“Is a brief, random, one- or two-generation explosion of verse plays impossible? The visual fixation of modern audiences—audience implies audition, hearing; perhaps we should call them viewers—makes it unlikely. The technological shift, from nearly bare stage to richly detailed screen, makes it even more unlikely. The emphasis among most poets on “lyric” poetry doesn’t help.”

—Amit Majmudar
Editors’ Notes

This issue of Verse Wisconsin includes a number of drama/poetry crossovers by poets, playwrights, performance artists, and hybrids of those categories. Interesting to note is the fact that most of these pieces were labeled by their authors, probably to help their readers and audiences identify what they are. Of the poetic dramas featured in the issue, both in print and online, some are in process; some unpublished and, as yet, unstaged; some have been performed but unprinted; some have had a staged reading, but not a full staging; some were written to be performed as a dramatic reading; others as a full, large-scale production. All, however, were written with the intention of being performed, not only read.

Visit the online issue for more, with audio of some of the works in print, plus video of other recent productions and commentary on them: The Latina Monologues, a collaborative effort by Latina poets in Milwaukee and beyond, has gone through several seasons and revisions, and has its roots in poets theater, the choreopoem, and Spoken Word. Angela Trudell Vásquez discusses her involvement in this project online. The Lamentable Tragedie of Scott Walker, a delightfully entertaining, wise, and topical bit of “Fakespeare” was assembled by its author, Doug Reed (with some liberal borrowings from Shakespeare), and rehearsed in a matter of months, then performed to completely sold-out houses in two different Madison venues August-September and November, 2011. Another online example of poetry drama comes from the unique UW-Madison program, “First Wave,” which provides scholarships and mentoring to students who work seriously at the craft of Spoken Word and Hip Hop while at the university. Finally, two dance poems—collaborations between Milwaukee poet Susan Firer and different choreographers—raise the question: do words and movement in front of an audience create a poetry drama? You will also find our themed section of poems, “Mask and Monologue,” online. These poems, written in various personae, or incorporating speech (both dialogue and monologue), represent other drama-poetry intersections, and you’ll find further comments by us online regarding this piece of VW 108.

Two prose essays comment further on the idea of verse drama: what it is, why it’s significant, where you might find it. We leave you to explore the various ways that the verse dramas in this issue use poetry and what kinds of poetry, mixing them sometimes within a drama to create an effect. And we invite you to add verse drama, however you define it, to the kinds of submissions Verse Wisconsin will now consider on a regular basis.

Thanks to Greer DuBois and Melissa Lindstrum for volunteer proofreading help. Lingering errors are, of course, the responsibility of VW’s editors.
**Books Received May-August 2011**


Lynn Domina, *Framed in Silence*, Main Street Rag, 2011


Matthew Stolte, *D10J11Po (Visual Poetry)*, eMTeVisPub #5, 2011


**Books Reviewed & Noted Online**


Margaret Rogge, *Through I Haven’t Been to Baghdad, Benu Press*, 2012, by Chloe Yelena Miller

Emily Scudder, *Feeding Time*, Pecan Grove Press, 2011, by Moira Richards


Matthew Stolte, *D10J11Po (Visual Poetry)*, eMTeVisPub #5, 2011, by Lisa Vilho

Elizabeth Tornes, *Snowbound*, 2011, by Elmac Passineau

Tony Trigilio, *Historic Diary*, BlazeVOX [books], 2011, by Margaret Rogge


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**Mission Statement**

Verse Wisconsin publishes poetry and serves the community of poets in Wisconsin and beyond. In fulfilling our mission we:

- showcase the excellence and diversity of poetry rooted in or related to Wisconsin
- connect Wisconsin’s poets to each other and to the larger literary world
- foster critical conversations about poetry
- build and invigorate the audience for poetry

**Books Received September-December 2011**

*Publisher & author links available online*

Mary Alexandra Agner, *The Scientific Method*, Parallel Press, 2011

Rose Mary Boehm, *Tangents*, Black Leaf, 2011


Bill Henderson (Ed.), *2012 Pushcart Prize XXXVI, Best of the Small Presses*, Pushcart Press, 2011


Jacqueline Jones LaMon, *Last Seen* [Winner of the Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry], UW Press, 2011


Blair Matthews (Poetry) & Bruce Murray (Painting), *Echo*, Parallel Press, 2011


Pepe Oulahan, *It’s Just Business* [Music CD], A Bare Bones Production, 2011


Matthew Stolte & The People of the WI Protest, *Don’t Cut*, WI ProteStPO, eMTeVisPub #6, 2011


Elizabeth Tornes, *Snowbound*, 2011, by Lisa Vilho


**VERSEWISCONSIN.ORG 3**
Our Expanding Dramaverse

by Wendy Vardaman & Greer DuBois

Verse drama left the commercial theaters and became the purview of the Romantic poets, especially Shelley and Byron. These poets wrote their plays as homages to Shakespeare and as exercises in blank verse. They didn’t even need an audience: Goethe had already pioneered the poetic closet drama, a play written for reading, not performing, and the English Romantics adapted this convention for their verse dramas. By the end of the 19th century, the naturalistic prose of writers like Ibsen and Chekhov began to dominate theater. A few struggling verse plays did come into fashion, Rostand’s Cyrano de Bergerac being the most famous, but these plays were deliberately archaic. Robert Bridges’ large body of verse plays, well-known in their time, certainly fit into that category; his friend, Gerard Manley Hopkins, considered them mostly unreadable and unperformable, with their insistence on Elizabethan language and their Shakespearian content and structure.

So what do we mean by verse drama? A play, or any other piece of theater, written in poetry? Of course, this definition comes with problems, since the definition of neither “theater” nor “poetry” is clear. We often show with problems, since the definition of neither corollary: we shouldn’t expect something written newer; Hip Hop theater, relatively recent.

