Michael Peich and Story Line Press.

Published in Verse Wisconsin 101

✿ Worth the Risk: Writing Poetry about Children with Special Needs

BY LAURA C. WENDORFF

I had not written poetry in thirty years. Then I had late-in-life children whose presence and complexity blew me to pieces. All children cause trauma in their parents' lives, but my children are special/challenged/differently-abled/disabled. (Even I can't settle on the best descriptor—none seems completely accurate.) Only through poetry could I put myself back together again.

My husband and I are both smart and talented—I'm good at art and music; he was a champion athlete. We come from families of smart, talented achievers, and I expected my children to inherit some of these qualities. At the very least, I expected a level of normalcy for my life—that my children would gradually become self-sufficient, find things they enjoy and that give them joy, and ultimately leave home and have families of their own. Some of this may still happen, and it's possible they may both turn out to be "achievers" in the traditional sense. However, the cost of getting my children to that point, and the fear that, because of their disabilities, they might never get to that point, is what compels me to write.

About twenty years ago, sometime before the birth of my first child, I read a column by the novelist Jacqueline Mitchard that has stuck with me. Mitchard was working as a freelancer for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and just about every column she wrote was about her family and children. In the particular column that I remember, Mitchard argued that, given a choice, she would want her children to inherit beauty rather than intelligence. You can always teach a child, Mitchard reasoned, but you can't change a child's basic looks. I loved this idea; I held it tight, like a plush. Anything was possible. Anything could be taught. Hard work and the right environment were all that was needed.

I often think about Mitchard's column when I sit for hours with my beautiful, high-school-aged daughter and try, over and over again, to teach her how to find the area of a regular polygon or interpret a scientific drawing. I think about Mitchard's column when I help my tall, tweener son try to remember the steps of multiplication and long division. And I think about Mitchard's column when I have three or four meetings a week at my children's schools so as to ensure they are getting the accommodations they need. Or when I send several long e-mails a day to my children's case managers. And I wonder exactly how much additional parenting time Mitchard would have been willing to sacrifice for this hypothetically unintelligent, but beautiful child. Five hours a week? Twenty hours a week? And where would she have found that time? Would she have quit her job as a columnist or stopped writing her novels? Or would she, like me, have put all of that stress into the creative process and written some things she might not want her children to read?

And so I write about my children and my experience as a parent, but it's usually not about them—not really. In one of her early short stories Linda K.

Hogan, a Chickasaw writer, has a character who comments that Native people “make art out of [their] loss,” and while I’m not a Native American, this fits my experience. I have a compelling need to create something out of the losses I have experienced, and continue to experience, by having two children with disabilities. Every day my children are not able to do something a “normal” child can do is a day when there’s loss. When they’re not invited to parties or can’t ride a bike or can’t wash their own hair, it’s a loss. Where are such losses to go, if not into art? Into alcohol, activism, or exercise? Into my body? Having lost a breast to cancer, perhaps my loss already has gone into my body. Could there possibly be a more perfect physical manifestation of my internal losses than the lopping off of a breast that nourished and comforted my two sweet infants?

In poems that feature my children I write mostly for myself, for my own needs, and I tell my story. I use my special children as subject matter in an attempt to exorcise the stress and pain from my life. In this respect, I suppose I am like a global superpower colonizing my children, mining their lives for resources to use in my poetry. I do not consciously maintain taboos, and the result is that some poems appear to be raw and ugly and might hurt my children if they ever read them. Would it be fair to my children, who already have to deal with so much, to have to read poems their mother wrote about the pain she sometimes suffers because of who they are and what they need? Where do I draw the line between my needs and their needs?

I must write—that much is clear. Sorrow is my near neighbor, and I can’t always make her clean up the junk in her yard or turn down her loud music. Yet writing poetry, more than anything else, gives me the semblance of control. Perhaps this is because poetry contains beauty, even at its ugliest. To find the right image, metaphor, or meter can make a pleasing result out of a sometimes challenging reality. Writing puts the pieces back together for me. I must take the risk of potential discovery. But writing is private, and theoretically it could remain so. Why must I publish, and risk much more?

I publish because music is wasted without an audience. Ideas dissipate without validation. Truths become true only when anchored to a page. Several years ago I wrote a poem called “To My Daughter’s Eighth Grade Teachers,” which was about the ways my daughter was misunderstood at school. It began with this question— “Where does the anger go when it cannot be expressed?” And part of the answer was that anger “goes into the permanent record,/this page imprinted on my readers’ minds.” Moreover, having an audience allows me to create empathy and understanding. Not all women are perfect mothers. Women who have children with disabilities are often broken in ways that women with physically and neurologically typical children are not. If my audience can understand that and empathize with me, then I’m not just venting; I’m making a difference. I’m creating understanding. Finally I publish because the process of writing allows me to create a poetic voice that is *part* of me but also *not* me. All writers—even writers of “self-revelatory” free verse—create personas who “speak” their lines. (Even the voice that speaks this essay is a literary creation.) Nor is every detail I include in a poem “true” in the sense that it happened to me or my children. Understanding writing as a conscious, literary act, no matter how anchored that act is to my children and their circumstances, allows me to

publish poetry that has the potential to wound them. All of these reasons, for me, make publication worth the risk.

But how likely is it that my children might read a poem before I think they are ready to understand it? It is unlikely, especially if the poems are published in print journals and especially if my children do not know I've used their lives in poems that have been published. Publishing poems about my children in an online venue, like *Verse Wisconsin*, is a bit more risky, especially since one of my kids is good at finding things on the internet. If he decided to Google my name, he might come across something I'd written that I'd rather he not see at this point in his life. Still, I'm willing to risk it. When my children are older and have separated more from me, when they have developed more of their own identities, when they have experienced enough of life so that they can look at me objectively, when they understand the nature of writing and the relationship between the writer and the words she places on the page, only then will I let them read these poems that may cause some pain. With explanation about writing—for example, *Poems have multiple meanings and the speaking voice is not really Mom's*—or about me—*Mom was feeling quite hopeless when she wrote this*—or even through the use of humor—*Mom was a whacked-out crazy lady who should have been locked in the attic; you're lucky you survived*—any pain they might experience will be minimized.

There's one last reason I publish poems about my children: I want my audience to understand that children with disabilities are completely human. Does this sound odd and obvious? Unfortunately, most people—consciously or not—view the disabled as less than human. Children with disabilities are stared at, isolated, assumed to be stupid, stereotyped, called ugly names, and bullied. The majority of the population could never envision electing a President with spina bifida, autism-spectrum disorder, or mental illness. And because the general public cannot envision it, children with disabilities cannot dream it. Because they are seen as less than human, they see themselves as less than human. When I write poems about the challenges my kids face at school from peers and teachers, I am trying to smack people in the face with my verse. These poems are like bricks to the head; they are meant to cause reorientation and, ultimately, create justice. I have published several poems about my daughter's challenges and the ways that some educators, because of their stereotypes, have made her life even more difficult. These poems are meant to cause change. For many people, however, "causing change" is not the job of poetry. In order to cause change, a poem has to have an explicit meaning, and many critics and poets believe that poetry should not "mean" anything. Billy Collins, for example, repudiates the idea of meaning in his "Introduction to Poetry." Collins writes that poems should only be "[held] up to the light/ like a color slide." While there are many fine poems where the reader needs only "waterski across the surface," as Collins puts it, waterskiing will not create justice for my children.

Validation, empathy, justice. These are the reasons I use my children in my poetry. These reasons are worth the risk.

☞ At the Kitchen Table: Shoshauna Shy in Conversation with Meg Kearney

Meg Kearney is Director of the Solstice MFA in Creative Writing Program at Pine Manor College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. She joins Shoshauna for this issue about parenthood to discuss two of her poems titled "Conception, American Style" and "Elegy for the Unknown Father." Bring your breakfast plate to the table, and join them.

SS: In your book *The Secret of Me* published by Persea Books of New York in 2005, a young girl grows up knowing she was adopted, as were both of her siblings. While this fact was openly shared within the family, the parents demonstrated that expressing curiosity about birth parents or sharing the truth of adoption with friends outside of the family was taboo. The book was written in response to this restriction, and is a novel in poetic verse. Could you say what went into your decision to write this book as a novel in verse instead of as a novel in prose or as a memoir?

MK: There is a writer you probably have heard of, Jacqueline Woodson (one of our rock stars of children's and YA literature), whom I credit for the "birth" of *The Secret of Me*. Jackie believes, and rightly, that poets should write for young people—we think in metaphor, which children and teens can easily and naturally grab onto and relate to. Many years ago, Jackie started urging me to write for young people. I was already a poet, working on my first book (*An Unkindness of Ravens*), but had never considered writing for teens or children. I didn't act on her suggestion until Jackie sent me a manuscript of a novel in verse she'd written titled *Locomotion*. She asked if I would read it and give her feedback on the poems before she sent it to her editor. When I read this marvelous book I thought, "Damn! Jackie can do EVERYTHING well!" I felt as if she'd thrown down a challenge. I knew novels in verse existed, being a fan of Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust*, but hadn't thought of it as a model for what I might do until I read *Locomotion* (which, by the way, went on to be a Finalist for the National Book Award). Because I considered myself to be a poet and not a prose writer, it seemed the natural way for me to tell a story. As soon as that idea dawned on me, I knew I had to try it—and almost immediately knew who my main character was, and the basic plot. I started writing as if possessed.

As for why I didn't write a memoir instead, I truly needed this to be a piece of fiction in order to tell this story. Lizzie McLane is the 14-year-old I wish I had been; she's much braver than I was at her age. Although I was writing poems by the time I was 12, I had had an experience similar to the scene captured in the poem "Reading My Poem 'What I Want' to Mom." When that happened, I didn't stop writing, but I did stop writing about anything related to being adopted—until I was in my mid-twenties. Creating the character of Lizzie gave me the chance to have that moment back, and let Lizzie realize, "There are just some things// you're not supposed to say to your parents. But/ I can write them down. I won't stop writing them."

SS: From age 12 until your mid-20s—that's a long time to not write anything

about being adopted! Especially since those are such turbulent years regarding identity. Well, a line in one of your poems that has stayed with me for months is, “Everyone knows you were a mistake before/ you were born.” That is *crushing*. It sure explains an adoptee’s resistance to sharing his or her history with others. On the other hand, I think of the girl who grew up next door to me. I met her when I was 4, and her mother told me right off the bat that this daughter of hers was “a chosen child”—which changed the whole adoption concept into something far more charming, (I admit, I saw angels and fairy dust when she informed me of this). It also seemed like an acceptable buffer for her daughter: highlighting the retrieval rather than the relinquishment that preceded it.

Another one of your poems in this book deals with the explanation parents give for that relinquishment, the explanation that it was out of love the birth mother gave up her child, which an adult can understand, but clearly, children are not able to. In your poem, you write, “My first/ mother loved me/ so much/ she gave me away... I hope/ no one ever loves me/ as much as she did” followed by this poem:

Empty List Poem

Things I Love So Much
I Could Give Them Away:

That colon followed by the empty page just swallowed me whole. So, if this discussion actually happened to you, Meg, might you remember how old you were at the time? I’m wondering if you care to say more about that specific experience.

MK: Many people have had strong reactions to the “Empty List Poem.” Thanks for that. I think you understand from my books, which are admittedly quite autobiographical, that I had very loving and supportive parents, as Lizzie does. But yes, when they tried to explain to me that my birthmother gave me away because she loved me so much, that boggled my mind. How does a child understand such love? As an adult, especially now that I know my birthmother’s story, I realize that my parents were exactly right: my mother gave me up for adoption not because she didn’t want me, but she wanted me to have a better life than she thought she could offer me and believed very deeply that the people (nuns, mostly, back then) at the New York Foundling would find the ideal parents for me. Which they did.

I don’t have a specific memory of being told I was adopted, or being told it was because my mother loved me so much—that was such a part of the family culture (I was the youngest of three adopted children) that it seems I heard it a great deal.

The idea of being “chosen” is right, too—I like that story very much. My parents felt that way, I think, but never expressed it exactly like that. These days, many families celebrate a child’s adoption day the way we celebrate birthdays. That would have helped me think of being adopted in a whole new light!

SS: I'd like to ask you about your poem, "Conception, American Style" from your collection *Home by Now* published by Four Way Books in 2009. It's Part II I'd like to focus on.

Conception, American Style

II.

They've returned to the parking lot: dim light reveals
a sheen of sweat on her forehead and upper lip.
Her Scottish skin is blotchy, as if she'd had a drink.

He lights her cigarette, regards her in the match
glow, while her eyes linger on a tuft of hair—
she'd kissed him there—at his shirt's open collar.

She is trembling; it's time for her to go.
They stand by the car and he takes her hand,
kisses it; she presses her other hand to her heart.

Then they notice her blouse, something askew—
she mismatched the buttons, and
they laugh. It was her first time. She thinks

he has made her a promise. He must have
known that. He leans, kisses her. Wherever,
whoever he is, he must have known that much.

