Features

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“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.”

—Philip Dacey

“[Nadine] looked at the world with honesty and amusement, and found in verse, what so many have found, a voice of witness and transcendence, a way of saying something real and true, without asking for pity, and with a little wit and music thrown in for good measure.”

—Max Garland

“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.”

—Sarah Busse
Books Received Fall 2010 Publisher & author links available online

Elizabeth Alexander, Crane Radiance, New and Selected Poems 1990-2010, Graywolf Press, 2010

Elizabeth Austen, Andrea Bates, Carol Stevens Karr & Sarah Soswe, Singline, Toadlily Press, 2010

James Babbs, Another Beautiful Night, Lulu Publishing, 2010

James Babbs, things that aren’t happen happen all the time, Interior Noise Press, 2010

Julie Carr, Sash–Of Fragments and Lines, Coffee House Press, 2010

Rebecca Dunham, The Flight Cage, Tupelo Press, 2010

Thomas Sayers Ellis, Skin, Inc., Identity Repair, Graywolf Press, 2010

Miriam Hall, Dreams of Movement, Finishing Line Press, 2010

Derrick Harrell, Citizen, Willow Books! Agatunet Press, 2010

Steve Healey, 10 Mississippi, Coffee House Press, 2010

Tim Hunt, Faust Lines, The Backwaters Press, 2010

Deborah Jackson-Wilson, Wailing Between Rainbows, Xlibris, 2010

Gary Jackson, Moving You, Metropolis, Graywolf Press, 2010 [Winner of the Cave Canem Poetry Prize]

Shawn McCar, In Ganem, Rescue Press, 2010

Aung Minlu, Shoulder Swan, Coffee House Press, 2010

Bewwyn Moore, O Body Swapped, Cherry Grove Collections, 2010

Ralph Munroe, The Price of Gravity, Auk Ward Productions, 2010

Charles Newmil (Ed), New Hear This: Voices of Urban Youth, Vel, Too, Centamin Press [in cooperation with Lad Lake], 2010

Georgia Ressmeyer, Today I Throw My Watch Away, Finishing Line Press, 2010

Liz Rhoadbeck, What I Learned in Kansas, Port Press, 2010

Books Received Summer 2010 Publisher & author links available online


Brian Kevin Beck, Poeo, Wonderside Productions, 2010

Cathryn Cofell, Lp (CD), music by Outnow Dog, www.cathryncofell.com, 2010

Philip Dacey, Moquee: New and Selected Short Poems, Rain Mountain Press, 2010

Alisa Dooee, Color Crossing, Blue Light Press, 2010

Karl Eldor, The Hawaiian Monogong (ppl CD), Store 43 8444 (special issue), 2010

Bart Galle, Everything & True at Once, Passage Books, 2010

Carmen Germain, These Things I Will Take with Me, Cherry Grove Collections, 2008

Adam Hallow, Poor Monsters, Auk Ward, 2010

Erik Krasne, Death-Defying Arts, WordFarm, 2010

Jim Lally, Stick Tight Man, Access Press, 2010

Jude Lally, The View from Down Here, Access Publishing, 2010

MIDWEST POETRY ALL-STAR (Kaveh Akbar, Steve Healey, David J. Thompson, & Oren W. Rodriguez), Wind Publications, 2010 [Winner of the Cave Canem Poetry Prize]

Charles Newmil (Ed), New Hear This: Voices of Urban Youth, Vel, Too, Centamin Press [in cooperation with Lad Lake], 2010

Georgia Ressmeyer, Today I Throw My Watch Away, Finishing Line Press, 2010

Liz Rhoadbeck, What I Learned in Kansas, Port Press, 2010

Books Received Spring 2010 Publisher & author links available online

David Graham, 39 49 58 67 70 72, Goldhedge Productions, 2010

Kevin Eurl, The View from Down Here, WordFarm, 2010

Adam Halbur, Seems, Interior Noise Press, 2010


Brian Kevin Beck, Poeo, Wonderside Productions, 2010

Cathryn Cofell, Lp (CD), music by Outnow Dog, www.cathryncofell.com, 2010

Philip Dacey, Moquee: New and Selected Short Poems, Rain Mountain Press, 2010

Alisa Dooee, Color Crossing, Blue Light Press, 2010

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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, darkness beginning to poke above ground. Sandhill cranes fly north with their precocious, bell-like calling. Robert Creeley once again sees Kore emergent, surrounded by her ghost-sheen, “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 a 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 standing 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 Verses Wisconsin 104, on the endings of poems. Simple, I told Wendy; I’ll look at two or three or four common failures, suggest some solutions, and wrap it up. No problem. Put me down for the spring issue. Siting 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 approaching them, differently, as writers. The same sort of essay simply won’t do.

Started in a second time, and got all swirled up by the definition of “beginning.” Every poem starts somewhere in seed, with a writing exercise, journal riddle, overhead 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 reshuffling books and trying to avoid the yawning computer screen. Such tentative, tricky, tender ground

The Union

A collage of cacophony, bumbling voices that swing lower than the sweetest chord 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 Ronayne’s red and white thirty-three shirt, then slowly spins wider, until we’re left at the end with an open-ended sense of possibility, without the cliché spreading across a still surface.

“A Button Fell Off,” here, the poem starts with an extremely close focus on the size of the gap in a woman’s shirt, then slowly spins wider, until we’re left at the end with an open-ended sense of possibility, without the cliché spreading across a still surface.

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 large 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?

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, drying of cancer. Another shift brings us to the stranger’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 toward what we began, but we arrive with a difference.

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In the Beginning...Some Notes on Just That

by Sarah Busse

How do we know, as writers, what sort of beginning a poem needs? How do we gain, or start to gain, clarity in the poem? I read over the poems in this issue of Verses 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 poem starts with a wide-angle lens. Look at W. J. Runyan’s “The Union.” The poem begins slightly out of focus, then after a few lines the landscape focuses in: “the twangy sound of an out-of-tune soul.” Visually, the poems take some time, until it finally locks in on the figure of the “old bald man,” then 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 Greblatt’s “Berrymen’s Bridge.” In this poem, the first stanza recounts, even a little prosaically, that he’s walking home from soccer practice, 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 opposite very opposite effect takes place in Marina Robert Warren’s poem

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Bathing with Mozart

What would Constanza say if she knew we were bathing, you and I together, me immersed in water, you inhabiting the air? I am glad your death has not come between us.

It is glorious, bathing at twilight, no light left except the evening seeping in, a glow at the window purpling the porcelain fixtures and purpling the tile floor, balancing what you can see with what you cannot, the Piano Sonata in A infusing the air with shades of violet, rose, and jade, the bell-clear stream of notes purring rounds the shapes and shadows of the darkening room.

With each succeeding variation, I could wish the chain of variations might never end—yet there must be space for the sprightly Menuetto, and who’d dare cease the jaunty Turkish march?

Still, I will live within these variations while they play, sinking a little lower in the bathtub so the water laps up at my ear, each new variation seeming to bring us closer to some brink or revelation, a giddy precipice receding playfully as we approach.

Now, even the purple light fades and becomes a wash of gray, the music darting and glinting off the fixtures.

...with shades of violet, rose, and jade, the bell-clear stream of notes purling...
This Says Boom

it is black, black night. nineteen-
fourty-four is ready to die.  
the father goes out in the cold
with his shotgun, two shells, the mother
starts at the slam of the door,
steps baby’s cars. she sighs.
forever, this winter, this war
have gone on. the father aims carefully
forever, this winter, this war
starts at the slam of the door.

—Gwyn McVay, Lancaster, PA

Spring Tease

At the sidewalk’s steepest summit before its long descent,
the young man on the skateboard launches himself
out into the slipstream of county highway twelve,
sailing magisterially down the faded yellow ribbon,
with the chill of oncoming night.
the afternoon’s warmth soon receding
disappearing into the vernal shimmer of light,
they notice him, the younger boys further on
spontaneously erupt with girlish
joie de vivre
when
I am warm, inside, watching a brown oak leaf,
tired of hanging on all winter, let go,
tumble across the yard like a young girl
on a dull white gymnastics mat.