Genres change—that sounds obvious, as does the 16th century. The novel doesn’t, poems don’t, and have been available a long time; the closet drama is newer; Hip Hop theater, relatively recent. Hip Hop theater

Hip Hop theater

drama, poets/poets’ theatre/theater, monologue, and traditional theater, folk theater,

what we mean by verse drama by mentioning its “theater” nor “poetry” is clear. We often show with problems, since the definition of neither

大陸 drama and the blank verse drama, have been available a long time; the closet drama is newer; Hip Hop theater, relatively recent. Genres change—that sounds obvious, as does the

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Drama” (1921)

The Cocktill Party (1949), and the fragmentary Sweeney Agonistes (1926). Other post-revival playwrights joined Eliot, including, in England, Christopher Fry (best known for The Lady's Not for Burning (1948)); and in America, Maxwell Anderson (Winterset, 1935) and the poet Archibald MacLeish (whose 1958 J.B. won a Pulitzer and a Tony Award). In Ireland, where poetic language has always been toleranted in theater more than in the United States or Britain, Yeats wrote poetic dramas at the Abbey Theatre, followed by poet-dramatists like Austin Clarke. At the same time, poets were increasingly called upon to write librettos for operas and musicals; Auden is well-known for his collaborations with Stravinsky and Benjamin Britten, but Richard Wilbur wrote part of Leonard Bernstein’s Candide. Among critics verse drama was a heavily trafficked topic for the New Critics in particular, though by 1955, the taste for verse drama that Eliot had described in “Poetic Drama” seems to have evaporated. Mainstream productions of verse plays were no longer commercially viable.

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

Many more such theaters have existed and continue to be founded, from San Francisco to Chicago to Providence, including the Nuyorican Poets Theater/Cafe founded in the 70s; the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E-affiliated San Francisco Poets Theater, 1978-84; and the more recent and unrelated San Francisco Poets Theater, founded in 2000 by Kevin Killian, co-editor of The Kenning Anthology. Black Poet Theatre, founded in 2007 by Joseph Churchwell and Dasan Ahanu in Durham, North Carolina, uses a variation on the name that marries poetry and Spoken Word into theater performances.

Poetic Theatre Productions in NYC sponsors a Festival that promotes “Social Justice through Spoken Word, Hip Hop, & Slam.” Some current groups producing theater grounded in more traditional poetry include Verse Theater Manhattan, Caffeine Theatre, founded 2002 in Chicago, and Poets Theater of Maine, founded by formalist poet Annie Finch. (PTM has produced one verse play so far, Wolf Song (2011), conceived at Wisconsin’s Black Earth Institute, where Finch met biologist/collaborator Christina Eisenberg.) Although our list is by no means complete, everywhere, it seems, poets are collaborating with performance artists, actors, and musicians to create eclectic and often experimental performances.

While poets’ interest in poetic drama, by whatever name, has remained significant in the past thirty years, interest in the verse drama, per se, has risen once again. In 2007, the Poetry Foundation under John Barr (who writes verse dramas as well as poetry) established a Verse Drama Prize (whose first award went to John Surowicki for My Nose and Me). Many poet-critics, influenced, perhaps, by Eliot, talk about verse drama in terms of revival and being able (or not) to re-create a dead form. Joel Brouwer posted a short
I think we can still agree that verse drama is not well represented in print or on the stage. When did you last go to see a play? When did you last go to see a verse play? When did you last see a verse play by a living writer?

—Joel Brouwer, “The Possibility of a Poetic Drama” (2009)

Theater, like democracy, makes demands. We, as an audience, have to do more than show up and get our orders. Theater merits an audience into citizens instead of just spectators. Theater, like democracy, makes demands. We, as an audience, have to do more than show up and get our orders.
the audience more than is possible in any other form of entertainment. Shakespeare’s verse, and any good dramatic poetry, subconsciously engages the imagination. (Neurological research around this topic has been in the news a good deal recently. Philip Davis’s *Shakespeare Thinking* is one recent book.) Compelling words enter our brains, where we see images: “But look, the morn, in russet mantle clad/ o’er the dew of yond high-eastward hill.” That’s an image of dawn that we’ll remember much better than colored lights illuminating a backdrop. And Shakespeare is, of course, not just using imagery, but sound, rhythm, repetition, and other poetic tools, in nuanced combination for his effects: “In sooth, I know not why I am so sad/It wearies me; you say it wearies you.” In the simplicity of this statement, in the sighing through the s-sounds, and the repetition of weary and you, who doesn’t instantly get an impression of this character’s state of mind?

No literature is as potent as the imagination itself. A good playwright’s job is to suggest a story, and a good actor’s job is to suggest a character. But the audience must be free to fill in other elements with imagination. This is exactly what makes verse drama so ideal. It combines the most suggestive language—poetry—with the most suggestive form of communication—live speech and movement by a group of actors or an individual actor—and shares it with an actively imagining audience. Verse drama’s unique power to engage groups of people has been understood for thousands of years. We believe, as playwright/actor Ellen McLaughlin argues in a 2009 commencement address, “Theatre and Democracy” (*fluxtheatre.org*), that the co- founding of Greek theater and democracy is no coincidence. Democracy depends on active, engaged citizens, who fill in the story behind a politician’s speech. Little wonder that our democracy can be so passive—how can a public educated on bad television ever develop the engagement necessary to vote? Verse drama isn’t just important because Shakespeare did it. Poetry is drama’s native language. Performance is poetry’s native state.

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

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

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

And what does poetry do for drama? Poetry focuses on language. Not only its sounds, but its images, rhythms, diction, meanings, metaphors. It has the capacity to take the black and white, flattened prose of contemporary speech, and make it colorful and three-dimensional. It can focus attention on the hyperbole of the marketing world, the lies of politics and the part-truths of journalism, and invite scrutiny. It requires our attention. It fires our imaginations, or to use a 21st century metaphor, our synapses. It provides a mode, non-visual, where theater has it all over movies. Instead of seeing more productions that employ cinematic effects, we prefer theater that opposes passive “viewing” and engages the active participation of its audience through surprising, and sometimes challenging, language. Verse drama doesn’t insist on a political or social purpose, but it carries one, naturally, that blank verse is unavailable to contemporary poet-playwrights? A resounding no! Metered verse, iambic or not, rhymed or not, is one poetic tool that contemporary poet dramatists would do well to master and to consider using sometimes—either as a way to write an entire drama, or as a way to write particular characters/voices, or as a means to mark a departure from the ordinary or for some other dramatic purpose in a play. The flat language of much contemporary drama (and poetry, for that matter) could benefit from a more ecletic, and riskier, aesthetic. And be one way to differentiate poetry drama from the movies and build an audience for poetry and theater.

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

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

More information about the sources of this article is available online, as are links, including some video.
The Scene

is one man’s memory throughout, pulling walls and props into configuration, holding them there and letting them go. (In some ways this play, for all its characters and activity, is a one-man show.) Accordingly, many events are telescoped, expanded, spliced, or juxtaposed as if chronologically successive when historically they may have occurred weeks, months, even years apart. There needn’t be great effort at keeping the transitions imperceptible; they must not be loud, however, simply because Hill is often speaking through them. The lighting has a role in signaling the end of a remembered sequence and in emphasizing or de-emphasizing a region of the stage; its role is detailed in the course of the play, second in significance only to Hill’s. I have divided the play into Acts and Scenes simply for convenience of reference. Continuity should be emphasized in performance, and I have made this continuity explicit in the stage directions. Except for the Petersen House and State Box scenes, the stage should have the minimum amount of scenery necessary to suggest the location.