The last ten words razor me every time I read them. I am assuming the speaker of this poem is the woman who once was the baby that resulted from the act of love that preceded this kiss, and so the "... wherever, whoever he is ..." packs an incredible punch. It illustrates that the speaker, if she was indeed the child, never has had any contact with her father. Am I on the mark here? If so, is this the speaker's attempt to understand the young man's position from his point of view, to make sense of his tenderness—and then his subsequent indifference?

MK: You're the first person to ever ask me about that poem, so I'm extra glad to talk about it. Yes, the speaker is the grown woman who was once the baby who resulted from this essentially one-night stand. You are right on the mark that the speaker has never had any contact with her father—she doesn't even know who he is, much less where he is. The speaker is attempting to step into the shoes of the woman (her mother) who has just had sex for the first time. She is naive and in love, and thinks that their act of love means a commitment has been made. The speaker is guessing that he knew that, even though he obviously didn't honor it. That kiss was actually a kiss goodbye, though the woman/mother doesn't know it at that moment.

SS: A kiss good-bye—ouch! Well, if you could, please tell me what launched this poem for you, Meg. I'm also wondering what came first. Was it the final line, the title, an image that prompted you to write it?

MK: This poem started as two poems, actually, and then when I realized that one picked up where the other left off (with lots of years inbetween), I made them one poem in two parts, and was able to cut some of the first lines of what became section two. That poem was originally titled “Goodnight, Goodbye,” and actually appeared in an anthology called *Never Before: Poems About First Experiences* by Four Way Books.

As to what prompted these poems—they are further explorations into my own humble beginnings in this world. It’s a topic I have trouble staying away from, as I know so little about my birthmother’s life when she became pregnant, and have no idea who my birthfather is; one tends to make up a history when the real story is unknown.

SS: That image of the mismatched buttons, the blotchy skin, the cigarette . . . I had so many questions coming to the surface after I first read this: did the young man ever know he was a father; how old was this young woman and did she have to drop out of school; when did she tell her own mother what happened; does she, to this day, think of her daughter on the “birth” day—not that I expect you to fill in the blanks, Meg. I just found the description so evocative that I couldn’t help wondering all of these things, knowing my own imagination would have to supply the answers.

As the poet, did you choose the tercet for this poem because there were actually three points of view going on here?

MK: What a great question! Yes, the fact that there are now essentially three people involved in the story was in the back of my mind, but that honestly came after I created the tercets, and felt like a bonus. Initially I was thinking about pacing. After the rush of part one, I needed to slow things down. All those end-stopped lines followed by stanza breaks in the first three stanzas are meant to make the reader take the words in more slowly, savoring the moment as the couple is doing.

I’m also thinking (always) of individual lines as units of meaning. In the third line of stanza four (the first stanza that isn’t end-stopped), if you take just that line in itself—“they laugh. It was her first time. She thinks”—it implies she is very much aware of the fact that she has just lost her virginity—she’s thinking about that—and then in the next enjambed stanza that thought is continued, revealing “she thinks/ he has made her a promise.” Many women, especially virgins, see having sex as an unspoken way of saying, “I love you and want to be with you.” The reader soon realizes that was her mistake.

Isn’t it remarkable how a poem can imply so much—a whole novel’s worth of story in a few short lines!

SS: Yes, as a reader, I realized that mistake once I got to the line: “She thinks// he has made her a promise. He must have/ known that.”

One can’t help but consider that the young man was already detaching from her before the last kiss. I considered that in the following line which you so skillfully

enjambement: “He lights her cigarette, regards her in the match ...”

This is an eloquent *double-entendre*. And, yes, a sense of betrayal by the young man towards the woman. But I get the message that the speaker, the resultant offspring, feels betrayed by him as well. So, there’s something I’m curious about. Hypothetically, do you think there would be a sense of betrayal on the speaker’s part if the couple had stayed together? I mean even if the adoption happened, but the couple went on to forge a marriage.

MK: That’s a very tricky and difficult question to answer. In the poem, the speaker feels betrayed along with the mother, almost as her ally. If the child born of this union were given up for adoption and then the couple ended up together, the child might feel betrayed by both of them—but again, maybe the child would land in a better place, regardless, and feel relieved once old enough to understand all that had happened. And still that grown child’s feelings would be mixed, I think.

SS: I’d like to ask you about this second poem, “Elegy for the Unknown Father” from this same collection.

Elegy for an Unknown Father

Maybe there’s a reason I was left
without a map to find you, why

the trail to your door has long gone
arctic. I’ve sat here nearly an hour

on the bench that marks the grave
of the man who raised me. I know

the way to this place, the back roads
south of the highway, the pothole

just before the iron gate. I know
its sparrows and withering lilies as well

as I knew the face of this father
walking in the door with an armful

of firewood or a fist of flowers. See
the groundskeeper give me a wave?

He knows me by name.
I have never needed you less.

SS: I saw some very effective enjambement in this poem. That first line uses the line break especially well to communicate its message, and so does the 1st line of the 2nd couplet. This is a very powerful poem in the way it addresses the unknown father, acknowledges the father who raised the speaker, and then shows

how the speaker is acknowledged by a third man who “... knows me by name” implying that even the groundskeeper has welcomed the speaker into his life.

Could you say what it is you would like the reader to take away from their experience of this poem?

MK: This is a question I'd love to turn around, and ask what you come away with as a reader of “Elegy.” I know that for me, the power in writing it came from declaring a love and loyalty for my father (I won't even call him my “adoptive father”—he was my father, period) and letting go of any thoughts of finding the man half responsible for my birth. This came after a couple of years of searching for him, even though my gut told me that wasn't a great idea. I've now let it go, and writing the poem helped me do just that.

SS: I can see how this poem helped to allow you to let go. As a reader, I loved how it illustrates that your father took care of you in practical ways, and also brought you beauty! I am also struck by how this loss echoes the earlier loss, and so, it is a delicate thing, the process of healing. The hopefulness in it is the fact that the groundskeeper, who has only known you, the speaker, a short time, is welcoming with a ready wave, and already knows your name. To me, the subtext is, “I easily turn acquaintances into friends; that's the kind of woman I am!” It's a very positive proclamation, and in defiant contrast to the last line: “I have never needed you less.” But at the same time, I have to confess, I don't believe that last line.

MK: How interesting to hear you say you don't believe that last line. I knew when I wrote it that I was trying to convince myself of the fact it was stating—and if that comes through, then good. It doesn't matter that I believe it now; I think it makes the poem more interesting, more layered, if the reader doesn't truly believe that last line, but WANTS to along with the speaker.

I'm also fascinated by what you understand as the subtext of that wave from the groundskeeper; I was thinking it pointed to the fact that the speaker spends a great deal of time at the father's grave, so much so that the groundskeeper knows her name. But again, there are a couple of layers here. I adore that aspect of poetry!

SS: I do, too. Interpretation of poetry is always very subjective and personal. I think how it is interpreted reflects more of the reader's state of mind than anything else, and I find that fascinating.

For me, that last line is very provocative. Here the speaker is saying how little she needs him—and yet the entire poem, from tip to tail, addresses him. Which makes me wonder if adoptees ever feel like, if given the chance, they would opt not to meet or have contact with a birth parent. For example, I can't imagine the speaker in this poem electing not to if the offer came up, but I do know of situations where this has been the case.

MK: I come from a family with three adopted children, just like my character Lizzie McLane, and I am the only one who has had any interest in searching

for birthparents. I think this kind of longing and decision is very personal, and different for each adoptee. There are simply those who do not wish to search—and who might even turn down the opportunity to meet a birthparent given the opportunity—and I think that’s an instinct they must listen to, as it’s probably there for a good reason.

SS: I am wondering, by way of wrap-up, Meg, what you would like readers to know about you as it relates to your literary life.

MK: A dear friend and wonderful poet, Kurt Brown, died just a week ago, on Father’s Day. I’ve known, adored, and admired Kurt for 16+ years. We worked together on an anthology titled *Blues for Bill* by Akron University Press, 2005, a collection of poems that honor Kurt’s friend and my former mentor, the late William Matthews. Just like Bill, Kurt lived and breathed poetry—outside of his family and friends, it was his one true passion in life. That is a model I try to emulate, making poetry—the reading of it, not just the writing of it—central in my life. I think that’s essential for a poet, or any writer; we must make this art not something that happens on the sidelines, but something that is somehow connected or infused in most of what we do. Art as something woven into life, not separate from it. That makes it possible (for me, anyway) to keep growing as a writer and as a person, both.

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✿ Lorine Niedecker’s “marriage”: Discoveries

BY SARAH BUSSE

A curious conglomerate ... published in this form for the first time in Verse Wisconsin...

marriage

Consider at the outset:
to be thin for thought
or thick cream blossomy

Ah your face—
but it’s whether
you can keep me warm

Sweet Life, My Love,
he said, didn’t you ever
know this delicacy?
the marrow blown out
of the bone?

All things are better
flavored with bacon
And be not afraid
to pour wine over cabbage

Ruskin found wild strawberries
and they were a consolation
poor man, whose diaries
are grey with instances
of Rose

—LORINE NIEDECKER

Printed here by permission of Julie Schoessow, Bob Arnold, literary executor for Lorine Niedecker, and The Hoard Historical Museum, Fort Atkinson, WI.

Jenny Penberthy, in her comprehensive *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, notes that in 1964, Lorine Niedecker made three small, handmade books. One she gave to her old friend, Louis Zukofsky, one to her publisher, Jonathan Williams, and one she gave to fellow poet Cid Corman. As Penberthy makes clear, all of these books were similar in their content but not identical. Niedecker had a habit of making various types of books for friends and family. She was having trouble getting her poems published to a broader audience, and we may imagine that making these poetry books took at least some of the internal pressure off.

Digging around in the archives at the Hoard Museum in Fort Atkinson earlier

this year, I discovered a fourth handmade book from 1964, similar in size and shape to the others, but with many textual differences. This one she gave not to a fellow poet, but to her step-daughter Julie Schoessow as a birthday gift. And the very last poem in this fourth book is “marriage,” a curious conglomerate of stanzas we recognize.

What does this small poem tell us, with its charged title? (It was unusual for Lorine to title her works at all, and even more rare for such an autobiographical reference to be made.) Is it even fair, given the private nature of such a gift, to draw any larger conclusions about her poetics, her own reading of herself? As a fellow poet, I believe it is. Any time a writer sets her own poems into book form, even as a private gift, it is a charged act. And, given the difficulty she had getting her poems into publication at all during her lifetime, we may well suspect that Niedecker made these gift books as a record of what she wanted to find its way to the world eventually. There is evidence that Lorine held some faint hope that at least one person in her husband Al’s family would help steer Lorine’s poetry into the world after Lorine’s death. In Lisa Pater Faranda’s *“Between Your House and Mine”: The Letters of Lorine Niedecker to Cid Corman*, we find a letter dated March 7, 1968, in which she asks Corman for advice regarding copyright law. She ends with a postscript which states:

I can’t vouch for Al staying interested in my literary work to the extent of selling it after I’m gone, and not certainly Al’s children with possible exception of one.

A gift to Al’s daughter Julie was not necessarily meant to be kept hidden away forever.

If we accept that we may view these books not just as personal gifts, but also as documents to be studied that may well yield insights, what then do we find here, with “marriage”? First of all, this poem places itself, by virtue of its title, next to Niedecker’s more famous poem, “I married.” This latter has often been cited as proof that Niedecker had serious doubts about her own marriage, that there were tensions in her late marriage to Al Millen which she perhaps could not or would not give voice to in real life, and could only vent into poetry. But what does she say here of marriage? Let us move point by point through the poem.

To start, she “considers” options: to be “thin for thought,” and lead the ascetic life of a philosopher (which arguably she had been, for a number of years), or “thick cream blossomy,” an evocative phrase which combines the largesse of the kitchen with the fecund outdoor world. She sets up as a choice to embrace the sensual, sensory world, or to turn away from it. This is a choice every writer faces to some degree. For many years, we know Niedecker purposely remained “thin for thought.”

With the second stanza, a sudden interruption: “Ah your face—” but then the poem draws back from this attraction to consider “whether/ you can keep me warm.” We move from a momentary (perhaps surprising) flare of physical attraction to the longer term care and consideration involved in commitment. In the third stanza, almost as response to the question in stanza two, we

hear “his” voice. Note that in this version of the stanza (which has appeared elsewhere, as will be discussed below), Niedecker added, in line two, the words “he said,” perhaps to make clear to the intended reader (Al Millen’s daughter, after all) just who was speaking the words, whose was the gift? In this stanza, we see how the man she is considering enriches her life through sharing both knowledge and pleasure. This voice continues in the fourth stanza. We’re still talking about food, but “All things are better/ flavored with bacon” is also a philosophical position, set against the school of the “thin for thought.” Pouring wine over cabbage has almost religious overtones, as a means of blessing even the humblest among us.