—James Bettendorf, Brooklyn Park, MN

Valentine’s Day

The sun’s rotting the snow forts
of the old regime—
puddles run rebellious in the streets.
Although too early for tender grass
we are at the start of winter’s defeat.
The year’s in kindergarten—
peeps and tumblings
of orange blooms—to materialize for you
a fresh twin of your shirt—same gentle riot
of dirty snow melt from black rubber
boots and angry resolve.
He times his orchard so there is fruit to eat,
permanently rooted and evergreen.
You seed annuals, their bright colors a temporary
vain. He plants red pines, blue spruce
For years you bake cakes, weed gardens,
the yolk of the sun
in a suitcase, his heart in pieces
until it home. The six tips are worn smooth by wind grit,
scrub blood stains from sheets patterned
in a suitcase, his heart in pieces
along the tawny neutral of canary grass. You can’t help
crossing the border into
the tawny neutral of canary grass. You can’t help

—Len TeWes, Oshkosh, WI

Suitcase

Crystallized by the winter sunlight
snow is no longer good for building figures.
I am warm, inside, watching a brown oak leaf,
tired of hanging on all winter, let go,
tumble across the yard like a young girl
on a dull white gymnastics mat.
Soon I’ll walk the dog, bundled
in wool against the chill, head bowed
into the wind, missing the evening star.
Pushing our face, we might miss
a pheasant, deer or coyote,
snow will crunch loudly underfoot.

—Jenna Rindo, Pickett, WI

March Mind

White flakes fall
into cracks in the street.
The auto skids
from sidewalk to sidewalk.

—Richard Moyer, Brewen, PA

Shed

You walk the state loop, careful not to
cross the border into Private Land Ahead.
Your bones are honeycomb. One day,
the buck runs and rubs, seeks out significant
the bottom face, porous as pumice.
He times his orchard so there is fruit to eat,
permanently rooted and evergreen.
You seed annuals, their bright colors a temporary
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For years you bake cakes, weed gardens,
the yolk of the sun
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scrub blood stains from sheets patterned
in a suitcase, his heart in pieces
along the tawny neutral of canary grass. You can’t help

—Erin Keane, Louisville, KY

Wisconsin March

Winter lasts six months,
a half a life spent in the
dark. Wake up old man.
The sun is sliding
through the bare limbs of the oak
and the maple bleeds
its sweet blood. Drink. Let
the daylight drip from your chin.
Winter here lasts six months; a half a life
spent in the dark and cold. A flower
behind a window bends to the
light. When the winds shift, and the
daylight stretches past...

—Shane D. Hanson, Merrill, WI

Ash Wednesday

As if we didn’t already know from so long
sitting in this bar that everything beautiful
fades, you point out a hole in the shirt
I just admired, which you rescued from
a thrift store bin. A friend is in love
and he couldn’t have been happier to sit in rush-
hour traffic to tell me. I wanted to tell him
hungry moths have chewed my best wool,
and soft cotton will wear thin, revealing
the weave of threads—a stutering cross-
hatch, the frost pattern on a windshield—
before breaking apart, cantiering ends
to form a circle: small at first, but rippling
ever six times every time you push a finger against
the lip of the hole, tasing resistance. Add
that to all we know: your case-less pillow,
my busted banjo eyes. I wish him charms
to ward off the rot; cedar chips, dry cleaning,
humidifiers. I wish his far-off sweet girl
a fresh twin of your shirt—same gentle riot
of orange blooms—to materialize for you
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—Carolyn Kondrath, Madison, WI
The patchwork matters: all the people we are all seeking fathers, inventing better worlds. The trains moving between loss and loss. That we never saw, remembered imagined landscapes of connection. I have also written down my father, his daughters and the rest of us. A vision of a world to leave. Whom he barely knew became slowly overcame the hole. The father into what was lost; writing could almost turn the absence. Barack Obama found his father in a dream. The harvest warnings, if we will but listen. Is their song; they have given us of our music and our history. Today For Lost Fathers: Inauguration Day, 2009 Warning in music words devout and large, that we are each other’s harvest: we are each other’s business: we are each other’s magnitude and bond. —Gwendolyn Brooks, “Paul Robeson” 1. Gwendolyn should have been here, and Paul Robeson and James Baldwin, who wrote because his bitter father grated into himself, and Art Hodes, Woody Guthrie and the Duke, and all the other jazz and bluesmen; Bessie, Billie, banjo pickers, poets, all who wrote and sang and played their way back and forth across the fault lines of our music and our history. Today is their song; they have given us the harvest warnings, if we will but listen. 2. Barack Obama found his father in a dream that never was. Dreaming him could almost turn the absence into what was lost; writing slowly overcame the hole. The father whom he barely knew became a vision of a world to leave his daughters and the rest of us. I have also written down my father, imagined landscapes of connection that we never saw, remembered trains moving between loss and loss. Somewhere in our memories and history we are all seeking fathers, inventing better worlds. 3. The patchwork matters: all the people dancing on the Mall and in the parks, their faces moving back and forth across the grass, touching and erasing common tears. He, like us, is incomplete, needs our dancing to begin the incarnation of his dreams, to make them ours. Acknowledging this incompleteness, shared and sung together, we begin the harvest. (January 20, 2009) —NORMAN LEER, MADISON, WI To the Old Man in the Rhodes Café I enter the small café in the early morning—rain falling lightly, buddled together a dozen Greek men smoking their interminable cigarettes—drinking coffee and cognac are talking loudly old now from years of hard toil I can see the wrinkles and holes in their faces like cold sponges on the ocean floor and yet these old men I know their laughter. I know their laughter means this is the beginning of another day would you relive your life? live it over to make sure your face had no holes or scars? you say you would if only you could have a face, new, as smooth and soft as sand on the beach. but how would you do it? in the early morning rain these old men squeezed together between five small round tables sit with their legs crossed and watch each other smoke and talk and then laugh how much is this laughter worth? the old man next to me orders a pipe other smoke and talk and then laugh five small round tables sit with their legs crossed and watch each other smoke and talk and then laugh I enter the small café in the early morning—rain falling lightly, buddled together a dozen Greek men smoking their interminable cigarettes—drinking coffee and cognac are talking loudly old now from years of hard toil I can see the wrinkles and holes in their faces like cold sponges on the ocean floor and yet these old men I know their laughter. 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I know their laughter means this is the beginning of another day would you relive your life? live it over to make sure your face had no holes or scars? you say you would if only you could have a face, new, as smooth and soft as sand on the beach. but how would you do it? in the early morning rain these old men squeezed together between five small round tables sit with their legs crossed and watch each other smoke and talk and then laugh how much is this laughter worth? the old man next to me orders a pipe other smoke and talk and then laugh five small round tables sit with their legs crossed and watch each other smoke and talk and then laugh I looked at the others and I saw countless cigarettes and then laughter overwhelmed the quiet sky —KOévRO CHANTRIK, LARKSPUR, CA visit VW Online for audio by this author Flight of Fancy Somewhere above the earth, inside the vastness between Spokane and Minneapolis, on January’s final frigid day, I momentarily convince myself that I’m sailing over North Africa rather than North Dakota, the moon so pearly full and white, the rim of sky so blue, the sun-burnished landscape like sand dunes mingled with the riverine tributaries of arteries in any human body, the heavenly bodies of you and our infant son in my mind, bursting through the static of businessmen who say things like baked into the solution, clear your calendar, and I need to jump off now, before being made to stew their electronic crackpikes and retreat back into their fevered brains for another hour or so, though they can hardly stand it, though they never notice the late afternoon moon or the frozen burn of ochre plains below—the blue line stretching on and on until we see Morocco, or Fargo. —JEF LEISGANG, CAMBRIDGE, WI White Eyes Black man looks at the world through white eyes. With a sometimes rage bailing to others-not-colored. White’s eyes see a snow-colored world measured in brightness, and Can’t understand what makes a black man see with white eyes, Can’t see a world through black eyes, Can’t relate to the smoldering rage, Can’t feel the pain it causes. Black man looks at the world through white eyes. While white’s eyes look at the world blindly. —HARLAN RICHARDS, OREGON, WI Ranch Hand When I was young he was a meadowlark who only wanted to cheer me up. He sat on a fence post and sang his song that descended to a spring so young frost froze on winter’s grass. Now I’m old and here he is, an old ranch hand in Seattle. He waits at the DON’T WALK sign rating to go because arthritis hardly leaves him time enough to cross. He’s duct-taped a little radio to his walker and everyone a block around can hear the whine of country music as he, in boots and jeans, rolls his cane across the street. Do you like my music? he asks hopefully when I meet him halfway across. The song’s about some lost love. Then the notes become silver coins dropping and rolling all over the street. Everyone is picking them up Yes, I like your music, I answer as I bend down and grab a silver dollar that’s landed—a lucky heads. But he doesn’t stay. Suddenly flushed, he’s off flying—boots, cage and all—over roof-tops, singing and headed for the park. I glimpsed his V-neck sweater—yellow, beneath a tweedy jacket. —LEN TOW, OSKOSH, WI Safeguard In each of the drawers of my father’s dresser, an unwrapped bar of soap nestled among the neatly folded undershirts, underwear, and socks, suggesting a strange alchemy at work to an imaginative boy, but to my father, maybe the most sensible thing in the world. I never learned the origins of this small extravagance of his—I only knew that when we put our arms around each other before he left for the plant each morning, he bore that faint perfume of those private wooden places, those contained spaces that lingered like a distant memory, woven into fabric. —JEF LEISGANG, CAMBRIDGE, WI
Know Your Neighbors

I.
Ms. Bunn’s age is old. She spurns counting
so she didn’t have to act her age. What’s important is
she’s young enough to enjoy hot fudge cake
when her alarm goes off before sunrise.
She wears a feather boa and presides over the Methodist women
and four grown children.