The Time

Hill, the narrator/Chorus, reminisces an unspecified number of years after the events. Most of the play’s action takes place around the time of Lincoln’s assassination (April 14th-15th, 1865), beginning in Act I Scene ii at 9 p.m. of the 14th, but the action fluctuates widely in time and space.

The Stage

is the present-day Ford’s Theater, with the façade of a decorated State Box overlooking the stage on the right.

Cast of Characters

Casting and costumes will benefit from the easily accessible historical photographs of several characters in the play, including Ward Hill Lamon himself. Where the appearance or overall demeanor of the character is not of great importance, I have given an indication of their role instead of a description.

WARD HILL LAMON
Lincoln’s personal friend and bodyguard; called “Hill” by the President, and hence by the play; a huge man, with drinker’s eyes and a faint Southern accent.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN
A few characteristic touches (beard, hat) should be enough to indicate his identity; he and Hill should be the two tallest people in the cast.

MARY TODD LINCOLN
Round, with an aggressive voice.

JOHN WILKES BOOTH
Handsome, slender, catlike in his movements.

GEORGE ATZERODT
Scruffy and dirty; a German accent, but not overdone.

JOHN BUCKINGHAM
Ticket-taker at Ford’s Theater.

JOHNNY PEANUT
Late adolescence, a little slow.

JOHN PARKER
Lincoln’s substitute bodyguard the night of the assassination; well-groomed, but two details of his uniform must be off: his shirt should be tucked asymmetrically, and he must have his badge on at a slight angle.

MISS LAURA KEENE
A famous actress.

MISS CLARA HARRIS
A family friend of the Lincolns.

FORBES
The President’s valet.

BURNS
The President’s coachman.

STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS
Short.

CLARK MILLS
An artist who made Lincoln’s life-mask.

DR. CHARLES LEALE
A 23-year-old doctor.

DR. TAFT
An older doctor.

HARRY HAWK
Comic actor in Our American Cousin.

MARY WELLS
Comic actress in Our American Cousin.

EVE GERMON
Comic actress in Our American Cousin.

EDWIN STANTON, SECRETARY OF WAR
Bespectacled, small in stature; little-dictatorish; a nasal but commanding voice.

PETERSEN
Owner of Petersen House, where Lincoln died.

GENERAL AUGUR
Commandant of the Department of Washington.

JUSTICE CARTER
Older than Augur.

ROBERT LINCOLN
Lincoln’s young son.

GIDEON WELLES
Secretary of the Navy.

SENATOR CHARLES SUMNER
Should look very patrician.

YOUNG LAWYERS; CROWDMEMBERS; SOLDIERS; 6 WITNESSES to the assassination.

ACT I.

Scene 1 (Prologue). Bare stage. Ward Hill Lamon enters and addresses the audience.

WARD HILL LAMON.
You’d hoped for Mr. Stanton, I suspect. Or Dr. Leale, who kept that night’s crimson cuffs in a brass case—reliquary for the blood. Well, either could have told this story, both Better than me, I bet. I never dug The slug out with my naked fingers, never Twisted a porcelain probe in the wound. I wasn’t there saluting when his spirit Raced up the sky the morning of the 15th. It wasn’t his no more, that spirit. Wasn’t Even America’s. ‘Now he belongs to the ages.’

Maybe. But these my memories belong To me, and me you’ve got, full fourteen stone, Atrociously sober on a Saturday night. I’ll tell my memories, as my host requests me. Believe me, though, if Lamon had his druthers,
He'd sooner douse these memories with whiskey
Than floodlight a stage with their embers....

Abraham, Father of the Tribes.
The white tribe, the black tribe,
The blue tribe, the gray tribe.
Clashing colors, clashing dyes.
Father, too, of all the cottonmouths,
Massasaugas, rattlesnakes,
Sidewinders, and Copperheads
That vied to strike his heel.

Personal bodyguard, personal friend
Of President Abraham Lincoln, I
Guard: always—save the night he needed saving.

And that—

[Hill points into the audience, to a seat at
the far right aisle, causing a spotlight to
come on over John Parker, who watches the stage. At the recorded sound of a
theater, laughing, John Parker laughs,
oblivious to Hill pointing at him or the
spotlight on him.]

Scene 2. The Performance of Our American Cousin, Good Friday, April 14th, 1865. Approximately 9:45 pm. The stage remains bare
until Hill steps off it, and Scene 3 starts being set up.

HILL.
— is John Parker.
The play he's watching: Our American Cousin.
Is it funny the third time around, John?
[Louder laughter overhead; John Parker
laughs, stretches, takes out a fob watch and
puts it back. Hill shakes his head.]

John Parker...let me guess: Never heard of him?
[Hill walks menacingly and slowly across
the stage and down the steps toward
John Parker. His voice has accusation in
it and grief. Parker remains oblivious to
him, periodically laughing or giggling
with the recorded laughter overhead.]

John Parker was assigned
To guard the President at Ford's
Theater that April night,
To catch the hole, flecked bright
With fresh wood, bored
In the State Box door
And the dark eye
Blinking behind it.
[Hill crouches so he's level with John
Parker.]

Why ain't you up there, Parker,
With your face to the corridor
Where you're supposed to be?
God damn it, man, why haven't
You been keeping your pistols oiled
And both hands free?
[Hi straightens and addresses the
audience again.]

He wasn't assigned to wander off downstairs
And guffaw with his fellow Americans.
A pleasant evening at the theater!
[Recorded laughter again, Parker
enjoying himself.]

That silly bumpkin—Asa! Took the will
That named him heir to his uncle's millions
And used it to light a cigar!
[He looks down at Parker again.]

How could anyone be so stupid?
[Recorded laughter again, Parker
enjoying himself. Hill is pretty much
on top of him by now. As if made
uncomfortable by Hill's glower (which
he remains oblivious to), he looks
around furtively, checks his fob watch
again; then gets up and heads up the aisle
and out of the theater. Hill addresses the
audience.]

Time enough to get a drink in? Sure.
No one will know. Thirsty, thirsty, sneak out
Real quick, then back here for
The final act. Ain't there a bar next door?
[Hi follows Parker out of the theater
while the lights come on onstage.]

Scene 3. Outside Ford's Theater. Two facades,
Ford's Theater and Taltavul's Tavern. Burns,
slouching in the driver's seat of President's carriage;
Forbes, standing on the ground by him.