Finally, in the surprising fifth stanza, Niedecker shifts the focus radically. She removes from the couple, and brings in John Ruskin, a Victorian philosopher/poet/critic she was familiar with from her wide reading. As is typical of her work, she focuses not on one of Ruskin’s public or artistic efforts, but on a more private, side note, an anecdote: a moment in his diaries when he recorded suddenly coming across wild strawberries on an expedition which had otherwise turned up little. Wild strawberries: sweet, low to the ground, an unlooked-for gift amid disappointment. It is not difficult to see a parallel to her own discovery of late life love. The poem closes with one of Niedecker’s nifty double entendres: Rose was the name of Ruskin’s beloved. In this poem, it is also simply itself, a warm, soft color which makes the grey (color of boredom, color of age) of a life easier to bear. All in all, this poem travels from the tentative start of a relationship to the full pleasure and acknowledgment of what such a late love may give to us. It is a lovely, evocative poem.

Readers of Niedecker will recognize that although “marriage” has not been published before in this form, all of these stanzas have been published in various places, including the other three handmade books of 1964. The first, third and fourth stanzas are found always together, as the first poem in each of the three other handmade books. She published these three stanzas in 1965 in *Poetry* magazine, in a set of five poems. It was included in her 1969 collected, *T&G*. The second stanza is published alone, the second poem in the other three handmade books, and then in *North Central* (1968) as part of the loose sequence, “Traces of Living Things.” And the Ruskin stanza is a variant on a poem, “Wild Strawberries,” which is included as the last poem in each of the other handmade books, and then printed in *Origin* in July 1966. “Wild Strawberries” was never collected in book form until the 2002 *Collected*, edited by Penberthy.

One has to be careful about making big statements on the evidence of just one poem. Certainly, in creating this new poem, Niedecker seems to be acutely sensitive to her intended audience: in this case, to the grown daughter of her (new) husband.

A second example of this sort of sensitivity to audience may surface in 1966. In Jenny Penberthy’s essay, “Writing Lake Superior” (published in *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*), writing on the generation and revision of Niedecker’s long poem, “Lake Superior,” Penberthy includes a footnote:

[Niedecker's] 1966 Christmas card to the Neros includes an excerpt "from Circle Tour." Strange that she should use "Circle Tour" when she had revised it in October. (78)

Why would a poet include an earlier version if there was a later revision already finished?

"Circle Tour," an early version of what became "Lake Superior," has been lost except for a brief excerpt. But apparently, it was written as one long, uninterrupted narrative of her trip with Al around Lake Superior. Later revisions chopped the poem into a numbered sequence and, in Penberthy's words, "obscure[d] the contemporary travelers" (71). Penberthy notes that even the title, "Circle Tour," "lodge[s] the poem with the human circumnavigators" (71). It is not hard to imagine that perhaps Niedecker felt for a Christmas letter, the earlier draft would stand as a sort of "what we've been up to this year" update. Was it more appropriate to that particular audience of two than a later, choppier and abstracted version might be? Once again, here, as with "marriage," we find Niedecker aware of and responsive to the intimacy of a gift relationship. She intended poems she sent to friends, and these handmade books, as gifts. Perhaps she was willing to present various versions of her poems in light of their recipients, and the context in which the poem was placed?

Whatever her reason or motivation, Niedecker seems to have been willing to reimagine her poems. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes in her essay, "Lorine Niedecker, the Anonymous: Gender, Class, Genre, and Resistances":

In [Niedecker's] textual practices, she carried poems forward from volume to volume, presenting them repeatedly in different contexts, not always seeking newness, but multiple tellings... She also (though more rarely) offered different versions of some poems when she presented them in print form. These tactics are similar to multiple transmissions of an oral tradition, but play havoc with the print institution of copy text and the authorial ego-frame of "final intentions" in ways that do not (unfortunately) lead to clarity in her collected works. (Penberthy 119)

"marriage" raises questions for me, as a poet and reader. In the swamp and flood of a life, can there be, ever, one single definitive version of a poem? Should there be? Do poems write themselves linearly? What narratives do we construct as readers? And how are these questions clouded, if poet and/or reader take into account an intended audience? In a letter to Corman on May 3, 1967, Niedecker writes, "Poems are for one person to another, spoken thus, or read silently..." In the first place, "marriage" seems to have been intended for Julie, a gift. Now, as her readers, we become each that "one." That such a characteristically brief, graceful poem may, like a pebble dropped into a pool, ripple out in many directions and for a distance, seems to me a good thing. It is a privilege to include it in the pages of *Verse Wisconsin*.

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Published in Verse Wisconsin 103

✂ *Primipara*: a Magazine by Women Poets (1974–1984)

BY JERI McCORMICK

It was a memorable meeting—my second with the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets. A member from Oconto, Diane Nichols, stood up and issued an invitation to women poets: why not get together and share our poetry? The women's movement was well under way (1973), I'd been attending "awareness" groups aimed at advancing women's causes, and I'd taken part in my first poetry workshop—a weekend with acclaimed Wisconsin poet, Edna Meudt, in Spring Green—where my skimpy drafts brought the encouragement I needed.

So I went to Diane's meeting, along with a small group of other women, each of us focusing on the dual purpose of exploring our feminine lives and advancing our writing. Our host, Diane, an English major and former high school teacher, proved to be knowledgeable and stimulating. Gathered at her country home north of Green Bay, we'd brought our own writing (very little published by any of us) and shared our personal backgrounds. Sitting in a large, comfortable living room with its enormous hand-built fireplace, we talked about our shared interest in writing; what it meant to us and what we hoped to accomplish.

We'd read Virginia Woolf and Betty Friedan; Gloria Steinham and Robin Morgan; Erica Jong and Denise Levertov; Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, among others. And some of us had heard Adrienne Rich in Milwaukee. Through these authors and others, we learned that we didn't need permission to write; we could just go ahead and do it.

Most of us were middle-aged—thirtyish or fortyish—with young families and busy lives. How to fit writing into those lives was proving difficult, but we were determined to do it. Over time, we found that sharing our stories and staying connected helped. As did group writing, often with timed prompts that Diane provided, using freewriting techniques outlined by author Peter Elbow and others. We offered gentle peer critiques based on what we knew of successful writing and no one worried about instantly shaping those initial drafts into finished poetry. We could do the polishing at home.

After a few such sessions, seven of us began to talk of widening our circle through editing a poetry publication. We all had acquaintances who would welcome this reach toward community. A women's poetry journal seemed a novel and needed project, one we would keep statewide in scope, since we knew we had an audience here, and our goal of making connections was more likely achievable if limited. Our founders' group of seven included women from Eagle River, Green Bay, Fort Atkinson, Oconto, and Madison. In addition to Diane and myself, Diana Anderson, Marcia Fischer, Donna Cole, Jane Farrell, and Nancy Breitsprecher participated. Diane would remain our 'fearless leader' throughout the decade to come.

We arrived at a name for the magazine quickly and effortlessly. Jane Farrell, a nurse and nursing textbook writer in Green Bay, suggested we use the medical term for “first birth”—*Primipara*. With that idea, we soon had a symbolic cover, designed by Lee Bock of Appleton, which we used on all issues by simply varying the color of the stock. Our subscription rate was \$2.50 per year for two issues. Our first issue contained work by the seven founders, each represented by poems and a biography, plus an introductory poem by Wisconsin’s well-known Zona Gale (1874–1938) of Portage.

Work on the magazine took place in the pre-computer era, which meant that we worked with typewriters, doing tedious re-typing of each submission, cutting and pasting, and laying out the master for a commercial printer. Eventually, the participants nearest Oconto took on most of this work, joined by an early contributor of art and writing, Ellen Kort of Appleton (who later became Wisconsin’s first Poet Laureate). And we found a friend indeed in Nancy Rose Sweetland, a poet in Green Bay, who accepted the job of assembling the “pieces” of our choosing, working with the printer, and turning each batch into a finished magazine, complete with binding.

But the selection of poems for print required the help of all of us, although we lost Marcia and Donna along the way when they turned to other projects. Meeting in each other’s homes, we were kept busy reviewing the mailed-in poems. Wisconsin’s women poets seemed hungry for outlets. Reading the submissions silently and then aloud to each other, we required majority approval for inclusion. We typed personal letters of rejection and acceptance, giving careful thought to each, with no pre-set forms to rely on. When we needed breaks from work, we often had Diane’s beautiful wooded acreage to walk in. One memorable weekend included tubing on the Oconto River and an overnight stay at the Nichols’ family cabin on its banks.

The magazine led to other community-promoting activities for writers. Among them were summer weekend retreats at Diane’s home, attended by any contributors or subscribers who wished to come. These gatherings included writing sessions similar to our own founders’ get-togethers, complete with prompts and critiques for drafts. We slept all over the house, wherever we could find space, and some overflow attendees brought tents for the spacious grounds. These get-togethers were heady times as we became acquainted with each other and shared our reading lives, especially the poems of acclaimed women writers around the country, historical and contemporary. Among our favorites were anthologies such as *No More Masks*, *Psyche*, and *Rising Tides*. And we learned about other feminist magazines—*Iowa Woman*, for example, and *Calyx* on the west coast. The meals for these retreats were excellent, as they had been at our meetings all along, prepared in Diane’s kitchen Friday evening through Sunday morning.

Thus we came to know many of the writers whose work we’d opened in the mail. We printed their poems about creativity, giving birth, coming of age, growing old, gardening, music, abortion, spouses, children, loved ones, memorable places, animals and birds, losses, the seasons, illnesses, domestic abuse, the war in Viet Nam—myriad subjects a reader might expect to find in a dozen years of

published poetry. Joy and sorrow, fear and comfort—all were there. It was a pleasure to meet such creative women as Phyllis Walsh (who became editor of *Hummingbird*); Peg Lauber and Joan Rohr Myers of Eau Claire; Helen Fahrbach, Dorothy Dalton and Laurel Mills of Menasha; Sue Silvermarie and Randy Arnow of Milwaukee; Kay Saunders and Estella Lauter of Appleton; Loretta Strehlow of Cedarburg, Leslie Dock of Madison, Jo Madl Gross of West Bend, and many others.

Primipara launched and conducted an annual writing contest, and the editors met to choose the winners. This meant assessing approximately a hundred entries for each contest and soliciting donations for prizes. And we sponsored a Saturday symposium at UW–Green Bay, which attracted dozens of subscribers and contributors for a day-long program of sharing through panels and readings.

These activities took a great deal of coordinating time, all of it volunteer work. And eventually the editors who had been most involved began to foresee a time of winding down. We agreed that after ten years of putting out *Primipara* we had accomplished a great deal, served state poets as a connecting and publishing hub, and we were ready to turn our sights elsewhere. Possibilities of going back to school, entering or re-entering the job market, starting a business, or simply concentrating on family needs, were starting to take attention away from publishing and its attendant activities. Diane, especially, was shouldering too much of the burden as the years went on. And, besides, costs were rising, for both production and postage. Dropping the page count helped somewhat, but mailing out the issues became increasingly expensive. It was time to admit that we had realized our dream, and we'd have few regrets about moving on.

But we had one last project in mind. We would compile a ten-year anthology, featuring new work by the founders plus selected poems from all of the decade's issues. We met in Appleton to make our selections and assemble the book, entitled *Words Reaching Between*. It appeared in 1984, a fine achievement we felt, bringing together many of the voices we had had the pleasure of showcasing in the course of *Primipara's* publishing life. As Diane wrote in the anthology's introduction, "our memories of the magazine will be good ones ... we've watched poets develop in their writing, as well as come to grips with problems in their personal lives—from boyfriends and lovers, to abortions and grown-up children."

And so *Primipara* was closing shop, but would not be forgotten. We believed that little magazines and small presses would necessarily come and go, their lives and deaths contributing a fertile medium for new ventures by others. Ours was a "first birth" for women poets in Wisconsin. We hoped it would not be the last.

Published in Verse Wisconsin 112

✿ The Essay That I Begin Writing While Walking to the Wisconsin Capitol Trying to Discern the Right Question 2/24/11

BY WENDY VARDAMAN

Do you know where the Assembly is?

I am walking down the street with a yoga mat under my arm, a back pack with a laptop, and a sleeping bag that, dangling from a cord, cuts off the circulation in my right hand, even through heavy mittens. It is cold and dark. It is February in Madison, and I have a cold.

I am walking toward the University at 8:35 pm. Really, I'd rather be sleeping. But I am meeting my 18-year-old daughter at a coffee shop where she is meeting friends to talk about starting a Shakespeare theater group at UW. She waves through the winter fogged windows, comes out with her sleeping bag and backpack, and we continue toward campus, talking as we go about her plans for next year when she goes to college for real, away from home, we still don't know where.

We are walking because we always walk. We are walking because we do not own a car.

Confession: I have not been a political activist. I have never marched in a protest before this week. Have never protested except in response to undone chores at home, unreasonable deadlines, and demands that eat up my poetry-writing time. Have missed voting in numerous primary, and a few city elections.