“If everybody loved going to church and fished,
we’d all be happy campers.”

God wants her to bake biscuits
and give them away. She must give them away because once
she enjoyed Elvis’ gyrations as much as his Gospel.

II.
The neighbors’ chow mix runs away
to our backdoor the way their 8-year-old did
when he lost track of his little brother. Mammonti
with my instructions taped on top waits in the freezer
while the neighbors wait in the oncologist’s office.

After she gets the results, I wear pink for a week
without realizing my wardrobe is a reminder
she’d rather forget.

III.
The four-year-old girl climbing a bronze Galapagos tortoise
doesn’t know a boy had to die in a fiery Suburban
before these statues could be built.

Her mother doesn’t realize Miss Beth cries
for the boy whose ABCs were animals, Boy Scouts, and Christ
every time she drives Route 35.

They don’t notice the memorial plaque, but they honor Jackson
with their laughter as they watch the monarchs feed on milkweed.

The Outpatient

The man shuffled under pretended warmth
toward the hospital entrance, under
quilted snowsuits that hung like a black tent
from the center pole of his body.

Another man stopped him, an impatient. Said:
“Sorry, hate to ask, but you got a cigarette on you?”

They hunched over gray sidewalk together
and he pulled out tobacco to roll a couple smokes,
paper folded over a puddle of brown shreds
into a loose taco shape.

The man’s weak, yellow hand
lifted it to his weak, yellow lips,
licking the dubious thing to seal it.

Then they lit up together like confidential friends,
two circles of fire against a gray morning,
cigarettes crumbling in their fingers
even as they burned.

The man hitched his snowsuits up
and continued to the cancer ward,
where other patients’ eyes
were drawn to him, then averted,
as if Death himself had arrived.

—CATHY DOUGLAS, MADISON, WI

Long in the Tooth

Upon discovering
that it actually only meant that
the gums recede with age
I was disappointed,
a little, that
it wasn’t about how
teeth might have kept
-growing imperceptibly
until Grandmother could look
up at the wolf and
declare, in mild wonder,
“My what
big teeth we have.”

—CHLOE CLARK, MADISON, WI

What We Believed

In fifth grade, we scoffed
at the notion a stepped-on crack
would break your mother’s back;
unlike those in first grade
who believed anything they were told.

You’d see them making their way
home from school, mindful
of their mothers’ spines, debating
the feasibility of Santa’s overnight
journey and the going price of teeth.

We’d snicker. And yet, we were not
above superstition. For us—older and so,
that much closer to death—the specter
of the rotten peanut loomed heavy.
Was it being sung to Clementine that brought
this demon nut to bear so hard upon
our psyches; made us wonder, could one
ill-chosen, delicious treat really kill you?
When I could have, should have, made
a wiser choice, why did I ignore the signs?

And that doctor in the song, who said
I wouldn’t die, but then, I died anyway
and went to heaven to meet St. Peter
in some versions. But there was always
confusion here. No one could agree on the end.

So we’d punch each other in the shoulder,
brush off death-by-peanut, purposely
step on a crack or two, just for the hell of it.

—LISA VABOS, SHEBOYGAN, WI

Ghost at the Party

wanders through the rooms –
dining, living,
den and kitchen.

Small groups cemented
in conversation, sealed
by low laughter.

Anyone who has been a ghost
has to learn how to put on
flesh and be noticed.

—HELEN FADWY, MILWAUKEE, WI

Predator

You’re a shark
swimming among a school
of thoughts,
chewing up
everything in your path,
gobbling down
ideas whole,
regurgitating them
into your
stories
and poems.

Never resting,
always plunging
through literary seas.

—G. A. SCHEINHOA, EDEN, WI

Grendel’s Live-in Girlfriend

Never bang together pots and pans after dark.
Nor steal his most beloved hen while she is laying
Eggs of any substance, gold or not. Carry a sword in your jawline,
And play ox-dumb at the riddle contest.
Tread lightly as a flea’s eyelash. Do not suggest
He does not love you, especially
When he has anything weighty in his hand
Or when he is eating. Or when he has just woken up.
Or when he has come home from a long day of tyranny
And just wants his dinner. Do not beat him
At his own game. Your own game. Chess.
Never tell him you are losing hope of ever
Getting married. Cook his eggs with a little extra salt
Even though his doctor has warned about blood pressure.
And when he is meek and sorry and says his mother
Drove him to it all those years, be wariest of all. Blink slow as molasses
Dropping from the bottle. Say nothing. Back from the room
With your head bowed low. Smile quite crooked, hum a hullaby,
O! Cover your rattling heart with your palms.

—CHRIS TAYLOR, MADISON, WI
Verse WISCONSIN.org

Verse wisconsin #105 March 2011

Whopperland
The Country Buffet Bumble Bee walks from table to table a mascot for the over-achieving eater cheering us up just like the pro-teams.
Plates piled high to the toppling tipping-over point, food jugglers return to their eating positions not dropping so much as a French fry.

Family style, blue collar, big hair, bargain shopper: America’s new melting pot is a fondue.
Immigrants enter the new world via buffet lines.

—Charles P. Rios, Milwaukee, WI

At the Salon
I watch her hands on their fact-finding mission in his hair; her fingers comb strands back from his ears four or five times, feeling, I suppose, for qualities like curl, texture, body...She lifts locks, smooths them into various places as he talks, maybe trying different ways she might cut and style.

Her hands move to the back of his neck, ruffle and lift the hair, linger...warming and being warmed at his nape.

I become aware of my eyes, turn them back to my magazine—upside down, unreadable.

—Sherry Slocum, Milwaukee, WI

Heritage House Smorgasbord
The carpet is smooth like some special coal, and mildly rancid, touched with the feet and urine of mice and pressed with time. Grains of breathing—cool and chicken—once only enough to shine have fallen, then fused into the fibers.
The managers don’t have taut arms, though they often open #10 cans, lifting tin circles that separate and tilt as they crank the table-mounted handles. They’re big men—warm enough in short-sleeved shirts, this long Thursday February afternoon, when lunch, the solstice and Christmas have all receded. It’s their time to rest on break; to have buttered toast pudding. Their bellies curve to the table with the grace of circus Percherons—they’re wheel horses, round as the earth, and modestly rewarded, for turning it, at the Heritage House each day.

—See Beaustein, Milwaukee, WI

La Coiffure de Germaine
My French friend’s mother was a working class seamstress; a torso of jambon and bouf en croûte roast lamb with flageolets shoulders, her shins were dessa pates, nothing baguette about her, nothing mine. Germaine was La Ronne Femme. Cassoulet on a cold night, salade vinagriette to cut richness. She chose the right cheese, right wine. The third year, I slept over. We giggled all night, my friend and I, until Germaine appeared, "Quiet yourselves." She chose the right cheese, right wine.

—Mary O’Dell, Louisville, KY

The Cozy Club Cookbook

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—Mary O’Dell, Louisville, KY

These Lovely People
My daughter and I have stopped at Frisch’s. She orders a meal, I sip coffee and watch the players come and go: the fellow big-bellied and bald, in baggy shorts and wrinkled Hawaiian shirt: Himself, perfected. The elderly waitress, thin as a mitten, gray hair molded, each strand folded, immaculate, into the next.
I am at home in the midst of these, God’s own. The man in the wheelchair, his bony forefinger on the control–see his lips move, practicing words–he’s sure he’ll be able to say again someday.

An awkward young server waiting to pass, watching the man though she doesn’t want to, the shrewed wife trailing them both, hugger herself.

Each form is backlit, as if by starshine. Across the table, my daughter works at her dinner, her own flaws misalignment, melancholy—weighed deep in her bones. Out the window, blacktop hot enough to fry a chop. Here where the Naugahyde is cool, we could stay forever.