FORBES.
You ever see a battle?

BURNS.
Not a battle. Just
A battlefield, afterward. Shiloh. I recall
Raindrops testing a crushed snare drum.

FORBES.
Funeral taps. The dead don't rise and march.

BURNS.
Confederate banner surrendered its orange to
sundown.

FORBES.
No constellation for its stars. No consolation.

BURNS.
The sky must be darker this evening in Richmond.

BURNS.
Five years this Union interlocked its fingers.

BURNS.
Five years. One hand trying to break the other.

FORBES.
Say, were they really what they said they were?
A people? Did we keep a thing alive?

BURNS.
Or kill a thing that wasn't born yet?

FORBES.
Elegies
Come easy, after Appommattox. Truth is,
I wished 'em hellfire just a week ago.

BURNS.
You see the prisoners they marched through here?
Five hundred of them nearabouts I saw.

FORBES.
They came on up this road here, skygray jackets.
Balconies, doorways, storefronts, lawns
Watched them shuffle on. Untucked, unkempt,
Uncountryed. Soaked gauze on a stub knee,
The medic's bullet still between the teeth.
[During Forbes's lines, enter Parker out
of Ford's Theater. He approaches Burns
and Forbes.]

BURNS.
Not interested in the play there, John?

PARKER.
Play's fine. I'm just a tad more interested,
That's all, in a drink.
You talking bout those rebel prisoners
They marched up Constitution Avenue?

FORBES.
Not a soul jeered, here to F Street.

BURNS.
You see them, John Parker?

PARKER.
We whooped the bastards, we did.
If I'd been there, I'd a spit.

BURNS.
It wasn't like that. Didn't even feel
Like victory, not in front of them at least.

FORBES.
Just bodies on the ground.

BURNS.
Just losses all around.

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FORBES.
No way to hate them, once you saw them.

PARKER.
Hmph. Ask the Union boys they fired on.

BURNS.
The President speaks of the South as a house
Hurricane-hit he’s eager to rebuild.

PARKER.
There’s money to be made down South, there is.
The manors Sherman kicks to bric-a-brac
Have got to be stacked up again, you know,
Factories, foundries. Labor’s plentiful
What with the freed slaves rubbin’ at their wrists
And wondering what it is to own two hands.

BURNS.
You plan to pack a carpetbag, John Parker?

PARKER.
And leave this beauty of a job I’ve got?
Where else can a guy cop a malt at Taltavul’s,
On the clock no less, and see
Miss Laura Keene perform for free?

BURNS.
(grimacing)
Hear, hear.

PARKER.
“Would you care for a little ale?”

FORBES (glancing at Burns, shrugging).
Sounds good.

[Hill enters into Taltavul’s Tavern. Re-enter
HILL.]

HILL.
He’ll come out soon—from the very door!
Ale from the same tap brims him up with courage
And empties out their minds. Did he scoot off
His barstool when they came so they could sit
Three in a row, and bump their pints, and toast
The Union? Did he tip his hat?

[John Wilkes Booth comes out of the bar
and looks up at the sky. As soon as he
leaves it, the spotlights focus on the two
actors, the façade of the scene is rolled
away and the stage starts being reset into
the next scene (see below). Booth takes
out his Derringer discreetly and slips it
back. He checks his knife as well.]

BUCKINGHAM.
Antony’s speech designs to choke us up,
But the way you delivered your lines, Mr. Booth,
We were rooting for Brutus
And booing the fellow who followed you.

BOOTH.
Brutus hated tyranny. What you heard
Were the Bard’s words, to be sure, but my own heart.

BUCKINGHAM.
Your style’s your own, too, what with the way
you leap,
Your lines shot forth so high, you’re carried airborne.

BOOTH.
That is what my critics have called me, you know—
The “Gymnastic Actor.”

BUCKINGHAM.
Your fight scenes make you seem a real swordsman,
Like you indulge the actor across from you.
When you were Roderick in The Marble Heart—
Now when’d that one come out? Three years ago?

BUCKINGHAM.
Will we be seeing you onstage again?

BOOTH (walking past him).
Tonight, sir, shall be my finest performance.

BUCKINGHAM.
Is that so? Are you in the play, Mr. Booth?

BOOTH.
A guest appearance, in the President’s honor.
A walk-on—no. A leap-on part.

BUCKINGHAM.
Who as? Not Lord Dundreary’s butler?

BOOTH (finger to his lips, winking).
Don’t tell, but I’m the God in the machine.
Brief role, but long enough to end the scene.
[Exit Booth into the theater.]
about writing II

to catch
just once
the light
of grace
precisely
the cardinal’s
scarlet body
scintillant
in late March
when he serenades his lover
parades along branches
rain-shined black
leaps into the blue pour of air

—Robert Schuler, Menomonie, WI

winter despair, 2011

below zero for days
the constant bite of the winds
these indifferent soulless times
although the goldfinches frolicking
in the woods still thick with snow
do not seem to believe
that there is much amiss

—Robert Schuler, Menomonie, WI

Spring

At the pond’s bright edge,
One rock slips off another.
Good morning, turtle!

—Caroline Collins, Quincy, IL

After Another Spring Snow

She waxes brave,
leaves the dry heated air
and shabby furniture
to trespass the farm fields.
Acres of stalk-pocked dirt
soothe her undiagnosed
craving to eat earth.
She clicks into narrow skis,
leans into the bloated sky,
pushes across still frozen pastel acres.
She searches for danger,
certain each box elder border
will reveal coyotes that yip and howl
through crescent moon nights.
But the coyotes stand her up.
They wait for the dark,
pre-dawn, pre-Darwin
to clear the barbed wire
then feast on the Shetland lambs
still rooting to let down April’s cruel milk.

—Jenna Rindo, Pickett, WI

Harvesting Forgiveness

That first post-wedding spring,
they started with a raised bed garden.
Those first few years each meal
was somehow victorious.
Salads from red-skinned potatoes,
cucumbers, fragrant with dill.
They devoured French beans,
blanched a perfect green.
roasted peppers, red, yellow, tangerine
each color a sweet fire for their tongues.
They thrived. An organic hysteria overtaking them—
their lust for each other pink and wet as melon flesh,
filled with the small dark seeds of quarrels and regret
they learned to either spit out or swallow.

—Jenna Rindo, Pickett, WI
Some Signs

The winter-bleached and matted grass
has its chlorophyll hue drained.
Walt Whitman’s faith in its leaves
must sustain me as I await tardy spring.

Some snow returns between thaws
and musty ground is spongy
as is the tender, upturned ground
of my father’s and brother’s
graves, one next to the other,
only two months apart.