I do not like parties, political or seasonal.

So what am I doing on day 11 or 12 of the protests in Madison on a marble floor, my yoga mat doubled beneath me, my sleeping bag rolled behind me, writing as fast as I can in my notebook outside the State Library Office of the Capitol's 3rd floor at midnight?

People ask me directions all the time, even here: do I look like I know what I am doing?

Are you aware that you might get kicked out?

My daughter and I reconnoiter with the male half of the family in front of my husband's Folklore office at the UW. We'd have gone down earlier, but he's meeting late with his group of Bradley Learning Community freshman, one of many extra campus duties cheerfully done. He teaches them how to make bread, which they have not learned at home. He's baked all of our bread, in fact, since I was pregnant with our first child. Our 14-year-old has arrived spattered with clay from his pottery class. It's about 9 pm when we gather to head down State Street. The TAs who started this sleepover have asked faculty members to come

tonight with their friends and families.

We've been spending time here, separately and as a family, almost daily, sometimes more than once a day, since the protests began, but we haven't yet stayed all night. My husband wants to support the grad students—he's been involved in the Coalition for Affordable Public Education (CAPE) since it began, an organization founded "to increase state funding for the public university system in Wisconsin and thereby increase access to higher education."

At first it is just our son who plans to go along. Then our daughter finds out that the Governor plans to depopulate "Protest Nation" this weekend. I draw myself out of cold-induced, I've-got-deadlines apathy, knowing that an overnight protest at the Capitol is probably not something we will do again as a family: our oldest son has already left Wisconsin to attend college, and our daughter will soon follow.

A young woman wearing a chartreuse vest with *Marshall* stamped on the back stops to talk to the guitar-playing college student close to me. I wonder if she is telling him that he needs to stop singing 60s songs? She comes over, munching a Lärabar, then bends down to share her message: There's a workshop at 11 pm, 1st floor, about nonviolent protest. I'm welcome to come and should spread the word.

It's nice that the Marshalls are concerned for us.

Will you take our picture?

We walk the halls deliberating about where to camp. The building is a lot more sparsely occupied than it has been during the day, when thousands jam-cram together, shoulder to shoulder, drumming and chanting. Did I mention my dislike of crowds?

We were inside earlier this week when the disappearance of the fourteen Democratic senators made it impossible for a vote on the Budget "Repair" Bill to go forward, and protesters responded with a thunderous *thank you, thank you, thank you*. We were inside another day when Jesse Jackson led us in a round of "We Shall Overcome," the Capitol so packed we didn't even know we were following him. We will be here later tonight when the Republican majority rams through its vote on this bill in 10 seconds, not even allowing everyone in its own party time to vote. But you need a lot more room to sleep than to stand, even if you plan to do it reclining. In the end we have to split up. Girls on one side of the hall, boys on the other. People who already have a space stroll past confidently. They know where to get the free food, the bottled water, the Ian's Pizza, the Lärabars. Almost immediately my daughter bumps into one of her theater friends and disappears.

I sit down. The family scatters. I have brought work, my computer. I have all kinds of things I am supposed to be doing this evening. But instead, I sit under a poster with Scott Walker's face on it, the word *Dope* emblazoned beneath, scribbling with a purple pen, as fast as I can, while people of all ages walk past—really, it's a little like being at a mall without shiny goods to purchase. (Did I

mention that I hate malls even more than crowds or parties?) The poster sticks with an inch of painter's blue tape to a marble column and details an off-site rally held earlier today. I notice that every column has such a sign. And of course, there are hundreds and hundreds of other signs stuck with painter's tape to the columns, the walls, the balconies, the doors, everywhere you look. They will all pull away easily when it's time to take them down. It will look as if nothing unusual had ever happened.

Competing with the guitar player and his friends, who harmonize quite beautifully, are the sounds of giggling teenaged girls hoping to attract some boys' attention, an occasional tuba blast, a soprano sax, the periodic cheering and chanting from the floor where the Assembly is in session. The kids circle back. I keep seeing people I know—families from the neighborhood, families from the theater where I work. It's funny how many people I do see now that fewer people are here. During the days, dozens of friends and acquaintances came to protest, but I didn't run into them in real life—too crowded—just on Facebook, as we posted and reposted information: new facts, old facts, more implications of the bill and budget as they've emerged since February 11th. Heartening stories of Ian's Pizza, loaves and fishes for the crowd, provided by folks from Arkansas to Finland to Iran. YouTube videos. Ken Lonquist's half comic, half serious "14 Senators" song celebrating the democratic lawmakers who fled to Illinois. "The Cheddar Revolution."

I have taken more than one picture during these protests.

Excuse me, ma'am, are you an educator?

It fascinates me to watch all of this. To read obsessively the news that comes over my Facebook wire service. But I'm just a poet, not a singer, not a journalist, not a news analyst, not a teacher. What can poems contribute to politics, to history? Oh, sure, I know the role that folksongs played in the Baltic revolutions. The use, earlier this month, of protest poems in Egypt. The subversive and communicative power of slave songs and stories in the American South. Innumerable World War I poets whose battlefield poems, and deaths, were and continue to be a powerful anti-war statement. And what about William Butler Yeats, who became a senator, and the other poets and writers who created and maintained the fight for Irish independence? Our own national anthem was written as a poem in the heat of battle, set to the tune of a drinking song, printed less than three weeks after the events it describes, and then used to rally others for nearly 200 years.

But I have not been that kind of poet, not that kind of person. I do not like to argue. I avoid groups. I find it hard to explain my thoughts out loud. I don't think I even know what they are until I begin to write them down, which is why on any given day, at any given hour, I'd rather be writing. And I'd rather, for the most part, be writing poems, which, for me, have always been wonderful little boxes of language and sound first: a place to put special words, a place where each word can become special, can sparkle, separated from other words, given space, and considered for both sound and sense; or, part of some little collection of needle-thin syllable slivers, can glint, gleam, shine, strike one against the other.

Are you correcting papers?

I don't say it's normal or desirable to be so absorbed by something so trivial as the way syllables sound. But it's a harmless way to spend time, or I have thought so. At any given moment of any given day, I would rather be rolling these marbles in my hand, turning them over, feeling them against the skin of my fingers, and hearing the pleasant clack-clack sounds they make, despite the fact that, at any given moment, there are so many more urgent and important demands on my time: the work of helping to hold a nonprofit children's theater together; the work of producing an independent, volunteer poetry magazine; the work of parenting three, now two, soon to be one child. Of even the chores, which themselves rarely ever anymore get done, dog hair collecting like heaps of dirty snow in the corners of a house I can hardly make myself care about at all now that the kids are almost grown. Even sweeping seems, on the face of it, more important than any particular poem.

And yet we poets write poems. I write poems. And when the protests started here in Madison, and Sarah Busse, my *Verse Wisconsin* co-editor, wanted to make a statement, we decided a little impulsively to invite our friends, our readers, for their poems about these historic events. Publishing them in the magazine, on Facebook, as written, as they were sent to us, without censure or deliberation, without time, as she eloquently said in a poem about the protests, for perfection. Letting this impromptu issue unfold as it will, as its contributors direct.

I am writing, I explain, a poem.

Would it help?

Would it hurt? There are all kinds of arts unfolding spontaneously—not sloppily—here at the Capitol. In the signs by protesters, in the posters. In the display of signage on the walls and hanging from the balconies. In the drumming of the student groups that have loudly led days of chanting. In the costumes of, for instance, a man who dresses up as an Imperial Walker. In the chants. In the bagpipes played by the firefighters who joined the protesters early on, who themselves slept over a few days ago. In the musicians who came with their guitars and cellos and saxophones. In the musicians who come with only their voices when instruments are banned around Day 19. In the knitting and crafting circles that meet at specific times. In the chalkboard at Ian's, amended daily with a new color for the names of more countries from which donations have come. In the pictures and videos that people create and share on web sites, blogs and Facebook pages. In the little campsites of those who have been here many days, with their home-made quilts and arrangements of stuff to create a place. In the Post-Its that will cover the Capitol doors when they close to Wisconsin's citizens on Day 28. In the impromptu dramatic readings that took place yesterday at the Bartell Theater. In the attempts of Assembly Democrats to keep the debate going. In the speeches, planned and unplanned. In the “theatrical stunts” of the fourteen senators who figured out a way to create this time in the first place for us to fill. In the continued “theatrics” of our minority assembly officials. In the “prank” phone call that went out to Scott Walker from *The Beast* (<http://www.buffalobeast.com/>). The total effect of all of these

different kinds of expression and creativity occurring simultaneously is something like what happens in theater, itself always a collaboration among different artists and arts—visual, textual, architectural, sculptural, performative: more impressive and more effecting than these things could be individually. More ephemeral, too, as any given performance unfolds over the space of a few hours and runs of even the best shows are limited.

Do you know where they've taken our blankets?

When I was little, my favorite book was *Mr. Snitzel's Cookies*. It's a parable about a poor baker, a hobo, and a rich grocer. The hobo asks both for shelter. The grocer turns him away. The baker shares what little he has left of his own food and gives the man his bed for the night. In the morning the hobo tells him, *Be careful what you do first when you go to work. You will do it the rest of the day.* The baker forgets, arrives at the shop, hopes to find enough overlooked ingredients to make one last cookie. To his surprise, there is a little flour, a bit of sugar and butter. He begins to bake, and magically, the ingredients replenish themselves all day. His hat-making, more business-minded friend from next door comes to help. While he bakes, she sells the cookies, giving some away to those who can't pay, as the hobo has instructed. And the grocer? He hunts down the hobo, brings him home for the night, feeds him a sumptuous supper, gives him the guest room with its wide bed and thick blankets.

Next morning the hobo thanks him, same as the baker, and offers the same advice. The grocer and his wife have planned to count money all day. *But first, his wife asks logically, don't we need to clear some space for the money we will count?* So they begin. Sweeping, tidying, sorting, clearing shelves, taking out trash. Can't stop, no matter how many boxes they empty, how many trash cans they fill. Meanwhile, Mr. Snitzel, buoyed by the previous day, is able to continue as before, baking beautiful cookies and making enough money to sustain his modest needs.

Do you know what time it is?

It's a dream, perhaps, this coming together of love and livelihood, but one that every artist can relate to. And aren't most of us artists of some kind, at least some of the time?

Watching the flying figures behind the pizza counter at Ian's three days ago as they bustled about taking our orders, sliding slices of pizza into wall ovens, someone else making hash marks on a slip of paper, adding to the "given away" column, and subtracting from the "donated" column with a stubby pencil, someone else throwing new country names on the chalkboard, others somewhere in the back baking, baking, someone else somewhere else posting Facebook updates, the place humming with happy people, phones ringing, orders collecting online, as this place offered, for a little while, a collaborative, cooperative economic model, I remembered Mr. Snitzel and the longing and the hope that story gave me as a child for a life of significance and meaningful work. For a sustainable life that balanced material and spiritual needs. A busy life of turning out cookies, but not so busy or so self-involved to prevent helping someone else.

What are you hoping to accomplish with these protests?

If poems seem less immediately significant or desirable to others than pizza or cookies, I am sorry. But they are the only thing I am really compelled to make: what I remind myself to choose first thing in the morning, and what I hope others who feel similarly also allow themselves to choose. It's not that anyone here needs any of the poems I've written, or any particular poem at all. But it's how I join my voice (the one I find while writing) to the voices that collect around me like needles needling, like marbles dropping on marble, and I need to give voice to these thoughts, as you do too. To give witness, sometimes, to the people and the events around us through our poems. To give witness, sometimes, to the art of words and writing by showing up and doing it in public, as when painters show up with sketchbooks, chalk, easels. To let ourselves be counted among those who love words and deliberate about their weight, sound, and significance. To join, now and then, the party.

When my daughter returns despondent from the debate downstairs (two weeks before she will lead others in singing "We Shall Overcome" in the rotunda on March 9th), she looks both older and younger at the same time, having traveled from activism to apathy in one night. And she asks.

Why do this?

And I begin again.



Relying on Your Imagination to Discern the Question, a Prose Sonnet

(at the Capitol, 2/25/11)

Because what's the point if you're not enjoying your life. Because neither of us is getting any younger. Because it is an unseasonably pleasant February day in Wisconsin. Because it is an unpleasantly seasonable February day in Wisconsin. Because my children are with me. Because who needs all this stuff this house these plates this bed these chairs. Because it all comes down to backstory: who we & why we. Because there is free Ian's pizza from Finland and Arkansas at the top of the hill where we listen to Rabbi Biatch.

Because you can read the news on Avol's Bookstore windows and on Facebook and in poems and on people's faces. Because Tammy Baldwin, my congresswoman, and Beth Kiser, my children's grade school cello teacher stand on either side of me. Because "ROTC Kills." Because my husband writes *Solidarity* on his sign in seven languages while my teenagers get out their magic markers. Because poetry and plays came from one place, and theatrical gestures aren't *stunts* or *tricks* or *mere* or even *just*. Because 14 senators are just enough to make a sonnet, if you're careful, and I am letting go of perfect all the time, and sometimes the performance *is* the poetry.