—Mary O’Dell, Louisville, KY

I have a coupon
rumored: a kiosk in mayfair mall offers open heart surgeries so i go to investigate slightly apprehensive yet not completely since you can now simultan during the rinsing cycle at the laundromat on farwell ave in tanning beds that strangely simultaneously smell of old underwear & old spice & it’s mid-february & the grecese still snack on the front lawn at the calatrava outsourcing warhol’s exhibit maybe knowing it’s snowed on the panehull & hawai’s just out of the question in a goosish way as i lie here looking leftward at a perfectly black man sweeping white dust in perfect rhythm to like a virgin which i can barely make out over the buzz of the bone saw.

—Jesse Mansee, Milwaukee, WI

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Haiku is now written in languages all over the world. It originated in Japan in the early 1600s. English has become the second most popular language for writing haiku. "Modern Haiku" is the oldest haiku journal outside of Japan. Spiess, the author of several haiku books, did much through the journal to bring attention to the form and style of today’s haiku in English.

Southern Wisconsin is “The Cradle of American Haiku.” Gayle Bull, owner of Foundry Books in Mineral Point, and her late husband, Jim, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, published American Haiku, the first American haiku journal in the early 1960s, and Robert Spiess’ poems appeared there. Spiess began publishing his haiku in 1949, and he is often considered “The Dean of American Haiku.” Today, Bull holds haiku readings and critique sessions at her bookstore, and she was one of the organizers of the Festival.

Just what is haiku in the English language? Many people seem to think haiku is just a pretty image with a nature reference written in three lines. However, it is much more than that.

Haiku (the word is both singular and plural) are written in simple, not flowery language. They most often have a reference to nature, evoking consciousness with it. Or they refer to a season. They are written in the present tense because that captures the moment. Successful haiku often have two strong juxtaposed images that, upon first reading, may seem unrelated. Together, these two images deepen the meaning. A successful haiku can often be interpreted on different levels, not just at face value.

Other typical elements include:
• one to three lines;
• sparing or no use of capitalization and punctuation;
• 18 or fewer syllables;
• no title;
• no rhyme;
• strong images that provoke emotion, without stating the emotion (e.g., sadness, happiness, humor).

This last point is important. Haiku, like any good poem, shows without telling. Poetry experts often argue whether haiku is a poem or just a thought. People who believe that haiku is poetry cite the present tense because that captures the moment. Successful haiku often have two strong juxtaposed images that, upon first reading, may seem unrelated. Together, these two images deepen the meaning. A successful haiku can often be interpreted on different levels, not just at face value.

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Other festival highlights included a haibun workshop by Roberta Beary of Washington, D.C. Haibun originated in Japan and is a short prose-piece formatted by a haiku that relates to its theme. The form contains a title.


To write a poem in form means accepting significant limits; the metrical requirements have to be met, as (in some cases) do the requirements of a rhyme pattern or a stanza form. To me, there are aesthetic benefits conferred by this acceptance, as I’ve mentioned, but these limits are also meaningful to me in other ways as well. The limits that go along with formal poetry can be seen—and I do see them, in all events, in this way—as emblematic of the limits of finite human existence. They are accordingly more or less constant reminders to me of the obtrusive otherness of the world. They remind me that, in the making of a poem, I am not so much creating, in any fundamental sense, as I am trying to describe how it feels to live in the given world—and this, for the sake of companionship of the sort that poetry has always offered, companionship with readers who share that world and its limits with me.

—Charles Hughes, “Why I Write Poems in Form”

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.

—Bruce Taylor, “On a Double Reverse Sonnet”

Available at www.versewisconsin.org
romantic

out all night drunk
stumbling down starpaths
owlshit caked on my boots

—ROBERT SCHULER, MENOMONIE, WI

If wishes

Call things what they are. A fish is a fish is a fish, is no metaphor, is not far-reaching or unfulfillable. It slithers through the water. Light moans and wriggles on its spine. A fish can be achieved by mundane efforts. Metal of the earth, and silk threads and pebbles of lead. Or perhaps, crocodiles. Lords of the belly and tooth.

Dear, I am no minnow, bellyup on the waterbed. When I thrash, it is not desperate, this hook of your finger—willingly swallowed. Call me woman, let us name these glistening things, which are real, which do not change shape when your back is turned.

—CHRIS TAYLOR, MADISON, WI

Stripped

What if I write poetry, the extreme, the “ultimate fiction,” and you see me after all, disguised with image and wild leapings, and you see me as I am, clear to the twisted core?

What if I unwrap the Victorian language—layer upon layer of petticoat, ruffled, pink edged, an eyelet embroidery—and you see me beneath all the hoopla, naked.

Do you see the extra rolls of flesh around my waist, the ones you can pinch between your fingers like fat ropes of pastry, the ones that angle from waist to crotch, the chevron that decorates the shoulder slid down to point to the most private part of me—do you see me naked, and lacking?

Go beyond that. Peel back the layers like a surgeon searching for some diseased part, inspect the bone of me, milk the marrow.

If you get that far, perhaps you’ll see what I see in you when I look out of the eyes of a doe on the edge of a meadow as watchful for what is good in you as she for an enemy.

—KAY N. SANDERS, OSHKOSH, WI

The Man Who Bought a Poetry Book

was just walking through the Book Fair when he picked up a copy of Sleeping with Octopi (attracted by the cover), read a poem at random, just a small one, then took another, and another, then impulsively bought the whole book and read it in a fast-food restaurant, occasionally laughing out loud, not knowing what he had done:

First, raised the statistics on the number of people who read poetry by 1.5 per cent, then brightened the life of a small-press publisher, a woman who had almost lost faith in miracles, then sent a message to the poet that life was worth living after all, and finally, became the kind of man who reads the poems in the New Yorker and glances at poetry in the airport while other men read the Times, feeling smugly superior like a man at a dog show holding a Siamese cat.

—GAIL WHITE, BREAUX BRIDGE, LA

visit VW Online for more poetry by this author

Kafka in the Garden 

He tramples tulips, pisses on hostas, takes a dump by the ferns. An old dog, he knows: they will return. Beauty always haunts the damned.

—JOHN LEHMAN, ROCKDALE, WI

A Sort of Salutation

To those collecting words like hollow shells and laying them out in code, then explaining their meaning as if they were ancient bones unearthed from the rusty hills of Wyoming.

To those who track each shining lure as it is reeled through the murky pond, who are fooled by the flash and wiggle the jingle, and the red-beaded eye.

To those who celebrate too long their winnings at the table in springtime, who still remember their flush in hearts when the cards no longer come.

To you I raise my sledge, an eight-pounder made to drive fenceposts in heavy clay.

Our garden should grow in clear view.

When do you think we can start?

—GEOFF COLLINS, MARSHALL, WI

Palette

A large yellow tulip shines in the noonday sun.
My cat naps under a green maple tree.
My neighbor, Mrs. Ridgely, hums a merry tune while she waters her blue pansies.
A man in a red hat sells chocolate ice cream from a white Dairy Queen.
In the distance a black bird dives through the sky.
I watch from my kitchen window, stir my coffee with a silver spoon.

—RICHARD W. MOYER, BERWYN, PA

My Dog and I Are Retired

When those other dogs bound up the stairs for their walk, Kafka smiles, the smells of spring and a morning breeze fill his hair. It was fun. But enjoyment without effort is also nice we realize, and wonder what there is for lunch.

—JOHN LEHMAN, ROCKDALE, WI
Erase the boys I kissed before you.  
nothing of my parents’ rages.  
obliterate the walls that hid  
easy listening and gentle,  
home it into something  
tidy up the messy house I lived in,  
such a common beginning,  
It’s how I can pretend away  
nascent adolescence.  
instances of passion in my  
bowdlerizing in particular  
obscure long stretches,  
Rather than correct it, I  
elided as it is.  
has never happened,  
The childhood I remember  
[The Robin is the One]  

REBECCA HAZELTON

[I had some things that I called mine – I]

Into the garden, crushing snails in my shell-flecked hands,  
happy. All the rabbits slaver  
as I pass, stand to, salute my grave  
domination; even the gate bows,  
solemn in my wake.  
To be a god is to take  
carts to land and row.  
Mostly your grievance is with my step,  
cylinding your sorrow with sorrel—but I’ve the deed  
to your property, the key to your big lock.  
Hold fast,  
ink your titles, and put a flag to your  
possessions—  
no fence you stitch from eglantine can prick me out—  
glistening morning-glories,  
shaking out canticles and pollen,  
touch me, then retreat,  
hide their blossoms, shy their leaves.  
A brute need blooms, too.  
These flames that paper my  
interior, like the fur that marks me monster,  
cage me in this shape  
and all I see, until I am little more than the  
Latin caption, your name made mine.  
Listen, I’m sorry for the mess I’ve made—  
except that it was fun— all done now—I’ll slip into a collar so long as your  
month kisses the latch.  
I’ll call it yours—you can  
name me  
Eve, again.