Family adieus at grave sites were
both snow-filled as are scenes,
floating with snow in a shaken
globe at holidays.

Spring has promises
that the roots are generating
from the loam, new green
and hardy grass fragrance,
some signs for me
of Easter’s promise.

—Michael Belongie, Beaver Dam, WI

Spring Pique

Wind a dervish,
wind that growls and shrieks
through screens in open windows.

Why, when spring arrives
must all be blasted
to neighboring planets
and beyond by a frigid,
huffing gale?

When I’m out
in woolens must I be
pelted with last fall’s
leaves and insect cadavers?

When my dear wife
stands open-mouthed,
hands as megaphone, red-faced and stamping, can I not
know what this pantomime means?

When I long to feel a bright
sun perched upon barren oaks,
must my eyes water and sting
as though slapped
by a rude parent?

When my little ones
want outdoor play to skirt
daddy’s foolish wrath, must
they be lashed to trees,
wailing directives to one another
in their games?

When I kiss each lovely
good-night and retreat
to my loft, must I pray
that all will awake rooted
and upright, including my house
and the beleaguered trees?

Why, does spring not arrive
shy, decorous, that I may,
each year, revel in her greens and buds,
as the last shaded snow melts
and the sun leers
high in hot heaven?

—G.A. Saindon, Seymour, WI

ruse 5.

let us gather points of sacrifice
rather than marbles in the lot of spring,
each word that dropped was badly scuffed
& the rain ended by a fence, being one of those
personal summer showers booked for t.v.
wild flowers in bunches jumped up;
their pale bodies swept along in laughter
then a barrage of words ended the flow.
memorial day was in the frying pan
& flowers were piled high.
the once grand nation sat in its backyard
of grave stones with words
that regurgitated & caught
both cusp & curd.

—Guy R. Beining, Great Barrington, MA
CAST OF CHARACTERS: EVE, ADAM, LILITH, CAIN, ABEL.

PLACE: The house that ADAM builds; the garden he designs and plants.

TIME: Continuing

CURTAIN: A scrim depicting clear noonday sky, white clouds floating on blue. Morning calls of songbirds, rustling leaves. The pastoral medley gradually gives way to the whining drone of a handheld chainsaw. (Directions signify stage left and stage right.) As light comes up, we see through the scrim. Stage area is divided in two: At right, the house, interior exposed, white airy, abstract open framework. At left, the outdoors—a naturalistic garden, but gashed by raw stumps of slender trees—pine oak, maple, scrub pine. Beyond, untouched woods, a green hill, a rock cliff. It is an afternoon in early spring. The furnishings and landscape features are minimal, suggested rather than actual. Scenes should be able to shift like states of mind. Scrim rises.

EVE, sitting at a white table she uses as a desk; her fingers rest on the keys of a small portable typewriter. Dressed in a comfortable pastel-colored shift dress, she will look to be anywhere from 20 to 50 as the play shifts in time. Her body is strong, physically sensual without self-consciousness. Wide casement windows are open to her view, gradually giving way to the whining drone of a chainsaw. (Directions signify stage left and stage right.) As light comes up, we see through the scrim. Stage area is divided in two: At right, the house, interior exposed, white airy, abstract open framework. At left, the outdoors—a naturalistic garden, but gashed by raw stumps of slender trees—pine oak, maple, scrub pine. Beyond, untouched woods, a green hill, a rock cliff. It is an afternoon in early spring. The furnishings and landscape features are minimal, suggested rather than actual. Scenes should be able to shift like states of mind. Scrim rises.

The sound stops. ADAM appears at the far end of the garden. EVE begins to type speaking aloud without looking at him, his movements enacting her words. ADAM moves to the center of the garden; he turns himself around as on the pinwheel of a watch, degree by degree, measuring the landscape with his eyes, until he has turned full circle.

EVE
(simultaneously typing/speaking)
As though you were the axis of the universe, you stood in the center of our garden and turned full circle, measuring the landscape.

ADAM
(kneels and begins to hammer a stake into the ground)

EVE
(typing)
Satisfied, you knelt, and hammered a stake into the ground.

ADAM
The edge of the pond will begin here.
ADAM
The same fragrance of grapes almost about to sour on the vine.

EVE
I patted a snake, loved its copper and green in the sun, head lifted, its little forked tongue moving in and out, tuned to every vibration of my thighs.

(Stage darkens, then flashes of lightning reveal them downstage running across left to right. BLACKOUT)

(Daylight, laughing together after making love.)

EVE
Not expelled—we escaped. You never wanted to be anybody's hireling.

ADAM
It was a world without sting or venom, or ambiguity.

EVE
His garden was a pose, like pictures in a mail order catalog.

ADAM
Our function was to complete a pattern of conceptual art.

EVE
Adam, you and I were the only pegs on that board worth the risk of free will.

ADAM
Like pepper dashed into the season. Creator's own hubris.

EVE
Adam, it was a world without sting or venom, or ambiguity.

EVE
His garden was a pose, like pictures in a mail order catalog.

ADAM
Our function was to complete a pattern of conceptual art.

EVE
Adam, you and I were the only pegs on that board worth the risk of free will.

ADAM
Like pepper dashed into the season. Creator's own hubris.

EVE
The one before me? Discarded for being imperfect?

LILITH
My dear, we are both perfect-ly over-intelligent. They tried to confine me within a wall of brambles, you know, like Sleeping Beauty? (EVE shakes her head) — a story, Eve, that you will write.

EVE
I do like to write stories, but—

LILITH
But I hoisted myself over the wall. I’m a born acrobat.

EVE
In Adam’s story, you give birth to demons!

LILITH
Our children will be cousins, Eve, you’ll see—demonic is child of human.

EVE
(Shakes Lilith's form with her hands, not quite touching.)

EVE
It swells, grows, stretches until I ache—

LILITH
I am a first draft. You’re a revised version, Eve—more adaptable to wifehood. Nor is Adam the first draft of a man. Before Adam, Creator attempted a man with wings and boringly sweet disposition. That angel couldn’t—or wouldn’t stay grounded — Useless for digging in gardens. Creator uses him like a trained pigeon, to carry messages.

EVE
Do you want to come into the house? Do you want me to call Adam?

LILITH
Yes, I’ll come into your house. No, don’t call him—

LILITH
I’d only be invisible. Your husband (sings, ironically)

“only has eyes for you.” There’s an example of Creator’s own hubris—to implant monogamous ideal into a free-willed sexual being. (Changing tone from ironic to serious, she looks directly into EVE’s eyes)

Yet, for you and Adam, I think it works.