Published in Verse Wisconsin Main Street Issue

✿ The Flowage Rebellions

BY LANE HALL

The Muratorian Fragment contains a list of the extant histories of the **Midwestern Water Wars**. The most interesting witness to the formative stages of the rebellions was a woman known only as *Sister Pulcheria*, who, in either tribute or “penance of the spectrum,” added mysteriously potent dye concentrations to water sources, inadvertently creating the first **Flowage Rebellion** according to the **Chronologies** of the Water Wars. Bright spectral coloration became synonymous with covert insurrection, which led to both the **Forbidden Palette Act**, and the sweeping **Pigment Prohibition Laws** of the mid-century. Color attacks, characterized by their vehemence and violence, were frequent, and their punishment swift and brutal. Words such as *tone, green, yellow, hue, blush, crimson, bleach, redden, color, colorize, discolor, people of color, vividness, chromaticity* and *tinge* were forbidden in public use, creating the **Covert Lexical Movement**, often subsequently associated with baroque and poetic syntactical style. “Lexical” thus became shorthand for “one who brings color-to-water” and has since been used as both rebuke and honorific.

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The Muratorian Fragment includes various apocrypha attributed to guerrilla cells of the **Covert Lexical Movement**. *Chroma Proclamation* was practiced among the rank and file, though was by necessity secretive as all Color Enunciations were deemed seditious and punishable by incarceration, fine, or death. *Chroma Proclamation* is defined, in **The Chronologies**, as:

1. Complete color-dousing.
2. A testimony of one’s commitment to the full visible spectrum.
3. A symbolic equipoise of shadow and light.

According to **The Chronologies**, rainbows assumed talismanic effect frequently inducing ecstatic display over sustained periods of time. The following devotion was found in a bolus-cache near the Low Head Plants of **Hauserlake Dam**:

From the **Chronologies** 6:4

“For I have placed my chroma in the clouds. When I send clouds over the earth, my chroma shall be visible. Color by Water is my covenant with you and with everything that lives. Never again will flood destroy all life. As water flows from rock, so you are free to wander among nations.”

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“*Bolus-caches*” were found in the following locations and revealed numerous and varied accounts as testified in the **Chronologies**:

- Substation “A”, Taylor Falls, (National Water War Historic Site)

- Hauserlake Falls, (low head), near East Bank Spillway
- Winnepesaukee River, 6 miles southwest of Laconia
- Verdi Diversion Dam and Headworks
- Chattahoochee River, 14 miles north of Columbus,
- Nooksack (medium head) Diverting Weir
- Penstock Forebay and Spillway
- Outlet Excavation, White River
- Puyallup River, 30 miles southeast of Tacoma in the Western Watersheds.

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“The Noblest of the Elements is Water”—Pindar

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The Carbon Child Describes the Color Red

Some things are light, while others are dark. If we put a hand in a bucket of water, that water might feel cold to the touch. If we then put our hand in a bucket of iced water, and submerge again that hand in the original bucket, our first water now feels warm to the touch. Terms for color invite mistake and disappointment. A single hue of green cloth might be labelled pea green, sea green, olive green, grass green, sage green, evergreen, verdigris, lime green, chromium green, viridian. We refer to toys and clothes of baby blue, peacock blue, Nile blue, lemon yellow, straw yellow, rose pink, heliotrope, magenta, plum. We have no syntax for color, only vague nouns and imprecise adjectives. If music resembled a lark, canary, crow, cat, dog, wolf, whale, nightingale, would we refer to corresponding musical tones as larky, canary-like, wolf-pitched, nightingalish, or speak of a crow-like chorus with roughed grouse percussive tympani?

The carbon child sees a hat of faded red, and desires this hat. He is never content to merely call it red, for he knows that it has no resemblance to his brightly painted red truck, or the red of his mother’s adornments, or the red of the running fox. He understands that a *lot of red* is different from a *little bit of red*. He gropes for a means to define this particular red, and finding none, retreats in sullen silence, unable to attain his object of attraction. He is cramped by the poverty of language to describe. His sister is no better equipped, even though she speaks of tone, timbre, shade, tincture, shadow, trace and vestige. When she acclaims a color “painted in a minor key” she further confuses her brother and mother, reducing our three-dimensional model of perception to vague metonym. A sphere can be used to unite our dimensions, but she sees only a flat plane, encircled by the vague boundary of imprecise cognition.

A Problem of Indeterminate Descriptors, From Color to Water

The carbon child gathers flowers, hoards colored fabrics, chases burrowing grubs and lives longer without food than water. Water means granaries of light, strong seed printing, good fishing described in erotic language of Viburnum red, light-on-shimmering yellow, purple of the deep bruise. We observe that often water

is undemanding and moves skyward, though some makes thin film around soil particles determined both by water's cohesive vision and by water's hesitation of water to water. If we desire to describe a surface of water that has ground soaked at summer shower, we haltingly suggest that it is an indeterminate darkening stain. The carbon child gropes for a means to define this particular dull stain, even while begging for the gaudiest of painted toys. Thus he is again cramped by the poverty of language to define surfaces of darkness and light, and we collectively suffer the insufficiency of our lexical and perceptual maps. We must encourage concrete and precise description of spectral conditions, an essential attribute for ethical conduct as citizen. Our inability to maintain accurate language concerning surface light on simple objects increases tenfold as we attempt to comprehend fluid systems over rich surfaces of time which decadent underground syntax, or *ground-water-talking*, perversely, though some say purposefully, obscures.

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“Clear mental images make clear speech. Vague thoughts find vague utterance.”
—A. H. Munsell, *A Color Notation*

“Precise Utterance asserts Form. Shapelessness is violation.”
—The Utterance Army, *Violation Campaign*

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Fragments from The Chronologies

1937 had been, as everybody knows, a momentous and sinister year for the **Flowage Rebellion**. Marriages and births in the Western Watersheds had fallen off nearly eighty percent, due in part to groundwater poisoning by **The Utterance Army's** radical fringe, and due in part to menstrual anomalies associated with regional cloud purgations. The establishment of *Vivid Suffragette Unions* in every town and village throughout the Midwestern Sectors, and their obedience to the dictation of the *Central National Franchise of the Covert Lexical Movement* led to the almost total suspension of social functions throughout the region, threatening eventually to paralyze the nation.

Clergymen were in pitiable condition for lack of fees, local water bureaus were only open Mondays and Saturdays for distribution purposes, and strict rationing was brutally enforced. Social columns of newspapers and electronic networks, believed to be distributing encoded directives, were abolished entirely. The pressure upon the privileged Water Holders of the Republic was mounting as women were denied franchise in the Powers of Water Act of 1941. The Central Federation of Vivid Unions was to deliver a deadly blow ostensibly led by the shadow figure of *Sister Pulcheria*, resulting in the infamous **Forbidden Palette Act**. As we now know, this terrible policy was first inaugurated in secret; a trial of the idea was to be made in the Minnesota Water Zones; neither the state nor federal governments had the faintest suspicion of what impended; not a single newspaper had any inkling, though pirate radio wavelengths frequently covered response to early campaigns through encoded poetic readings and anagrammatic playlists.

The martyred minor poet and boat enthusiast, **James Carrick**, was forced into national spotlight after **The Utterance Army** made first discovery of the covert *bolus-cache network* by decoding the now famous poem, “**Dingman’s Pond.**” The stanzas “While gliding o’er fair expanse/ And gazing at the shore beyond,/ What simple joys the soul entrance/ Evoked by crossing Dingman’s Pond” seemed innocuous enough, although the iambic count associated “the shore beyond” and “the soul’s entrance” with a causeway at the Low Head of “mildly beauteous Dingman’s Lake” near Hauserlake Falls, thus offering concrete proof of the Lexical Movement’s growing resistance and sophisticated organizational strategies. An epoch of draconian repressions ensued.

Though school children now recite the poem in common curricula, and “a Dingman” has wormed its way into popular speech, the mysterious Mr. Carrick has never been seen again, and was perhaps never seen at all. There is ongoing controversy among various intellectuals prone to analysis of abstract causation regarding Carrick’s disappearance, death and even existence. Analysis of poetic algorithm has become a popular academic pursuit and it is often asserted in scholarly journals that “algorithmic agents cannot be said to disappear”; and that they are “always present, *everywhere*” and “combinatory recoding is proof of its own agency.”

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Further Reading

Living the Water Underground. 1951. Braun, Ernest and David Cavagnaro. American West Publishing Co., Palo Alto, California.

The Gaudy Toy: Tales from the Color Frontier. 1964. Thomas Taylor. W. H. Freeman and Company, San Francisco.

A Color Notation. 1905. A. H. Munsell.

Rough Algorithms of Dingman’s Pond. 1960. Reginald Willet. Routledge Press.

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✿ Afterwords—

(di) Verse Wisconsin: Community & Diversity

BY SARAH BUSSE AND WENDY VARDAMAN

my feathers
 sailing
 on the breeze
 the clear sky
 loves to hear me sing
 overhanging clouds
 echoing my words
 with pleasing sound
 across the earth
 everywhere
 making my voice heard

—Ojibwe Dream Song (unknown date/author) in *Winter Nest: a Poetry Anthology of Midwestern Women Poets of Color*, ed. Angela Lobo-Cobb, 1987

This essay was originally presented at the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature, May, 2013, in East Lansing, MI.

In 2009, we inherited an independent poetry magazine named *Free Verse* from Linda Aschbrenner, who had published it on her own from her living room in Marshfield, Wisconsin, for 11 years and 100 issues. *Free Verse* was born out of Aschbrenner's writing group and its frustration at the lack of publishing venues for members. Aware of the biases against poets who did not belong to the academic community and who did not necessarily have degrees or awards behind their names, Aschbrenner collected poems from the group and photocopied them, handing out pages to friends. Poets being what they are, they shared these simple monthly documents, and Aschbrenner started to receive submissions from others as well. Thus began a magazine which became something of a fixture in the indie press scene, and a means for Wisconsin poets, particularly, to feel part of a community, as she shared not only poems, but also the knowledge of poets with one another.

Belonging became important to both of us when we moved to the state in 2000 and 2005, respectively. As writers know, especially when unattached to universities or other institutions, it can be difficult to find community in a new place. At home with children, writing independently and isolated from peers, contacts, and adult conversation, we recognized on a personal level the important role that an academically unaffiliated venue like *Free Verse* could play. When we became its new co-editors, we didn't want to lose that sense of belonging, even as, in 2009, we discussed other changes, including a new name, *Verse Wisconsin*, that referenced our identity as a place-based community of poets, even as we sought to extend our reach by creating a new, online component for the magazine. We wanted to cross boundaries in all kinds of ways: print and online, intellectually rigorous and community based, small-town

friendly and artistically and creatively ambitious, and to accomplish this goal we added another key concept: diversity. Community and diversity are the twin poles by which we navigate, and although there is at times an uneasy relationship between the two, we believe the tensions inherent therein help us to create a richer publication.

But what do we mean by diversity? *Verse Wisconsin* strives to include variety with respect to age, race, class, gender (and all its contemporary complexities), geography, occupation, poetic genre and aesthetics. If the mix we seek isn't exactly (or only) urban, we could certainly call it polyglot, a heady, giddy, slightly anarchic endeavor that feels many days like juggling, or running a three-ring circus.

How do we know if we're achieving our goal, providing a space for truly diverse poets and reaching out to diverse audiences? Well, like any conscientious editors, we count, we track, we compare our poet pool to the broader populations in the state, in the region, and see how we match up. We study. We research. If we find we receive content from, say, 60% women, but accept them at the rate of 40%, we would ask ourselves why and launch an investigation. When we are aware that some other kind of poetry has a base in say, Madison, we try to find out more about it and its practitioners and understand why our publication isn't drawing their work. Maybe we make changes. Maybe we attend new events created by other groups. It doesn't always work, but we make attempts, reaching out to a variety of organizations, as well as *in* to university groups that may exist apart from the community.

Beyond inreach and outreach, comparison and measurement, we also question whether diversity, like justice, is something that can be "achieved" or is better thought of as a goal, an ideal, something on which we fix our eyes and frequently stop to ask ourselves: How are we doing? Can we do better? How do we do better? With whom do we engage in order to help us do better? Perhaps, for us, "diversity" has become a code word for a questioning stance, a willingness to listen to others' stories, divergent narratives, experiences, other silences, for that matter. By remaining open to interaction with others—poets, artists, organizations, we gain greater awareness of our own place in the community: two middle-aged white women with advanced degrees, families, privilege that we are aware of and no doubt sometimes fail to register, and too many volunteer jobs.