[There is a Shame of Nobleness — I]

Tear down the horizon, he said, reveal it for sham.  
His was the hand longed for, so I  
emptied out the cabinets, row by  
row, of stars, folding  
each, and sorting them away.  
I took a hammer to sky’s baseboard,  
struggled with the earth but it wouldn’t peel back.  
Allow me, I panted, just a moment longe  
but he was off  
and all I see, until I am little more than the  
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except that it was fun— all done now—I’ll slip into a collar so long as your  
month kisses the latch.  
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Eve, again.

[Their Height in Heaven comforts not—]

This is the cheap paths of Lost Dog  
(has you seen my dog? Runs not good. Foams.).  
Excise Lost Dog, and insert my gray hairs  
in the morning (has you seen age?).  
Runs unshod home.).  
Heaven has a place, even for me,  
excluded from the glowing host.  
In my hand a flaming sword,  
golf cart my chariot,  
halilulilah  
trumpet,  
in timny tiny key,  
no mute.  
Heavy the sadness  
each wails into his sock-balled heart—  
all are wounded in  
vision, X’d out  
eyes, drunk or dead.  
Now we are  
close to the sadness  
of a mockingbird waiting, its  
mate snared in lime or sodden, still on gutter’s edge—  
For how long, Whitman, are we to sing,  
over what oc cam?  
Remember those gray hairs,  
tene cious and wry, that  
she in the mirror grown older?  
Not I. I has not seen her.  
Or her dog,  
trailing arabesque spume.  

[The Voice that stands for Floods to me]

The bride is two part  
hydrogen, one oxygen: burning and breathing; un-  
ev en yoked—  
very very her hair, spun ribbons  
of sugar, varied her bridesmaids  
impatiently waiting,  
carrying her train like queen’s attendants,  
enduring the humiliation of  
taffeta scroop.  
Her steps are slow  
and measured to the music.  
The music is  
slow and measured because  
the bride is an uncult blossom,  
and therefore trembling  
naif, inclined to the existential:  
Do I do, and  
so knot myself in contract?  
forgetting the foregone of the caterers’ deposit.  
Of a holy subject today we  
roodbeam our gaze,  
rah rah as the appointed holy  
lets loose the vows,  

O, my spouse, thy lips drop as the honeycomb (louder)  

Rebecca Hazelton attended The University of Notre Dame for  
her MFA in poetry, and completed her Ph.D. at Florida State  
University, under the direction of David Kirby. She is the Jay  
C. and Ruth Hall Poetry Fellow at the University of Wisconsin-  
Madison Creative Writing Institute and teaches writing there. She  
has been nominated for a Pushcart and for Best New Poets 2010,  
and has been a finalist in several book prizes.  
These five poems are acrostics based on lines from Emily Dickinson  
used as their titles.
Plum Cantata

1.
Their ripeness masked in milky blush, they jestle skin to skin. Cloud-wrapped clusters freight the boughs.

Ten years the gardener wrapped tender trunks against Leipzig winters. Each year he took more parchment from his shed, a dank supply pilfered off an old composer’s desk. Ten winters’ indelible sweetness praising Luther’s god seeped into heartwood. Each fall he wrapped the slender tree, the clefs and staves spiraling up the trunk. Each winter ink wept into the tree; each spring it dripped into the thawing earth.

Ten winters’ discarded cantatas swaddled the tree. Ten summers’ sun muscled through the leaves.

2.
The burglar’s wife looks out over the walled garden to the orchard beyond. Such a sopranosweetness from that small twisted tree, each fruit’s melody sung over a tannic bass continuo. She holds a pit, sucked clean, a long time in her mouth. She eats in silence.

—NAOMI CORN, ST. PAUL, MN
visit VW Online for audio by this author

Midwest Nocturne

She whispered, under the rain
“Whose wind chimes are those?”
Out by the goateesward where
the last of the snow retreats
I whispered, “sounds oriental”
Kabuki on a transistor radio.

“Why did the Buddha lose his head?”
“Probably the long winter, honey.”
“It’s so quiet tonight, not a breath”
I wrapped my arm close around her.

—MITCH L’HERAULT, VERONA, WI

Five-Seventy-Five

Consider the haiku in your bones, consider that all we need is September’s bowl of apples to lift us toward our open selves, toward the one truth, the impossible grain.

Years ago I signed on for that ride, but the bus was late and I would not go in the VW Rabbit my lover had parked in the drive. The poor man’s nose was pointy like a possum’s.

Now, I have not a thing against possums. My current man grows his garden for possums alone, them and the random rabbit that passes at dusk. My boy is rogustish like that—the best ones are.

Hand me my pen and an apple, please. And toss out the others for possums and hares.

From this bliss I’ll scratch out a pliable life in seventeen syllables, more or less.

—MARY O’DELL, LOUISVILLE, KY

Legend

Korea, 1442

In winter’s darkness, King Sejong sips barley tea. He shivers despite the wood heaped on the fire. In his haste to be warm, he scalds his tongue. The king opens his mouth to receive the ice his servant brings from the pond and thinks, moving his wounded tongue from ice to teeth to palate. Quiet, he thinks for a long time, then commands invention of a new alphabet.

Scholars scurry to form characters, each shorthand for how the body forms sound. The alphabet mimics mouths, tongues, throats in their work of making language. The king thanks his wise men. He hides the beautiful alphabet in his royal palace. Some time, then commands invention of a new alphabet.

Caterpillars crawl to his graffiti and eat away pieces of green. Soon his alphabet hangs in the trees. His subjects look up and tendril at the end of every line, each tangent sublated, nomadic, smooth blending of memory and abandon. the thrill of the deposed and unfounded. beyond the happestance of the curtain. delivering the fix. signs written in reverse. imploding the vertical.

our imperatives are brief: swift lunge to gather the remains; look before leaping; leave nothing to waste, strangers to the indeclicte, skirting the precise with our inviolate skin:

—GREG GLUBE, MADISON, WI

Amaranthine

Alonzo King’s Lines Ballet, Wisconsin Union Theatre, February 6th, 2010

in the wings, we wait to aggregate.
the lights flare and we burgeon, curl into the glint that is deep and surreptitious.

if the stage is night, and it always is, then we take sky for our sanctuary:
always disembarking, lifted and lowered, made, by design, to understand the scattering: our imperatives are brief: swift lunge to gather the remains; look before leaping; leave nothing to waste, strangers to the indeclicte, skirting the precise with our inviolate skin:

—GUY R. BEINING, GREAT BARRINGTON, MA

22 VERSE WISCONSIN #105 MARCH 2011
Letter Of Recommendation For Max Kaisler

To Whom It Most Concerns,

It is thrilling to write to you on behalf of Max Kaisler. No, disorienting; the smell of new money, phosphorus abloom in a buried skull, a marlin with postage stamp eyes, is what it’s like.

I first met Ms. Kaisler in 2005 when she enrolled in my Industrial Poetry class, before she was a glove of bees, and I can say, without hesitation, my fondness for her has continued to grow like a shotgun wound.

Ms. Kaisler has a rare ability to bring people together, to interchange their limbs, and create new life forms suited to exotic environments. She doesn’t have to be told. This is a very motivated young artist. Ms. Kaisler possesses that kind of enthusiasm. Probably the greatest help to a teacher of poetry—besides a talking lamb—is a student willing to fail publicly. Such students can inspire entire classrooms.

I once saw a man fire himself out of a cannon over a pool of sharks. He landed in the boiler room of a children’s hospital, touching off a blaze that consumed the entire block. I believe.

Ms. Kaisler was ovulating. And I suspect my mother didn't know she was ovulating. Probably life on other planets can be contacted by waving at the muddy bottom of the water. Then it decides it doesn’t like mud or seafood. We love that one. The oldest joke is the one where life begins at 6.

If there’s a plot, we can’t wait for the epilogue; it doesn’t like mud or seafood. We love that one. We should’ve hired sailors to keep us sailing. Did he whisper?

A Proper Noun

Trying to understand what it was you said, nowning and verbing the ditch line of grammar, picking through the trash of dependent clauses, I discover you are nothing but your name, the word for you unmodifiable, the subject lost in the verbage, kicked up like a gold band among empties tossed from speeding windows, thrown, or slipped off, lost by accident, the ringing of your name.

—I love you. In the subject line of a email.

A boy reads loudly through his braces. A girl reads about the boy who is thin as a toothpick. It is April and the girl loves the boy with her poem about seasons and loss and her eyes know these things. Another girl reads about her courageous fake arm, adjusting it without a pinch as she shifts her pen from wood to flesh.