EVE
You were the first wife—are you my mother?

LILITH
(Shakes her head) — We’re born of the same ingredients, dear Eve—of earth and salt water. Creator squashed and patted us out of the same body of mud. In this story, Adam keeps his rib. (EVE looks distressed. LILITH, sensitive to her distress, caresses her face)

LILITH
I think we are both perfect.

EVE
Lilith —

LILITH
Yes —?

EVE
There is something inside—here—(hands on her pregnancy)

LILITH
Yes.

EVE
It’s alive.

LILITH
Yes.

EVE
It swells, grows, stretches until I ache—
LILITH  
I know.

EVE  
It feels as though this living thing is a substance—boiling and seething—my belly's become a cauldron—as if all the angers of Creator are on fire inside me—here.

LILITH  
No, not all Creator's anger—his supply is infinite—the more we scoop out, the more we add to the pot.

EVE  
I did not put this being into my belly of my own free will.

LILITH  
You were part of the garden—a fertile part. Do you love Adam of your own free will?

EVE  
Do I?

LILITH  
You are the mother of what comes to life inside you.

EVE  
(falls to her knees) Oh, it kicked me again. Lilith, tell me how much more must it hurt? I've seen animals—they lick off black blood and purple slime.

(LILITH holds EVE, rocking) I am your midwife, your healer, we are the two women of the world. Come, let's take you back into the house.

(EVE's labor begins. As LILITH guides her through the birthing, ADAM continues to labor in the field. The clanging of his pick on the rock accompanies the rhythms of EVE's panting and stifled cries, the steady beat of LILITH's voice chanting instructions.)

EVE  
No—(looks up imploring)—stay with me.

LILITH  
You'll see me again, dear sibling—I'll be around a long time — like you.

EVE  
(Uncovers the infant and shows him its naked little body.) Look, Adam, I, too, have created a man. His name is CAIN.

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Sunday Mass

We would swirl our garter belts around our hips, separately, before church, and clip a sheer stocking on a thigh and hope it didn't run, that it held up, that a thigh wouldn't ruin it by brimming over the top, or let the silk pull the clip and make a hole.

We would fast before communion. Instead we would feed the birds by throwing stale bread, hard meatballs, or cut the rim down on an ice cream carton, and leave a little vanilla.

We would make sure our coats were brushed, our hats not cockeyed, our make-up not too much, our gloves were in pairs, our words to each other better words, and sentences that didn't begin with You better...

We would always walk the same way, down four long blocks that passed a dentist, Pinocchio's cafe, and Laura's Beauty Shop all shut up faces and doorways littered with broken leaves and receipts.

We would quicken our pace so that we could walk in early, maybe unnoticed, sit in the middle, smell frankincense from the last mass, genuflect, put down the kneelers.

We would see Helen and Mae and Regina, my mother's friends, who would nod and be happy that my mother had a daughter. They wanted to give us a lift. But we never took one. We would stop at the deli to buy hard rolls and donuts, carry them home, and eat them and eat them, reading the funnies.

—NANCY TAKACS, WELLINGTON, UT
After Sunday School, I was dispatched to the Rexall Drugstore to pick up our copy of the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, of which, for me, only one section existed, the comics. Puck on the masthead heralded amazements: *The Phantom*, *Prince Valiant*, *Mandrake the Magician*, and most especially Mac Raboy’s *Flash Gordon*. A grey-haired woman removed from a carefully laid row the paper with my father’s name written in grease pencil.

Sunday

Probably she looked forward to noon closing; save for the taverns, a commercial silence settled over our little town’s main street, as was the way in that world of mid-century. Over the streets a delicious lassitude lay—church-going over, time for a leisurely dinner or, season and weather permitting, a picnic at the park, or a long nap or, in my case, a good sprawl on the living room carpet with the funnies. It could be heavenly if my father had someone to relieve him tending bar at the bowling alley, and if my parents weren’t quarreling over money or other matters beyond my understanding, that simple peace of rest from workaday efforts, of which I as yet had no inkling, though I enthusiastically partook in observing that Sabbath I knew was in some way hallowed if only by the blossoming into color of what had stayed, all week, resolutely black and white.

—THOMAS R. SMITH, RIVER FALLS, WI

**Sharecroppin’**

It took to forever, me sittin’ by that old well, pickin’ tiny blue flowers and onion grass stalks in the pasture next to the weevil-infested cotton fields worked by her Pa.

Finally, forever later, she comes out. She stops, curls her toes, they’re goin’ up and back, up and back, inch-wormin’ her closer to that old well where I am.

All of a sudden, she throws a tiny blue flower and then we are both throwin’ tiny blue flowers over and over again, back and forth, back and forth; until we are standin’ on a tattered carpet of tiny blue flowers; and she giggles and runs toward me and back; and I giggle and run toward her and back; and we are in a cascade of giggles; and she runs ’round back of her house; and I run ’round back of her house; and we are breathless; and she calls, “Bossy, cumbossy! cumbossy!” and I call “come bossy, come bossy!” and she hoists herself up, and she pulls me up, and we are doublin’, on her Ma’s skinny old cow; and we are riding Bossy way out beyond the onion-grass pasture, way over yonder, beyond where her Ma and Pa would catch us; and way beyond where Mother and Father would catch us, to where we both get a whuppin’ for somethin’ called going beyond bounds.

—BARBARA LIGHTNER, MILWAUKEE, WI
**Some New and Shining Place of Glory**

When I go to some new and shining place of glory, persons I care about (or don’t care about) may peer down into my casket and think of things like how my lips look dry and chalky. Or the teeth behind those slightly parted lips appear too dull.

> Although they used to gleam (one might recall).  
> Yes, he had nice teeth (some might reaffirm).  
> Though there were gaps an orthodontist could have fixed.

And it should be Spring.  
Late Spring when there are tulips, daffodils and warmer days.  
No cold hands in Spring.

> He hated winter, some may note  
> while gazing at my quiet hands  
> that probably hold some rosary beads.

YES! HE HATED WINTER IN WISCONSIN!  
AND TO HIS LAST COOLING BREATH!  
grins Jerry’s guardian angel.

> And didn’t Jerry sometimes think that rosaries were superstitious?  
> And Jerry didn’t believe in angels, either.  
> Did you know that?

> And did you know he died a raving beggar?  
> Could have left a million to the ones he loved.  
> But ends up in a cheap gray coffin wearing frayed and faded shirt cuffs.

> And look. A tiny spider. And very still.  
> On the edge of his silk pillow.