As important as the what of diversity for *Verse Wisconsin* is the why. Why not, as poets and artists, stick with our own groups, whether that is a university-based creative writing program, or a different socially-defining characteristic like youth, or some aesthetic principle, such as "plain speaking" or experimental? First, we believe that diversity complicates narrative. As poetry itself insists on complexity of language and thought, working against the simplifications of the marketers, the dishonesty of mainstream media, and the voiding of meaning common in political speech, true diversity works against the corruption of cultural narratives by offering internal critiques through multiplicity. We also believe that diversity—of ideas, of style, of aesthetic, of voice—helps us to grow artistically. The creative poetic work of those we don't normally encounter—whether that

is hip hop or postmodern theater or *The Onion* or performance art or writing from people in nursing homes—can, if we take it seriously and engage deeply with its aesthetics and artistry, provide a means to see what we do differently and to change through the encounter. That this artistic encounter has, we believe, a further role to play in creating a less segregated, less stratified, more democratic society, as well as a more interesting one, is perhaps idealistic, but we wouldn't do what we do if we didn't believe that.

These multiple voices are welcome to us as individuals, as well as artistically. Writers need community. We need the support of fellow writers as well as the challenge. We provide audience for each other and produce each others' work, making place and space for our collective words and texts. In the current political landscape that is Wisconsin, we are particularly aware of the importance of a thriving grass roots community of producer-writers, or publisher-editor-poets, because that is all we have. With no public support at the state level, those of us outside of academic and other institutional frameworks have precious little to keep us going.

Steering by these twin stars, community and diversity, we developed the following mission statement with our advisory board.

Verse Wisconsin publishes poetry and serves the community of poets in Wisconsin and beyond. In fulfilling our mission we:

- showcase the excellence and diversity of poetry rooted in or related to Wisconsin;
- connect Wisconsin's poets to each other and to the larger literary world;
- foster critical conversations about poetry;
- build and invigorate the audience for poetry.

We're aware that each of the terms in that statement can be complicated, and we try to do that work, asking with each issue we publish: Who counts as a "Wisconsin" author? What counts as "Wisconsin" poetry? What is a poem and who gets to be called a poet? What is publication?

We are all too aware, for example, that there is a certain nostalgia, even *solastalgia* (as Thomas R. Smith explains it in "Enrichment and Repair" in this anthology, a sadness about the loss of places with which we are familiar) connected to the very idea of Wisconsin or Midwestern poetry, but we resist the notion that these are inherently pastoral categories, even as we include poetry responding to rural themes and images within our pages. And poets writing about rural places do not, necessarily, write with any one style or agenda, with one set of connotations, any more than Midwesterner poets writing about urban spaces do. If anything, we look to incorporate work from both populations that thoughtfully engages with a range of places, or with multiple or mediating places, and may have more in common than work of either rural or urban poets that relies on either easy abstraction or unexplored assumptions. We are uncomfortable, for instance, with projects like "Our Wisconsin" (recollectionwisconsin.org/stories) that don't actively problematize nostalgia and define, before engagement, the terms of the writers' experiences as an idealized past. We are likewise uncomfortable

with events meant to suggest an open door that skew towards younger work or academic work, on the assumption that those poets best reflect contemporary poetry.

At *Verse Wisconsin* we have been open to various definitions of poet and poetry, from spoken word and visual work, to video and verse drama, to prose that incorporates poetry or that is poetic, to dance and musical collaboration. We are also aware that the writers who often need the most support, from those in prison, to those who are homeless, to the young and those in assisted living, have access to the fewest resources, and are literally invisible to most of us. How do we support and recognize these writers? How do we find them?

As we have diversified notions of *Wisconsin*, of *poet*, we have diversified content by increasing the amount and types of prose we publish, right in among all the poems: the online “Wisconsin Poetry News” column promotes the projects of groups (rather than individual poets) and pays attention to service and activism of poets across the state; we include interviews, craft essays, personal reflections; we encourage (though we don’t often receive) hybrid prose-poetry work; we encourage readers to become book reviewers, and we mentor new reviewers, creating, we hope, readers akin to Virginia Woolf’s “Common Reader” and a group of reviewers whose backgrounds, opinions, and types of expertise are as diverse as the poets they read. Our interviews allow us to reach out to poets inside the state who don’t always see themselves as participating in a community, as well as those living out-of-state who are nevertheless connected to Wisconsin in substantive ways, inviting them to share their work, their vision of poetry, and to think of themselves as connected to the region.

As a hybrid print-online magazine, *Verse Wisconsin* creates print, as well as a virtual, space, and its community occurs within, and across, those spaces, as well as in real time. The print magazine uses a larger, 8 ½ x 11 format inherited from Aschbrenner and places multiple poems (3–4) on each page, which means that 6–8 poems typically occupy a 2-page spread, an unusual decision in poetry publishing. During layout, we ensure that poems sharing space also share themes, imagery, or some other commonality, or even difference, which will create conversations among them. It’s not a minimalist aesthetic, instead stretching toward something like “maximalist.” Another community-driven feature is the inclusion of every poet’s name on the front cover. Rather than choose two or three or four “big names” to feature, we prefer to print a visual representation of that issue’s community.

Online, we offer different, but related, content. We include poems around a specific theme or call, news, essays, interviews, reviews, special sections, and features on projects, partnerships, and creative reactions or reflections coming out of events such as the annual summer Hip Hop Educators’ Institute at the UW–Madison. Publishing online allows us to embrace a wider diversity of formats, including visual poetry, songs, music/text mashups, audio and video of poets performing their works. We have published poems and prose around a wide variety of topics, too, and our online calls range from poetic form to political poetry, verse drama to ecopoetry, and are often designed around a particular collaboration or to try to create new partnerships. Our political poetry

issue (110), for example, was timed in conjunction with a Wisconsin Book Festival at which we coordinated an event involving community- and university-based poets responding to dynamic work by poet-performers in the First Wave Hip Hop Learning Community.

Social media likewise offers more possibilities to reach a wider audience geographically, while simultaneously, we hope, building knowledge of each other and community: both Facebook and a YouTube channel enable us to feature content, to draw a larger group of readers to our site, and to give poets and writers yet another platform for their work. During the protests in Wisconsin, we simultaneously published poems as “notes” on Facebook and as a special online “Main Street Issue” (versewisconsin.org/mainstreet.html). We’re able to engage with a broader audience of poets and thinkers through social media, to learn from them, and hopefully to participate in such transformational interactions online as well as in person, as was the case with the Main Street work.

Around the edges of the magazine, increasing in frequency, we have held readings, panels, presentations, conversations, and other kinds of events, which invite people to engage with poetry and questions around poetry in person. These events have, themselves, driven both our thinking and the content of future issues, and have evolved from marginal to central features of our process and product. Along the way, we’ve come to believe in the importance of face-to-face conversations, with and without poems, as a means to bring people together, discovering new ideas and questions, while building relationships and promoting public poetry. We also believe in the importance of attending a range of events conducted by other groups in various spaces, from slams and festivals, to symposia and lectures, all of which are also part of the discovery, the research-driven process for locating and connecting poets.

Our mission has undergone a parallel change, as our emphasis has shifted toward conversation, activism, and transformational circles, and away from traditional publication. But publishing is itself another word to stretch, reinterpret, and to reinvent playfully and thoughtfully. Increasingly, we have been involved in efforts to publish in new and unexpected places and spaces, putting poems into our Verse-O-Matic vending machine, on buses, bicycles, shoes, postcards, and road signs, on Twitter & Facebook, as well as in magazines and books, as both *Verse Wisconsin* and Cowfeather Press. We have created colorful broadsides of all shapes and sizes, co-edited a Wisconsin Poets’ *Calendar*, and introduced poetry into Madison’s Common Council meetings. Current projects bring poems to an art gallery for a celebration of art about protest; to a playhouse for display in response to a production; and juxtaposed with composting demonstrations and lectures on soil science in readings and a poetry “(de)compos(t)ing station.”

Over the past five years, we have found that we do our best, most dynamic work in partnership with a wide variety of groups, and to date we have engaged in a variety of joint endeavors with over thirty groups, including Wormfarm Institute, Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, UW’s Office of Multicultural Arts Initiatives (OMAI), Poetry Jumps Off the Shelf, Forward Theater, Writers in Prison, the Wisconsin Humanities Council and Wisconsin Book Festival,

Madison Metro, and the Dane County Watershed Commission, as well as literacy groups and libraries, retail spaces and other nonprofits.

As we discover the centrality of collaboration to our operational method, of partnership to our process, we explore the relation of word and world, and realize that, at its most interesting, the role of editor allows us to be—rather than gate keepers or canon makers—event planners. Even a print magazine or book has an ephemerality about it. Embracing, engaging with transience, rather than resisting it, allows us to do other kinds of work, and to ask other kinds of questions. Rather than worrying about and trying to create and maintain an institution, buildings, permanent infrastructure, we can emphasize process, relationships, and transformation, asking ourselves: Who will we invite to the party? What sort of gathering will it be? Does everyone look like us? Think like us? Sound like us? Is that interesting? What other parties are going on around us that we might think about attending?



10 Ways to Hear Each Other Into Existence

1. Emphasize community and connection
2. Bring people together who might not ever get together otherwise
3. Give up ideas of prestige in favor of creativity
4. Have fun
5. Relinquish power
6. Invite new voices to contribute
7. Create space
8. Allow process to happen
9. Listen
10. Let go



A Few of the Questions We Still Haven't Answered

1. How can we better reach across basic divides (academic writers versus “community” writers; mothers v. non-mothers; various educational levels; gender and family choices; income/wealth disparities; geographical regions; aesthetic differences; etc.) in our daily practice?
2. How do we prove we are “serious” writers? Do we want to do this? What

does the word “serious” imply?

3. Who determines which publications have prestige? Who decides what “counts” and what gives them that power?
4. Can we reimagine our work as connecting and interconnecting in webs of network? Looping? Weaving? Bumper cars? Roller derby?
5. How do we live meaningful lives, and how do we empower others, those who will never afford an MFA program, writers in prison, writers at the margins, how do we empower those writers to also write their way into ever deeper meaning?

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✿ Contributors' Notes

Antler is author of *Factory, Last Words, A Second Before It Bursts, Subterranean Rivulet, Exclamation Points ad Infinitum!, Ever-Expanding Wilderness, Deathrattles vs. Comecries, Touch Each Other* and *Antler: The Selected Poems*. He was Milwaukee's second Poet Laureate. Antler recently read at Texas A&M, in Minneapolis with Robert Bly for the 100th anniversary celebration of the Poetry Society of America, and, as featured poet, at the annual conference of the National Association for Poetry Therapy in Chicago His poems have appeared in over 150 anthologies including *The Journey Home: the Literature of Wisconsin through Four Centuries* and *Earth Prayers*.

Linda Aschbrenner likes to read, dream, collect books, and think about the future of this planet. She founded the poetry journal *Free Verse*, editing and publishing 100 issues from 1998 to 2008. In 2001 she founded Marsh River Editions, publishing 17 poetry chapbooks for fellow poets. Over the years, she has organized a poetry group, a poetry reading series, and judged poetry contests. Her poetry, essays, book reviews, and short stories have appeared in various journals and anthologies. She has degrees in English and library science from UW–Madison. With her sisters Elda Lepak and Mavis Flegle, Linda is working on the book *Three Sisters from Wisconsin: Our Finnish American Girlhoods with Recollections of Michigan's Upper Peninsula*. Visit marshrivereditions.com.

Laurel Bastian is a past recipient of the Halls Emerging Artist Fellowship, and her work can be found in *Margie, Cream City Review, Nimrod, Puerto del Sol, Tar River Poetry, Anderbo* and other journals. She ran a creative writing program in a men's correctional facility near Madison, Wisconsin, for several years.

C. Mehrl Bennett [cover artist] is a writer/artist, visual poet, curator/associate editor. She plays with found objects, collage, book art, video poetry, and mailart (creates artistamps and rubber stamps, participates in and organizes/documents mailart and artistamp exhibits). She performs at fluxus events, at poetry symposiums (Ohio, Uruguay, and Mexico), and will be participating in the next Video Bardo, a Buenos Aires, Argentina, video poetry symposium. Some of her books and those she helps publish as associate editor are at lulu.com/spotlight/lunabisonteprods, or for more info visit cmehrlbennett.wordpress.com.

Kimberly Blaeser, a Professor in the English Department at UW–Milwaukee, teaches Creative Writing, Native American Literature, and American Nature Writing. Among her publications are three books of poetry: *Trailing You, Absentee Indians and Other Poems*, and *Apprenticed to Justice*, as well as the edited volume *Traces in Blood, Bone, and Stone: Contemporary Ojibwe Poetry*.

Gary Busha's involvement in small press writing and poetry publishing goes back to the mid 1970s. He worked on Wisconsin fiction/poetry magazines, including *River Bottom* and *Wolfsong*. He earned an MA from UW–Eau Claire. Gary worked as a newspaper copyeditor, children's book editor, and corporate magazine writer. Today he continues to write and publish haiku and short poems under the *Wolfsong* logo.