The teacher was invited from the city to unveil or imparti something she can barely fathom. She chewed on her lip and found herself fragmented and shrinking and the students aren’t even sorry and the whole class laughs, boys and girls alike as the miniature teacher stands as tall as she can on a school chair while she continues to shrink. A quiet boy.

—Deon Kempthorne, Richland Center, WI

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank the clouds for last night, and rain and eager ripeness straining against the garden fence.

I would just like to say thank you for the hopeful quality of sunset, how it hints pink for tomorrow, and to my shovel and the tools that work in my moraine of a brain and dear Mrs. Sullivan, thank you for teaching me how to spell and diagram a sentence. My hat’s off to black dirt, earth worms, my mother and father for getting me here. For the pleated skirt, the blue shirt and barely nothing of a breeze, the rustling paper leaves, the visiting monarchs, like paper themselves as they float among rickety zinnias, blurred-faced coneflowers, benign bumble bees, river and land mass and this is just the short list. And finally, thank you, veins and sinew, delicate orbs, newest of fruits and the juices within. None of this could have been possible without you.

—Linda Back McKay, Minneapolis, MN

Sixth Grade Class

A boy reads loudly through his braces. A girl reads about the boy who is thin as a toothpick. It is April and the girl loves the boy with her poem about seasons and loss and her eyes know these things. Another girl reads about her courageous fake arm, adjusting it without a pinch as she shifts her pen from wood to flesh.

The teacher was invited from the city to unveil or imparti something she can barely fathom. She chewed on her lip and found herself fragmented and shrinking and the students aren’t even sorry and the whole class laughs, boys and girls alike as the miniature teacher stands as tall as she can on a school chair while she continues to shrink. A quiet boy.

—Linda Back McKay, Minneapolis, MN
The Story of the Kentucky Derby

My mother’s not dying as quickly as predicted. I have all of her poems, stories, letters, journals, scrapbooks in boxes on shelves in my basement. I am afraid to read them too soon, if you know what I mean. She used to ask for her embroidery and sometimes wondered where her letters were and once she asked about a painting by her uncle which we hung the next day in her room at Odd Fellow. Leon, I think.

She’s happy enough I say when someone asks. Sometimes I tell the story of my mother telling me the story of the Kentucky Derby, how she’s there in her wheelchair, how they let her sit up close, next to the stands, almost on the race track, so she can see, and how her face now is watching me as she catches herself rolls herself out of the Derby, changes the subject, something about the trees, wonders about lunch.

Later she tells me she remembers going to the Derby right after she was married, with my father’s brother, who knew someone at the bank where he worked who got them tickets, how much fun it was to walk up high into those white stands, almost to the top, not the best seats, but I was there, she says, a sunny day, and I’ve always wanted to go again—and she sees I believe her follow the words racing there around the track.

And I remember now, how my mother’s eyes say, I’m sorry, sometimes I forget I’ve not been in this wheelchair forever and when she says I wish I knew which horse won or the jockey and if your father was there—I tell her I’ll find out, she doesn’t believe me, but we have learned to go on like that, my father no longer here, me the new rememberer, my mother the last storyteller trotting word after word to the next.

—C X Dillhunt, Madison, WI

Visit Verse Wisconsin Online for more poetry by this author.

Salted Crow

If I told you
I like meat medium rare, would you pluck
fowl from the air
and roast them
with your breath?
If you served my words
on a silver platter,
repaid all this
thoughtless, idie chatter
would I have
to beg
for salt?

—Tad Phipps Wente, Port Washington, WI

You May Now Move Freely About the Cabin

Waving at airplanes five miles overhead I know it’s a foolish way to meet people but I do it anyhow from wherever I happen to be from the worn step of my back porch from my dense woods sitting on a stump from my empty field grooming a horse while ambling back up my dusty lane with the mail I do it

I just reach my hand sometimes both high into the air and wave thinking someday somebody up there in a window seat will be looking down as lonely as I am looking up and will see me waving to her and will leap out of her seat and will seize the flight attendant’s hand will whisper stop this plane stop it stop it right now land it right here will cry are you blind can’t you see the only one I will ever love is down there waving to me saying come back to earth to me jump if you have to.

—Dion Kempthorne, Richland Center, WI

To Poem, Or, Today You’re Like a Phone I Almost Didn’t Answer

21 feet high in Philadelphia, the no poem deep quiet, the February snow peeling away. I’m sitting near glass pulled into sun, into this poem somehow far off, un real like those roofs down there, the small cars. Poem, you’re like a phone I almost don’t answer putting its mouth on me, a voice I’d been looking for and then half avoided

Meet me in an hour
It’s always yes

—Lyn Lifshin, Vienna, VA

My Sister’s Diaries

she spreads them around her bed like a moat, ditch to keep some raging forest fire from enough so the red doesn’t touch her. The verbs unwind, a film going backward fast sweeping the woman who goes from 38 to 16 then to 10 back, a tidal wave slamming houses.

She reads every page of what was to be before it was, takes those words like a lover with 4 leaves or rose pressed in an amulet toward where nothing is written

—Lyn Lifshin, Vienna, VA
God App

Thus far over 400 million people have downloaded the God App. You can choose various icons for the God App, like a burning bush or a cloud shot through with light. The God App doesn’t really do anything. It’s just there on your screen should you need it. If you touch it, it asks: “Do you want to pray now?” After a few seconds you are prompted, FINISH & SEND? Once sent, the word RECEIVED comes back as confirmation, which is comforting. They say the app was developed by a company called primemover.com, a virtual company of no fixed address. I think that residing where it does, the God App must feel almost omniscient. I’m certain it can hear a billion voices all at once, and yet parse each sentence down to syllable, unto bit. And it always does anything. It’s just there, and I am the best bad idea you ever had.

—Lesley Wheeler, Lexington, VA
visit VW Online for more poetry by this author

God

I am divinely distant sometimes, and cool as a figment. Being a great patriarch in heaven, I neglect to return your call, gossip about you with my angels, shrirk conflict though I’ve caused it. You’ll never know whether I love, pity, forget or despise you, and our last supper will always grow your conscience with what if’s. I need my space, I have earned the right to resist, and you won’t ever be sure what lives behind the door. Get used to it. Pray, worship all you want, sacrifice a virgin. Your fix is dire: yes, your parents helped to cook your head, but I am the best bad idea you ever had.

—Lesley Wheeler, Lexington, VA
visit VW Online for more poetry by this author

The White Witch

Turkish Delight is useful on sleigh rides. White-garbed patriarchs are not skilled with children. Do not neglect the statuary. All roads, especially those that climb to thrones, run through a well-equipped wardrobe. These tips and more at bargain prices in my book—call this number now. Do not think I stoop to mere Christian commerce or balk at parley with minions: I am a teacher. I once was cold and ran with wolves, I confess, but now I desire a legacy. Torture is a fading art. My golden foe confuses belief, and an old gray-haired angel overhears our straying thoughts and thinks, maybe, just maybe, they will be his way back home.

—James Finnegan, West Hartford, CT

Navigation

Won’t be much longer now before the art Of talking someone through to where they’ve got To get it lost. No one is going back, What with the navigation in the dash. Main problem was, its audience didn’t want it: Needing it was a sign of weakness, rolling The window down and waving your directions, That pencilled list of missed turns your white flag. Then to be told you should have sung that left, Or no, it’s Starter Road, not Tanner Road, Or that you’ve got a ways to go (meanwhile The niece’s flute recital you had sworn To show for entering its adagio), Or First you got to get back on the highway.... But how they loved it—everyone you asked— The navigators, the natives who knew The way and took it telling seriously, They’d hurry over from their stroll and hear Your problem like a doctor, maybe take The paper off your hands. The face would go Dreamy a moment, gazng down the street. They accessed all their years, the hourglass Turning and turning there on the mind’s screen. These were the streets they biked as kids and drove To work each morning. Every inward map Might place your left turn by the corner Shell, Another tell you it was past the Walgreens— Whichever sign they stared at every day, Waiting out the long red. They would unroll The whole remembered layout of their worlds And measure it for you in traffic lights, Drive in their minds the whole way with you And warn you, advance, of all the tempting Wrong turns, of all the places you would have to pass up Before you saw it on your left—can’t miss it. Until you took that first turn, safely on Your way, they wouldn’t turn back to their lives. They stood like parents on the sidewalk, watching.

—Lesley Wheeler, Lexington, VA
visit VW Online for audio & more work by this author

Crusin’

Sits of split screen scenery seep through rain stained windowpane, tall buildings that converse with cloudless skies about who’s seen and heard more, lights that beam like stars, motionless, locked in a ducker’s standstill, each one begging for some artificial wish and forming new constellations that flicker.
We whiz by going 65, 70, paying little attention. Underneath us, the bridge is a Freddie Freeloading kind of blue, humming silent oceans, bodiless misunderstandings, that escape unnoticed and an old gray-haired angel with arthritic wings, overhears our straying thoughts and thinks, maybe, just maybe, they will be his way back home.