—JERRY HAUSER, GREEN BAY, WI

**Rain for Rent**

North of Brainerd we pass a building that says “Rain for Rent,” nothing but snow banks surrounding, no explanation. Irrigation equipment comes to mind, but also various reasonably priced packages for theatrical rain: *Singin’ in the Rain* requires downpour. *King Lear* rains horizontally and employs a wind machine.

Cemeteries include rainy options in the price of burials. Novelists rent drizzle for Noir inspiration, and party packages prove popular with lake house sets: programmable confetti showers for birthdays and anniversaries, with concluding cloud bursts, rainbows extra, for sending the perseverant away.

Rain is transient and can’t be sold. Catch it in gauges, barrels, bowls and it transforms immediately, losing something essential and definitive; rain exists through falling alone. As the sun sinks toward Winter Solstice, I sit in the backseat of a Jeep whose plates read “Ever After,” hands commandeering clouds, seeding their silver linings, precipitating summer and home.

—SANDY LINDOW, MENOMONIE, WI
The Knock

Death met his match
at my father’s door today.
He was welcomed as if an old friend.

You’re not afraid of me? Death asked
What a silly question, Dad’s response
as he put on a Beethoven symphony.

Most folks shudder when I come knocking
their hands covering their faces.
I’ve lived a long time and am ready for you.
I’ve had a good life.

I like that, Death said
I need to think on it some
as he turned to leave.

—JO SIMONS, FITCHBURG, WI

Your Life on Google

I double-check the meaning of “arroyo”
and learn how the “yo” is really pronounced
you, flooding with memories.

Like the time I typed my own name and just like that
a reed-thin dancer from Denmark
swept her sinewy arms around me. Around both of us.
The stuttering click-marks from her t-strap heels are still there,
somewhere near my ankles.

I type in “cankles” when no one
is looking. As if something deep inside is swelling.
If I forget how to pronounce “Jane Eyre”
and cannot ask anyone, Miss Air reads my footwork,
my ballroom stance when I stretch in my banana taffy office.

I learn how to squeeze through opaque windows, how filing cabinets
are really square-shaped universes, caches
of student papers that will never be collected.
Bring up Composition 2009. Or type “suede kitten heels.”
Boolean search “professor clothes”
and trace the thumbnail image of a woman
tenderly, rhythmically undressing
every letter of your name.

—EMILIE LINDEMANN, NEWTON, WI

Letter from a Winter Retreat

With flurries forecast, every hour or so
I stare out at the complement of trees
on duty: solid-limbed, shouldered with snow
that tumbles earthward in each passing breeze,
mimicking a snowfall, till the air
stills and clears, the morning cold, but fair.

It’s beautiful and lonely. From the eaves
icicles hang, gnarled as goblins’ fingers.
Love can be winter weather: it deceives
the slow and the naïve. Meanwhile, it ninjas
into position to launch a sneak attack,
flooring the wise before they can fight back,
like a New Hampshire snowstorm—sudden, white
erasure of vision. What one thought one knew
vanishes until the next day’s light
reveals it subtly altered: I miss you
more than I thought I would, as if I’m lost
while walking home, the street signs rimed with frost.

The roads are narrow trails of snow-plowed ice;
no point trying to drive—my car would spin.
(Flurries, at last!) We’ve seen each other twice.
I’ll close my eyes, breathe slow and then begin:
It’s cold out, but my cabin’s warm as June.
I think I love you. Come and see me soon.

—ANNA M. EVANS, HAINESPORT, NJ

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Excerpt from

Melvilliana—a dramatic monologue

by Angela Alaimo O’Donnell

INTRODUCTION

[Angela seated at desk. General lighting.]

*OBSESSION: the Latin, OBSESSUS
From OBSIDERE, meaning "to besiege or beset" Meaning "to trouble the mind"

It goes back a long time—my obsession with Moby Dick—to when I was a college student in an American Literature seminar. My professor, himself obsessed as Ahab, quoted a character from Dickens: "I wants to make your flesh creep" with all things Melvillian.

And so I did the only thing I could—made my obsession my profession. I became a Professor of Literature, with Melville as the central polestar in a swirling constellation of shimmering planets and luminous moons, each of them bearing practical Yankee names: Hawthorne, Thoreau, Emerson, Dickinson, Whitman, Poe.

There was never any doubt that Melville ruled, that Moby Dick was the Ur-Text upon which all the others were founded—Yes, even the ones that had been written before THE WHALE breeched the waters and leapt from Melville's imagination into America's, in November of 1851.

For 20-odd years, I taught it in every course—Summer, Fall, & Spring. I read it 60 times, lectured on it hundreds. I frightened thousands of students, even as I had once been frightened, by the Magnitude of Melville's Work & World.

*OBSESSION: to dominate, after the manner of an alien or evil spirit. To be possessed.

Three years ago, I moved to the Bronx, only to discover that my house was two miles from Woodlawn Cemetery and Melville's grave. He had followed me—stationary as he seemed to be, in his current state—or, rather I had followed him, quite unconsciously. I tracked him down on a pleasant Spring day and stood in proximity of the hand that had penned the Mighty Book that made us friends, beyond time, circumstance, and all reasonable expectation.

*OBSESSION: An idea or dominating feeling from which one cannot escape.

The headstone on Melville's grave surprised me. I expected something monumental, mythic, of Leviathan proportions. What I found was a modest slab of granite whose chief feature was a blank stone scroll upon which not one word was carved.

This artistic oddity lodged itself in my mind, like a grain of sand in an oyster shell, and bothered me until I salved it with words of my own. The result was this poem, entitled "St. Melville," and the poems that follow. A series of conversations, celebrations and interrogations—part tribute, part paean, part homage. Some focus on Melville and his writings; others are inspired by and obliquely related to his art—a sort of repayment in kind. A suite of songs meant to please and to trouble—a sequence of pearls on a string—words born of obsession and meant to obsess.

*OBSESSION: A fixed idea around which the world seems to be arranged. A kind of mania.

[Center Stage]

1. "St. Melville"

St. Melville
Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx

"Wonderfullest things are ever the unmentionable;
deepest memories yield no epitaphs."
"The Lee Shore," Moby Dick

Is this what you were called to, still pilgrim,
to sleep beneath six small feet of earth?

A scroll unrolled across your headstone unengraved: the whiteness of the whale?

Is this the dumb blankness full of meaning Ishmael fought and found at the end?

Or is it pure chance, Queequeg's oaken sword struck blunt across the warped Loom of Time?

A paradox and pleasure to find you here, grounded, for now, on the leeward shore,
your own bones unmarked by any writing,
ot one hieroglyph of what you'd hoped to be,
no tattoo grafted from the savage thigh,
no etching from the dead leg of Ahab.