Sarah Busse deeply appreciates the opportunity to serve as co-editor of *Verse Wisconsin*. She currently blogs at patheos.com as Sarah Sadie, writing about the intersections of theology, poetry, and the kitchen. Her poems now appear under that name as well.

Brenda Cárdenas is the author of *Boomerang* (Bilingual Review Press, 2009) and *From the Tongues of Brick and Stone* (2005). She also co-edited *Between the Heart and the Land: Latina Poets in the Midwest* (2001). Cardenas' poems and essays have appeared widely in publications such as *Achiote Seeds*, *The Wind Shifts: New Latino Poetry*, *The City Visible: Chicago Poetry for the New Century*, *RATTLE*, *Cream City Review*, and most recently *Angels of the Americlypse: New Latin@ Writing* and *Cuadernos de ALDEEU*. New work is forthcoming in *Camino Real* (Spain), *City Creatures: Animal Encounters in the Chicago Wilderness* (University of Chicago Press), and *The Golden Shovel Anthology*. In 2014, the Library of Congress recorded a 40-minute reading of her work for their Archive of Hispanic Literature on Tape. Cárdenas is an Associate Professor of English in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee.

Ching-In Chen is author of *The Heart's Traffic* and co-editor of *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities*. A Kundiman, Lambda and Callaloo Fellow, they are part of the Macondo and Voices of Our Nations Arts Foundation writing communities, and have been a participant in Sharon Bridgforth's Theatrical Jazz Institute. They have been awarded fellowships from Soul Mountain Retreat, Ragdale Foundation, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Millay Colony, and the Norman Mailer Center. In Milwaukee, they are *cream city review's* editor-in-chief, senior editor of *The Conversant*, and serve on the board of Woodland Pattern. Visit chinginchen.com.

Cathryn Cofell of Appleton, Wisconsin, is the author of *Sister Satellite* (Cowfeather Press 2013). She has also published six chapbooks and produced *Lip*, poems set to the music of Obvious Dog. She served on the original advisory board of *Verse Wisconsin*, is a member of the Wisconsin Poet Laureate Commission and has helped to launch and promote, among others, the Fox Cities Book Festival, the Foot of the Lake Poetry Collective, the WFOP Chapbook Prize and the Harmony Café Poetry Series. Visit cathryncofell.com.

Philip Dacey is the author of thirteen full-length books of poems, the latest *Church of the Adagio* (Rain Mountain Press, 2014). His awards include three Pushcart Prizes, a Discovery Award from the New York YM-YWHA's Poetry Center, and various fellowships. His work appears in Scribner's *Best American Poetry 2014*. The author of whole collections of poems about Gerard Manley Hopkins, Thomas Eakins, and New York City, Dacey returned in 2012 to Minnesota (Minneapolis) after an eight-year post-retirement adventure on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Visit philipdacey.com.

In addition to being an actor in the Core Acting Company at American Players Theatre, **David Daniel** also serves as APT's Education Director, teaching workshops on poetry and Shakespeare for students and teachers alike. His life has been blessed with a wonderful wife and three sons. David holds an MFA from the University of Delaware's Professional Theatre Training Program and is a proud

veteran of the United States Army.

CX Dillhunt was born in Green Bay and grew up nearby along the Fox River in the city of De Pere. He is the third child after two sisters, first of seven boys, interwoven with three more sisters. He is author of *Girl Saints* (Fireweed, 2003) and *Things I've Never Told Anyone* (Parallel, 2007). CX was named a Commended Poet by the Wisconsin Poet Laureate Commission in 2010. He is the editor of *Hummingbird Magazine of the Short Poem* (hummingbirdpoetry.org).

Drew Dillhunt is author of the chapbook *3,068,518* (Mudlark, No. 39, 2010). His writing has appeared in *VOLT*, *Eclectica*, *Jacket2*, and *Tarpaulin Sky*. His manuscript, *Materials Science*, was selected as a finalist for the National Poetry Series. He's released two albums of songs, including one with the band Fighting Shy, and is currently a member of the Seattle-based band Answering Machines. Drew is the Associate Editor of Hummingbird Press.

Greer DuBois is a student in the Department of Theatre at Northwestern University and a writer.

Martín Espada has published more than fifteen books. His latest collection of poems, *The Trouble Ball* (Norton), received the Milt Kessler Award, a Massachusetts Book Award and an International Latino Book Award. A previous collection, *The Republic of Poetry* (Norton) was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. His book of essays, *Zapata's Disciple* (South End Press), has been banned in Tucson as part of the Mexican-American Studies Program outlawed by the state of Arizona. The recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Shelley Memorial Award, Espada teaches at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst.

David Graham has published six collections of poetry, including *Stutter Monk* and *Second Wind*. He also co-edited (with Kate Sontag) the essay anthology *After Confession: Poetry as Confession*. Essays, reviews, and individual poems have appeared widely, both in print and online. He has served as poetry editor for *Blue Moon Review* and as poet-in-residence at the Frost Place, in Franconia, New Hampshire. He is Professor of English and the Helen Swift Neilson Professor of Cultural Studies at Ripon College, where he has also run the Visiting Writers Series for twenty-eight years.

Adam Halbur is author of the collection of poems *Poor Manners* (Ahadada 2009), for which he received residency at The Frost Place, Franconia, NH, in 2010. Former Michigan writer Jim Harrison said the poems “at first intrigued me of my Swede immigrant relatives who farmed in Mecosta County. [They] are on the money as they say.” Once the owner of two Jersey heifers, Halbur has lived on and off in Japan for the past 15 years.

Lane Hall is a multi-media artist, writer, and professor in the Department of English at UW–Milwaukee where he teaches courses on modernist avant-garde movements, cultural resistance, and workshops exploring image and text within book and screen formats. He has been active in the recent labor struggles in Wisconsin, and has written extensively about pragmatic activism. He is a co-founder of the Overpass Light Brigade (OLB) which is a direct action group aimed

at DIY political messaging, visibility, and the creation of community through the power of play. OLB, now in its fourth year, has forty chapters worldwide forming the Light Brigade Network, and continues to grow in unexpected ways.

Callen Harty has a long career as a community activist. As a youth he co-founded Young People Caring, a youth group dedicated to helping the Shullsburg, WI, community. In 1982 he was a co-founder and charter member of the University of Wisconsin's first LGBT group, the 10% Society. He was also a co-founder and the first Artistic Director of Madison's Proud Theater, a queer youth theater group that has been creating art out of the experiences of queer youth since 1999. He served in the late 1990s on the Dane County Coordinated Response to Domestic Violence's Same-Sex Domestic Violence Task Force. From 2005 to 2010 he was the Artistic Director of Broom Street Theater, Madison's alternative theater that produces local and original works. He is currently the Artistic Director of Proud Theater-Milwaukee. In addition to writing more than 20 produced full-length plays, he is a published free-lance writer and photographer. His first book, *My Queer Life*, was published in late December.

Matthea Harvey's book of poetry, *Modern Life*, won the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award and was a New York Times Notable Book of 2008 as well as a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her most recent book is *If the Tabloids Are True What Are You*. Matthea teaches poetry at Sarah Lawrence and lives in Brooklyn. Visit mattheaharvey.info/index.html.

Judith Harway's books of poetry include *All That is Left* (2009), a finalist for the Eric Hoffer Award, and two chapbooks, *Swimming in the Sky* (2014) and *The Memory Box* (2002). Her memoir of Alzheimer's caregiving, *Sundown*, was recently published by Branden Books. She is Professor of Writing and Humanities at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, a two-time recipient of the Wisconsin Arts Board literature fellowship, and a widely published poet and essayist. Visit judithharway.com.

Winner of the 2003 Main Street Rag Chapbook contest, **Karla Huston** is the author of the collection *A Theory of Lipstick* (Main Street Rag, 2013) and seven chapbooks of poetry. Widely published (poetry, reviews and interviews), she was awarded a Pushcart Prize in 2011.

Meg Kearney's books include *Home By Now*, winner of the 2010 PEN New England L.L. Winship Award for Poetry and a finalist for *Foreword Magazine's* Book of the Year; *An Unkindness of Ravens*; two YA novels-in-verse, *The Secret of Me* and its sequel, *The Girl in the Mirror*; and a picture book, *Trouper*, published by Scholastic with illustrations by E.B. Lewis (2014). Meg's poetry has been featured on *Poetry Daily* and Garrison Keillor's "A Writer's Almanac," and in myriad anthologies. She is Director of the Solstice Low-Residency MFA Program of Pine Manor College in Chestnut Hill, MA. Visit megkearney.com.

John Koethe is the author of nine books of poetry, most recently *North Point North: New and Selected Poems*, *Sally's Hair*, *Ninety-fifth Street*, and *ROTC Kills*, all published by Harper Collins. *Ninety-Fifth Street* is the winner of the Lenore Marshall Prize from the Academy of American Poets. He is also the author of

The Continuity of Wittgenstein's Thought, Scepticism, Knowledge, and Forms of Reasoning and Poetry at One Remove: Essays. The recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, he is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of philosophy at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and lives in Milwaukee. A new book of poems, *The Swimmer*, will be published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 2016.

President of the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets, **Michael Kriesel's** poems, reviews and articles have appeared in *Alaska Quarterly*, *Antioch Review*, *Free Verse*, *Rattle*, *Library Journal*, *North American Review*, *Small Press Review*, *The Progressive*, and *Verse Wisconsin*. His haiku has appeared in *Modern Haiku*; *Frogpond: the journal of the Haiku Society of America*; *Mayfly*; and the anthology *Haiku 21*, Modern Haiku Press 2011. Books include *Whale of Stars*, a letterpress collection of haiku published by Sunnyoutside Press.

LaMoine MacLaughlin is Executive Director of the Northern Lakes Center for the Arts in Amery, Wisconsin. In 2003, Mr. MacLaughlin was appointed first Poet Laureate of Amery. He also edits *The Hometown Gazette* and has published four collections of poetry: *A Scent of Lilac and other poems* (2009), *Lyra* (2011), *Secrets from the Wings* (2012), and *A Song of Summer Rain and other poems* (2014). He regularly reads his poetry in many west central Wisconsin libraries. He has also read in Scotland at the Globe Inn in Dumfries where Robert Burns read, and in Edinburgh along the Royal Mile.

Jeri McCormick, a Madison poet, long-time teacher of creative writing in senior centers and the Elderhostel program, and founder of Fireweed Press, has co-authored two writing texts (Haworth Press), published in many journals and anthologies, including *The Book of Irish American Poetry from the 18th Century to the Present* (Notre Dame Press), and has two books of poems out from Salmon Poetry in Ireland.

Patricia Monaghan (1946-2012) taught literature and environment at DePaul University in Chicago. She was a scholar, spiritual pathbreaker, activist, Pushcart winner, and author of six books of poetry. Poetry published posthumously includes *Sanctuary* (Salmon Poetry), set in Ireland and the Driftless Area of Wisconsin, and *Mary, A Life in Verse* (Dos Madres Press), the story of Mary as a woman of her times. She was Senior Fellow at and co-founder of the Black Earth Institute, a progressive think-tank dedicated to reconnecting environment, spirituality, and social justice through the arts.

Jennifer Morales is a poet, fiction writer, and performance artist whose work deals with questions of gender, identity, complicity, and harm. Jennifer received her MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University-Los Angeles in 2011. Recent publications include short stories in *The Long Story* and *Temenos* and poems in *Stoneboat* and *Kenning Journal*. She served for eight years as an elected member of the Milwaukee Public School board, the first Latino/a to hold that position, and in posts in education research and publishing. Her collection of short stories about race relations in Milwaukee will be published by UW Press in 2015. She blogs at moraleswrites.com, and you can follow her in the twitterverse @MoralesWrites.

CJ Muchhala writes stories for her grandchildren, creates photo-ops for her shutterbug husband, and dispenses unsolicited advice to her patient sons when she's not reeling in poems. Her work has been published in anthologies and numerous print and on-line journals, and nominated for the Best of Net and twice for the Pushcart. She has collaborated on four Threaded Metaphor exhibits and a Gallery Q exhibit (Stevens Point), subsequently published in the book *Versé & Vision*.

Jeff Poniewaz taught Literature of Ecological Vision via UW–Milwaukee from 1989 to 2009. Allen Ginsberg praised his 1986 book *Dolphin Leaping in the Milky Way* for its “impassioned prescient ecological Whitmanesque/Thoreauvian verve and wit.” It won a 1987 Discovery Award from PEN, the international writers organization. Lawrence Ferlinghetti called Jeff's epic “September 11, 2001,” written in the immediate aftermath of that horrific day, the “best poem I've seen on 9/11.” Jeff's *Selected Poems 1965-2014* will be published in fall 2014. He was chosen to be Milwaukee Poet Laureate 2013–15.

Doug Reed grew up in Richmond, VA, and graduated with a degree in theatre from Goshen College. After living in the Madison-area for many years, Doug recently moved to Chicago.