—W.J. Nunnery, Madison, WI

Jesus Never Fails

over the Whosoever Gospel Mission. The Drive-thru’s open til 4 a.m. The drive-lys go on all night. Super Chinese Hot Wok never closes, cops are leaning in the doorway. The Thrift Shop’s shuttered up now. The bread line forms at six.

—Kelley White, Gilford, NH

Verse Wisconsin #105 March 2011
Tradition and the Individual Sonnet, or
Listen! Iambic Verse Has Variation

by Wendy Vardaman

Gerard Manley Hopkins' and Robert Bridges' "spring rhythm," or in the context of boundary-stretching, is really a sonnet, 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 architecturally created by 2 longer or rather whirlwind parts with their potentially thudding final couplet, the line will differ slightly within each couplet verse.

You'll know that 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 "dih-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:

\[ / / \ / / + / + / / + / \]

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 mummared under your breath, preparatory to hurling a "SHUT UP" or "OKAY" at the offender? Then it might look like this:

\[ / / \ / / + / + / / + / \]

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 than the opening words of a spondee. It can also seem lighter and faster than a regular iamb, and certainly than a spondee. Poets have traditionally balanced 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 person, 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 any, and then finally 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, 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, SHUT UP (or OKAY). 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 (dih-DUM), 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 "venn/em" 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 metric 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 XXXIX to show you what I'm talking about:

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state.

Imagine that in exactly regular, unvaried iambic pentameter, and then do it with some exaggeration, please. Now think about how you might read it to convey its emotional outcome. Out loud again, please! How would you scan that opening? Here's how I said it:

\[ / / \ / / + / / + / / + / + / + / \]

When, in disgrace [with [un] and [men] eyes],

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 line into pure iambic pentameter, you'll be saying silly things like fa'TURD, wish'NG, hlapY, as well as emphasizing unimportant words. You'll miss the point entirely, Shakespeare, like most good contemporary poets, usedmetrical 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 (a breath line) in your reading. If you were to write these sonnets in the sonnet form, 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.

There are some of the most basic tools to create rhythmic effects within a line in any type of 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.

2. If we look at a sonnet each by Marilyn Taylor, Ronald Wallace, and John Mupham, we all adapt in different ways to the rhythmic variation in the context of a fairly regular sonnet with deliberate care and craft....

Part 2 of this article can be found at VWOnline.

I gratefully acknowledge the overall influence of Richard DiPrima, Director/Founder of The Young Shakespeare Players, Madison, WI, and author of The Young Shakespeare (2010) (and more recently, Beyond the Language of Shakespeare (2010) on my overall knowledge and understanding of prosody, especially Shakespearean prosody). For an introduction to the subject, like Paul Fussell's Poetic Meter and Poetic Form.

More Reading (not exhaustive, just suggestions of where to go):


All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing

Poetic Meter and Poetic Form

by Richard DiPrima


The Vermont School of Writing and Publishing

The New Book of Forms

by Lewis Turco

All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing

Poetic Meter and Poetic Form

by Richard DiPrima

Must Everyone Write a Poem Subtitled After Dean Young?

After Dean Young

My daughter peed in her bed then cried like she’d needlessly broken a peace treaty with Otto von Bismarck whose centripetal mustache implies your days of empire are quantified. Geese explode in the microwave sky, unless folded in tinfoil, in which case the sky explodes. Don’t ever grow up. I’d prefer you mummify right here in my heart, a pyramid preserving stories of the girl Queen’s golden authority over systole and synapses. I do not understand the poem I just read. It fell out of a book and bounced like a superball off some highbrow wall. NASA says the sun will extinguish when every superball is contained by a human pocket. But hey, I just love language and the sounds of words so much! The words are like turds shat by birds on everything from prologue to afterwards. My feet hurt from jogging from prologue to afterwards. My daughters back and legs with clean rectangles, four 90˚ angles of freshness. Princesses flee Disney palaces because all they really desire are tacos, royalty heat lamping past midnight in establishments packed with enough busy humanity for a Breughel painting. This has to be forever. This is a poem that makes sense. Your bladder is drained, so deep sleep and dream thirsty frontiersmen who drink from the bladders of baculuric animals. I don’t know jack about Tycho Brahe but wow, the sound of his name turns every gear in my brain’s serotonin diorama. I have outsourced my status updates to India. The birds retweet the songs of other trees and those trees trend beautifully. Whose poem is this?

Must everyone write a poem subtitled After Dean Young? What comes after Dean Young? Logos, pathos, and ethos triangulate and calculate that this is not that poem. My daughter is in my arms, dry, triumphantly returning to sleep and dreams like MacArthur returned to the Philippines. Good night. Please do not age and leave me without someone to clean in the middle of the night. My mind is slowing beneath the sun’s gaze, though the police car did pull out behind me for an occipital glide, for a fifty-five-mile-an-hour rearview-mirror staredown. It is late on the great socialist Interstate. We are all entitled to one warning.

—Chuck Rhyak, Oneida, WI

visit VW Online for audio by this author

The Air Around Me

for Shelly

I was trying not to write about your passing but how can I say nothing about the woods yesterday, the heavy shade, the bright wind, all those vecrys singing down their spiraled songs from hiding places high in the leaves, the emerald-winged damselfly, the shining neon beetle. As a child I killed ants. Covered them with my small hands, fingers so tight there were no cracks. Eyes closed, I tried to feel for the brush of their souls pushing to get through. I keep trying to feel you. I want you to speak to me in the songs of birds, summer’s wind, the electric green insects, and not, dear soul have slipped through, unable to reach me with a touch as light, as light as a dragonfly’s lace wing.

—Jeanie Tomasko, Middleton, WI

Spa Nights

The blue tightens. The green exfoliates. The pink rejuvenates. The white moisturizes. The bare frightens. Masque it.

—Marilyn Windau, Sheboygan Falls, WI

White and Black

A day in May is made for promises - to have, to hold, palpable, yet illusory. When we married I wore white and what seemed a heartbeat later at the funeral as well. It seemed appropriate, somehow even audacious. Your white face inert and unresponsive; your hands grasping at the black circle of death that wound around us both agonizing over our transient tale, inexplicably adrift in a darkness so total it should have swalllowed the world.

—Gwyn McVay, Lancaster, PA

Massed Clouds

Are these my thoughts, my face, dry as wine? I can do no other than lift, lift again, my hands, examine them often as if to offer them away but not before I make sure they still have value.

—Robert Schuler, Menomonee, WI

awakening

each thing in each day

is thick with strangeness

quidditas the black feathers of ferns

rising out of wind-raked snowbanks

the fire-red-headed woodpeckers

the oak branches intagioed

over the windows irised with ice

—Robert Schuler, Menomonee, WI

versewisconsin.org 33
There’s something like a hayrick covering her, but it’s cloth – the folds reveal as much – and it rests upon her shoulders like a leopard insouciantly sleeping in a tree.

She’s half-length, turned to the right, and the lower part of her is the tree that leopard curled, all brush and limbs, but framed in the shadow of her head-dress.

Her face is stern, watching another watching eye. What time has wasted, he wastes no time to see. Perhaps he has said something careless. Perhaps she feels the chill has moved too fast.

It broke – that’s it, and he flung it away without breaking his concentration, and she does not approve of this, her eyes dark, her lips pinched – on the floor, a splinter of chalk.

---

Bagatelles

1. Portrait
Bedside, on the floor,
books scattered like stepping stones –
such fear of water?

2. The Poet’s Lament
I confess of everything, this burned the most – that all my blurs to promote the work of other writers earn more praise than any poem I wrote.

3. Canguein
Goodnight,
Radiator.
Thanks for the company
of your chokes and knocks this long winter.

4. Pissing in the Cemetery
The dead don’t mind, though they are a little jealous.
Still, they say, “Enjoy.”

---

Past Prologue

The sign for Acme Funeral & Tax Services stares down on a repertory company passing in caravan, traveling to the next county fairgrounds where they’ll recite their sweetest tempest of words to summer’s audience.

No, surely that’s not what the sign says. Shadows, a flight of crows as the tropic rumble parasol rumbling through, drivers humming the sunshine of eternal roads while a near-drowned king (it is, after all, The Tempest) mumbles his lines in the back of a van. A king who makes his living out of make-believe. Financial & Tax Services, is that what the sign says? Nothing to certain. This traveling troupe, these hankers of words, do they pay taxes? Five acts, they’re gone.