Harlan Richards grew up in Madison, WI, and earned a BS in business administration from UW–Platteville. He has had numerous poems published in print journals and online in various venues. He is currently working on his first book of poems. You can find more poems and essays on his blog at [between the bars.org/blogs/637](http://betweenthebars.org/blogs/637).

Charlie Rossiter, NEA fellowship recipient and host of poetrypoetry.com, has authored four books of poetry and numerous chapbooks. He lived in Milwaukee in the 1970s and maintains contact with his friends there while living in Oak Park, IL.

Margaret (Peggy) Rozga has published two books of poetry, the award-winning volume about Milwaukee's fair housing marches, *Two Hundred Nights and One Day* and a collection responding to her Army Reservist son's deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, *Though I Haven't Been to Baghdad*. Her third book, *Justice Freedom Herbs*, inspired by her small garden, is forthcoming.

Shoshauna Shy's poems have been anthologized by Random House, Grayson Books, Wisconsin Poets' Calendars, Samsara Quarterly, Pudding House Publications, Marion Street Press, Midmarch Arts Press, Wild Dove Studio & Press, Sourcebooks, Inc. Girlchild Press, Paper Kite Press, Red Hen Press, and Dos Gatos Press. She works for the Wisconsin Humanities Council in Madison, WI, where, for a decade, she helped create, coordinate, and facilitate poetry programs for the annual Wisconsin Book Festival. She is the founder of Woodrow Hall Editions which sponsors the Poetry Jumps Off the Shelf initiative and the Woodrow Hall Jumpstart Award program (PoetryJumpsOfftheShelf.com).

Sifundo, aka Be Manzini, is an artist and educator. As an educator she has worked in schools and with theatre companies and adult learning spaces in the UK and the

US and worked with over 3,000 students from all walks of life. As a youth SLAM poetry producer and the founder of Word Champions (wordchamps.org), a spoken word and performance initiative for under privileged young people based in East London, she has touched and introduced many to the power of spoken word. As an artist she sees her work as a way of understanding the human condition and articulate experiences so they become communal. Her work ranges from poetry to site-specific work, to theatre and film. She is interested in finding new ways to make spoken word accessible to audiences who do not traditionally engage in it or have a demarcated perception of the art-form. She has performed across continents and her work appears in several anthologies. Based in London her work has shown at theatres across the capital, including the UK's flagship arts space The Southbank Centre, where she has also been a poet in residence.

Thomas R. Smith is the author of many collections of poetry, including *The Foot of the Rainbow*, 2010, and *The Glory*, 2015, both from Red Dragonfly Press. He has also edited several books, including *What Happened When He Went to the Store for Bread: Poems by Alden Nowlan* (Thousands Press) and *Airmail: The Letters of Robert Bly and Tomas Tranströmer* (Graywolf Press). He lives in River Falls, WI, and teaches at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis. Visit him on the web at thomasmithpoet.com.

Affrilachian Poet and Cave Canem Fellow **Bianca Spriggs** is a doctoral student at the University of Kentucky and holds degrees from Transylvania University and the University of Wisconsin. Named as one of the Top 30 Performance Poets by *TheRoot.com*, Bianca is a Pushcart Prize nominee, and a recipient of multiple Artist Enrichment Grants and an Arts Meets Activism Grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women. In partnership with the Kentucky Domestic Violence Association, she is the creator of The Swallowtail Project, a creative writing workshop dedicated to the women inmates at the Federal Prison Camp, and the creator and Artistic Director of the Gypsy Poetry Slam, featured annually at the Kentucky Women Writers Conference.

Sandy Stark, Madison, Wisconsin, is the author of *Counting on Birds*, published by Wisconsin's Fireweed Press in 2010. Her poems have appeared in the Wisconsin Poets' *Calendar*, the *Texas Poetry Calendar*, the former *Wisconsin Academy Review*, *Verse Wisconsin*, and *Echolocations, Poets Map Madison* (Cowfeather Press, 2013), as well as in various gallery events. She retired from teaching literature and business communication skills at UW–Madison to volunteer in natural areas/prairies, learn those bird calls, and write.

Margaret Swedish hails from Wisconsin and is currently working on a multi-generational memoir about our immigrant roots and the unsustainable American Dream. She lived and worked in the Washington, DC, area for 24 years as director of the Religious Task Force on Central America and Mexico, a national office in the days of the solidarity movement (1981–2005). She returned to Milwaukee in 2007, creating a project called Spirituality and Ecological Hope, which addresses the challenges of our ecological crises to the US culture and our way of life. She is co-author with Marie Dennis of *Like Grains of Wheat: A Spirituality of Hope* (2004), chronicling the story of US Americans who encountered the reality of Central America during the time of civil war, and author of *Living Beyond the End*

of the World': *A Spirituality of Hope* (2008), which challenges the values and belief systems that have helped bring about the crisis, while offering a spirituality that can help us live through and beyond it. Both are published by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY.

Professor Emeritus at UW–Eau Claire **Bruce Taylor's** latest collection is *In Other Words*. He is the editor of eight anthologies including, with Patti See, *Higher Learning: Reading and Writing About College*. Besides *Verse Wisconsin*, his work has appeared in such places as *Able Muse*, *Light*, *The Cortland Review*, *The Nation*, *Rattle*, *Rosebud*, *Poetry*, and on *The Writer's Almanac*. Taylor has won awards from the Wisconsin Arts Board, Fulbright–Hayes, the NEA, the NEH, The Council for Wisconsin Writers, and the Bush Artist Foundation, and is the recipient of the Excellence In Scholarship award from UW–EC.

Wendy Vardaman (wendyvardaman.com, @wendyvardaman) is the author of *Obstructed View* (Fireweed Press, 2009), co-editor of four anthologies, including *Echolocations*, *Poets Map Madison* (Cowfeather Press, 2013), co-editor of *Verse Wisconsin* (versewisconsin.org), and co-founder of Cowfeather Press (cowfeatherpress.org). She has a PhD in English from the University of Pennsylvania and is one of Madison's two Poets Laureate (2012–2015). With husband, Thomas DuBois, she has three adult children and has never owned a car.

Angela C. Trudell Vasquez, Milwaukee, is a poet, writer and activist. Her words, poetry, essays and op-eds, have appeared in print and on stage, nationally and internationally. She was a Ruth Lilly Fellowship Finalist in 1995. In 2003, she was a featured poet and performer at Bumbershoot, Seattle's annual music and art festival. From 2009 to 2011 she was the featured poet for the *Latina Monologues* in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She has written and self-published two books of poetry, *The Force Your Face Carries* and *Love in War Time*, through Art Night Books, her own label, artnightbooks.com. Her poems have appeared in *Echolocations: Poets Map Madison*, *Turn Up the Volume: Poems About the States of Wisconsin*, *Verse Wisconsin*, *Burdock*, *The New Verse News*, *Real Change*, *Raven Chronicles*, *Little Eagle's RE/VERSE* and *I Didn't Know There Were Latinos in Wisconsin*. She received a Voices Award from Planned Parenthood for poetry performed at their January 2013 *Roe v. Wade* celebration event in Madison, Wisconsin. In 2014 she appeared at Fighting Bob Fest as a poet and activist.

Lisa Vihos has two chapbooks, *A Brief History of Mail* (Pebblebrook Press, 2011) and *The Accidental Present* (Finishing Line Press, 2012). She is the poetry and arts editor of *Stoneboat* literary journal and in October 2013 started what she considered a "real" blog of her own, *Frying the Onion*. She continues to blog occasionally for *The Best American Poetry* online and serves on the board of the Council for Wisconsin Writers.

Moisés Villavicencio Barras is a Mexican poet, translator, fiction writer, and co-founder of *Cantera Verde*, a magazine that has been one of the most significant literary publications in Mexico for the last twenty years. His first book of poetry *May among Voices* (*Mayo entre Voces*) was published in 2001. His poetry has been selected for several Mexican anthologies, magazines, and CDs. His children's book *Urarumo* (2005) was published and distributed for the Department of Education

in Oaxaca, México. He received two writing fellowships through the National Commission for the Arts in Mexico (1993-1994 and 1996-1997). His newest book of poetry, published by Cowfeather Press, is *Luz de Todos los Tiempos / Light of All Times* and contains poems in Spanish and English.

Frank X Walker is the author of six poetry collections, including *Turn Me Loose: The Unghosting of Medgar Evers* (University of Georgia, 2013); *When Winter Come: the Ascension of York* (University Press of Kentucky, 2008); *Black Box* (Old Cove Press, 2005); *Buffalo Dance: the Journey of York* (University Press of Kentucky, 2003), which won the Lillian Smith Book Award in 2004; and *Affrilachia* (Old Cove Press, 2000). A 2005 recipient of the Lannan Literary Fellowship in Poetry, Walker is Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Kentucky and Director of African American & Africana Studies, the editor of *PLUCK! the new Journal of Affrilachian Art & Culture*, and Kentucky's Poet Laureate.

Phyllis Walsh was the creator and founding editor of *Hummingbird: Magazine of the Short Poem*, which is in its twenty-fifth year.

Mary Wehner is the author of *... or the opposite*, a letterpress chapbook by Red Hydra Press, which also published her broadside "The Chinese Painting" and "Broken Shells at Dusk," a lithograph in collaboration with Cuban artist Pollyanna Fernández Fernández. She has published a miniature letterpress book, "To Sit with Animals" in collaboration with artist Sigfredo Mendoza. Her work has appeared in *Red River Review*, *The Writer Magazine*, *Verse Wisconsin*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *Wisconsin Trails*, *qarrtsiluni* and other publications and anthologies. A founding member of Foot of the Lake Poetry Collective, lakepoets.com, Mary is active in Thelma Sadoff Center for the Arts programming and the FDLVA art group. She is a recent past commissioner for the Wisconsin Poet Laureate Commission and board member of the Council for Wisconsin Writers. She is also a visual artist.

Greg Weiss teaches writing at New York University, and his first book of poems, *Interstate*, was published in 2014 by WordTech Communications.

Born in Wausau, **Laura C. Wendorff** earned her doctorate in American Culture from the University of Michigan and is a professor of English, Ethnic studies, and Women's studies at the University of Wisconsin–Platteville. She has published poetry, nonfiction, and literary criticism in a variety of different places.

Marilyn Zelke-Windau is a former elementary school art teacher and a Wisconsin poet who enjoys painting with words. Her work has appeared in print and online venues including *Verse Wisconsin*, *Stoneboat*, *qarrtsiluni*, *Midwest Prairie Review*, *Your Daily Poem*, and several anthologies. Her first chapbook *Adventures in Paradise* was published in 2014 by Finishing Line Press. A full length book, *Momentary Ordinary*, is forthcoming from Pebble Brook Press.

About Verse Wisconsin

Verse Wisconsin published 13 print and 15 online issues of poetry, visual poetry, verse drama, spoken word, songs, reviews, interviews of poets, essays about poetry, video poetry, and art. The print magazine began as *Free Verse*, founded and edited by Linda Aschbrenner for 10 years. Visit its archive at versewisconsin.org.

About Cowfeather Press

Cowfeather Press, founded by Sarah Busse and Wendy Vardaman in 2011, is a two-woman volunteer operation committed to developing a place for poetry in civic discourse, everyday life, and ritual as well as to expanding and connecting communities of poets and readers. At Cowfeather Press, we believe poetry matters, and we reach towards an aesthetic that represents the diversity of the Midwest. We encourage conversations on the page, the stage, and in public spaces which embrace, challenge, and explore both our differences and our common humanity.

Supporting materials for book groups & community reads are at cowfeatherpress.org.



local ground(s)—midwest poetics

✦ SELECTED PROSE VERSE WISCONSIN 2009–2014

EDITED BY SARAH BUSSE & WENDY VARDAMAN

For six years, Wendy Vardaman and Sarah Busse co-edited the hybrid poetry magazine *Verse Wisconsin* working on laptops out of local coffee shops and libraries. Over 13 print and 15 online issues, they published the work and words of writers from around the corner and around the globe. Including poetry, essays, book reviews, interviews, verse drama, spoken word, visual poetry, and other poetic forms in print, image, audio, and video, they sought to build the audience for poetry and the community of poets, while working to define and redefine what *community* might mean. Over the years, the mission of *Verse Wisconsin* underwent significant shifts, as editorial emphasis moved from a simple publication model toward creating conversations, activisms, and transformational circles, seeking to invite diverse voices into these conversations, to define and to redefine what a poetics of the Midwest might be, and to point the way towards what such a Midwest poetics might become. This volume represents another iteration of an ongoing conversation, as the voices of *Verse Wisconsin's* editors weave in and out with those of other poets, once again reframing the questions by selecting work from over the years and placing pieces in new context.

Sarah Busse and Wendy Vardaman are Poets Laureate of Madison, Wisconsin (2012–2015), editors of three anthologies, including *Echolocations*, *Poets Map Madison*, editors of *Verse Wisconsin* (versewisconsin.org), and founders of Cowfeather Press (cowfeatherpress.org). They teach workshops and organize readings and conversations about poetry.



Photo by Katrin Talbot

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