The king of mock-pearl eyes swims with imaginary fishes, looks for signs in the heavens. It’s August, thunder-water, and a sign says whatever it think it does.

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The Widower

After the Rembrandt drawing by the same name, c. 1643

In short, a man is feeding a child whose face has turned away without breaking his concentration. She is sitting on his knee. Seated Old Woman, in a Large Head-dress, Poetry, 34

It’s certain now the bowl will spill.

There is something wrong. This is a study, abandoned probably. Perhaps some kind of aging – perhaps a man is feeding a child whose face has turned away without breaking his concentration. All over the drawing are spots, in the margin, once crying and once Rembrandt has drawn the same child who is sitting on his knee. Which must also hold the child whose face has turned away. In short, a man is feeding a child whose face has turned away. The widower.

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Phil Dacey

Dacey is the author of eleven half-length books of poems, the latest being The Mountains Open: New and Selected Poems, (Rain Mountain Press, 2010), Verbeke Rotaries: 50 Sonnets (Red Dragonfly Press, 2009) and 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 Lodge, Poetry Northwest, Kansas Quarterly, Yankee, Feve 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.

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Discoveries can be made while working with traditional forms, as the forms act as collaborators with the poets; there’s a give and take.

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Phil Dacey Interviews

Karla Huston: 

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 Ph.D. 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 poetry, 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: 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 at 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 canons? So I decided that my apprenticeship should encompass those means, and in the mid-70’s 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 (Wolibar, Hecht, early Kunitz, Kumin, Starchuk, Van Dyne, 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 away working. Bl y sniffled 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 putting 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 a n y w h e r e near as good and successful as it turned out to be if David Jauus, a one-time student of mine, hadn’t signed on and agreed to be my co-editor.
PD: Not surprised really when I consider the great input owed to Jesus. (Ode to Jesus)!

Folks say it finds you user-friendly, given the ease of forming the types or finding examples of forms one might be interested in. By the way, my two sons and I formed a rock’n’roll trio in the early ’70s and named ourselves Strong Measures.

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 Petrarch writing in English. One picks up a sense of tradition from so doing. But let me be quick to add, as Jesus 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.

PD: I’d say, surely, simply because any kind of serious work with language will have a spillover into one’s other writing, but there The Whittome: A Portrait

In old age they play chess at lunch each day, the long-married couple. What’s there to say?

With “check” and “checkmate” their most frequent words, they watch their lives’ pawns move one way—wavers.

They make moves quickly, game the age. Why get too serious? There isn’t time.

Their hands busy slow: a bite of food and now a well-worn handmade peace of wood.

(He wipes his right hand clean after each bite; and now a well-worn handcarved piece of wood."

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 ‘cage’ to fill with material that might be too volatile—too scary, too close to you—to become a poem instead of an emotional clutch/burden.”

PD: I’d say yes indeed. It’s like handling a material with special gloves. At the same time, one should stress the possibility that the formal means can stimulate the material—help develop the “material” (put it that way). One can push the writer forward into territory not imagined or unimagined before—simply containing it or making it safer. Discoveries can be made while working with traditional forms, as the forms act as containers for the poems; there’s a give and take. The forms are not passive receptacles that simply pour pre-cooked material into formal Deadeye chase as a way to restrict, and do both at the same time. It’s like gravity directing a gravitational force that frees us to dance.

KH: Can you give me an example of how a poem was pushed into a new territory or a form that contained this?

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 meaning of what you have in mind. One can’t know in advance what words you’re going to use in what order to accommodate and make it fit into a formal scheme. It’s a matter of rhyming stanzas. Therefore the formal requirements lead you (by the ear, at any rate) to some words but also is consonant with or unpredictably and positively extends the material.

In my book The Deathbed Playbook, “Eskimo Joe,” about my father, employs Tennyson’s “In Memoriam Acheilognus” form (as a base from which I operate. I say “base” because the metrical poet can be like a jazz musician in an ensemble, stepping in and sometimes playing off it and around that. This would be analogous to off-rhyming. There’s a special pleasure to be had in those slight differences, distances—like glancing blow. The story about my father which explains the infinite number of familiar words that had written in it prose or free verse. Numerous details (his second wife’s perfume, the almost poetic phraseology, the final act of affirmation, and others) only appeared in the story because of the rhyme scheme. Following Taylor’s lead I would still balance them as to felicity. The reader is the final judge as to which is present in any rhymed poem.

KH: Are some forms more popular than others? Are there forms you choose more often than others? What other differences do you see among the various forms, like, the New York Poetic Sonnet or The Veritable Rosaries, for example.

PD: Blank verse (a term sometimes mistakenly thought to be synonymous with free verse) is, in fact, about the same form, thanks to Shakespeare and others. Unrhymed iambic pentameter has been a workhorse of English, or English language, writing. It can be made into prose or used as a basis for writing in English. It was a kind of blank verse (in the way we use that term today) as a base from which I operate. I say “base” because the metrical poet can be like a jazz musician in an ensemble, stepping in and sometimes playing off it and around that. This would be analogous to off-rhyming. There’s a special pleasure to be had in those slight differences, distances—like glancing blow.

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KH: Is there a special pleasure to be had in those slight differences, distances—like glancing blow?

PD: I could name a few projects I have been working on in the last few years which used iambic pentameter form. A tennis player who holds the racquet by the quality of the whole final product, the story about my father which explains the infinite number of familiar words that had written in it prose or free verse. Numerous details (his second wife’s perfume, the almost poetic phraseology, the final act of affirmation, and others) only appeared in the story because of the rhyme scheme. Following Taylor’s lead I would still balance them as to felicity. The reader is the final judge as to which is present in any rhymed poem.

KH: Have you created a form, like Billy Collins’ Parallèle? For example, are your 5x5 poems (stanzas of 5 lines each) a form you invented?

PD: No, I haven’t followed Collins’ example. But I believe my 5x5 poems sprang from James Dickey’s “Heaven of Animals.” It had more than five lines, but it was more of a sonnet. I did assign myself a long list of forms I wrote in while in Spain for those six months. Wallace’s sonnet has a form I, and I think others, have said about “just doing it.” Burt in chair and write. I’d argue it’s almost the opposite of a poet who has a set of rules and writes in the style that exists rather than choosing a style for themself. The question underlies the sinfulness of the label.

KH: Have you spoken about your use of form, for asking, writers to create an iambic paraphrase of your work? 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 style addressed wide open. For example: “Dear Santa, won’t you please bring me a bag? Of answers I can give to questions asked / by the little ones who live outside the built boundary, and discover a personal capacity for expression you didn’t know you had.

KH: Do you have advice for anyone interested in trying his or her hand at writing formal poetry?

PD: I’d 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 Alckema book I mentioned earlier, Poetic Meter and Poetic Form by Paul Russell, I think there’s a plethora of formal writing 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 on times. If you put your mind to it, you will find more and more of what you are looking for and discover a personal capacity for expression you didn’t know you had.

This is an excerpt from Karla Huston’s interview of Philip Dacey. Read the full interview at versewisconsin.org.

Choreographing Whitman: Cento for Dance

How many heavens do we get? Here’s one’s a crowded cocktail party, full of dance folk, tongues loosened by champagne. I wander in and through, weave an adagio, to hear the talk.

“Alas!—It’s—Doris Humphrey!—‘Are too long.’

Unless dance is religious—no Isadora!—it’s merchandise. And here’s another—‘Steps, boring’—

Chalino! ‘In dance, there are no sisters-in-law. Dance and bank robbers both need—’

Twyla Tharp!—‘perfect timing.’

‘Dance is food for the eye’—natch, near Twyla there’s Paul Taylor—‘so up with dance, down with choreography."

Do the voices or the drink make my head spin?—‘Nureyev?’ George again! ‘Ballet’s Liberator.’

In dance—Graham, finally—‘freedom means discipline.’

Pretty’s not pretty—’that hair! Mark Morris!—’to me."

Somebody’s just minding drinking. Of course, Charles Weidman: ‘Martha kept us a whole year on the floor. ’

‘All real ballets’—dear Auden!—’take place in Eden."

And once more, Mr. Be-‘everywhere: ‘My Muse, bless her, works only on union time. ’

‘La danse? Ecriture’—Mallarme?—‘corporelle.’

Yes, but who’s that with him? Merce Cunningham: ‘Words about dance are Jell-O nailed to the wall.”

And the old man? Whitman! In his hand’s glass of champagne, which he loved to indulge in once he reached old age. Why not here? He’s here, all right. Yes, he’s quoting his poem ‘The Sleepers’—‘I am a dance.’

—Philip Dacey, New York, NY
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