That you should leave us silent at the last like the mad captain taken by the sea

echoes and keeps your bitter promise,
your life but a draught, unfinished and undone.

I place on your stone among the offerings—
rocks and blossoms, mute things of this earth—
a shell cleft clean by the constant tide,
the song without words she sings and sings.

[Go left. End at Lower RIGHT.]

2. “St. Ishmael”

It may seem odd that I call Melville “a saint.” But he is a saint, truly. For what is a saint if not a person who has lived an exemplary life? A person who has devoted him- or herself wholly to speaking the truth to the face of falsehood?

A person who is so gifted at his art that, surely, he has been touched by the hand of God?

These are the qualifications for sainthood, according to my Catechism. I have built my own Cathedral and filled the empty niches with saints of all kinds, as you’ll soon see. They may not be canonized, but they are blessed beings, each in his own right, and worthy of our attention and admiration.

Chief among the saints in Melville’s world is “Ishmael.” He is, after all, the hero of Moby Dick. He alone escapes the wreck and ruin of the Pequod, even after he seems to have been lost with the rest of the crew. Buoyed up by Queequeg’s coffin-turned-lifeboat & preserved by Divine Providence from the sharks and birds of prey, he is spared in order to tell the tale. His survival is, practically, a miracle.

This poem, “St. Ishmael,” celebrates his resurrection—not the one that happens at the end of the novel, but one that happens close to
the beginning. Ishmael gets a lesson in the dangers of his new profession in Chapter 48, wherein he goes out in one of the whaleboats in the midst of a storm with the first-mate, Mr. Starbuck. The men barely make it back to the ship alive, reminding poor Ishmael of his mortality and compelling him to rewrite and update his will. The epigraph to the poem is from Chapter 49.

[Lower Right Stage. Seated on stool.]

St. Ishmael

“It may seem strange that of all men sailors should be tinkering with their last wills and testaments, but there are no people in the world more fond of that diversion. This was the fourth time in my nautical life that I had done the same thing. After the ceremony was concluded . . . I felt all the easier; a stone was rolled away from my heart. Besides, all the days I should live would be as good as the days that Lazarus lived after his resurrection . . . .”—Ishmael, after surviving a storm at sea & upon rewriting his will. “The Hyena,” Chapter 49, Moby Dick

We know what those days are like:
Girl-drinks in coconut shells
shaded by those little umbrellas,
Mai Tais at the Tiki Bar of Eternity.

We see you sipping slowly—
aft all, what’s the rush?—
your hairy legs crossed at the knee,
meditating on—what else?—the sea,
your crazy days with Queequeg and the boys,
Ahab passing the flagon,
the savages cheering him on,
Starbuck—as ever—in a sour mood.

Squeezing sperm and burning blubber,
you’d all become so close,
as if you’d grown into one another,
Kokovoko near as Rockaway.

Who’d have guessed your joy ride would end so badly?—
all lost in the Whalwreck,
the whirlpool of His wide white wake.

Orphan that you are, you’re not alone here in heaven,
where there’s no last call,
and every round is free.

They’re with you in the tale
you tell to every traveler
who finds himself—surprised!—
on the barstool next to Jesus,
you on his left, easing his passage
from one life to another.
A few drinks & many chapters later
(plus Epi-logue, Ex-tracts, Et-y-mo-lo-gy)

he jumps ship, bequeathing his berth
to the next soul bound-and-gagged for glory:
his will fresh-penned,
stowed safe in his sea chest

amid sharks’ teeth, hemp
knots and close-carved bone—
one more Lazarus
fresh from the tomb.

[Move towards Lower Left.]

3. “St. Lazarus”

Ishmael is a kind of Lazarus—a biblical figure who shows up in Melville’s writings over and over again. And why not? Here is the only man we know of—besides Christ himself—who died—stayed dead for days—and then came back to tell the tale. Along with the rest of us, Melville wondered what it may have been like to enter the world of the dead and then return to the land of the living. Surely, Lazarus, then, is one of our “saints,” an intercessory figure, who can teach us something about how to live and how to die.

This poem, “St. Lazarus,” imagines what those first moments of resurrection must have been like.

[Lower LEFT]

St. Lazarus

“After the ceremony was concluded . . . I felt all the easier; a stone was rolled away from my heart. Besides, all the days I should live would be as good as the days that Lazarus lived after his resurrection . . . .”—Ishmael, after surviving a storm at sea & upon rewriting his will. “The Hyena,” Chapter 49, Moby Dick

He knit him self up, a cable-stitch of skin.
Pushed his left eye in its socket, then his right.
Cracked the knuckles in his fingers (now so thin!).
Raised him self from the dirt and stood up right.

Lazarus, Lazarus, don’t get dizzy.
Lazarus, Lazarus, now get busy.
Mary’s weeping, Martha’s made a cake,
Jesus is calling at the graveyard gate.
Your closest cousin, happy you are dead,
Eyes Martha’s sheep and Mary’s empty bed.

The chorus of voices sings him awake.
Once a body’s broken, it cannot break.
He licks his lips and wags his muscled tongue.
Flexes each foot till the warm blood comes.
Turns from the darkness and moves toward the sun.


“St. Melville” appeared previously in Christianity & Literature and in Moving House; “St. Lazarus” in Christian Century and Saint Sinatra.
Dramatic Poetry and Fermat’s Last Theorem

by Amit Majmudar

I used to think Shakespeare poisoned the soil like a eucalyptus. His leaves, medicinal, leeching something equal and opposite into the ground. The Tree of Life stands in a clearing. Creativity that dominant demands a sterile radius. We still stand in his. It’s the way energy could be neither created nor destroyed after the God of Genesis switched off the generator. No great ascents to heaven in Christianity, after Dante; no great verse plays in English, after Shakespeare. Call it the First Law of Succession. The First Law of Succession is that there are no successors.

Because it’s been done fairly well, elsewhere. Sometimes the Shakespearean seedling will take root far afield. Aleksander Pushkin’s Boris Godunov, for example, or Schiller’s Wallenstein cycle—these poets derived, from Shakespeare’s history plays, a viable way of presenting the histories of their own people. The young Victor Hugo openly declared Shakespeare superior to Racine and the French neoclassical drama, producing some highly successful plays, like the contemporary sensation Hernani, in prose (a lesser Shakespearean Frenchman, who also wrote his plays in prose, was Alfred de Musset). In other instances, a poet writes a verse play on a different model entirely—Goethe’s Faust comes to mind. It might be argued that Faust Part I has some precedent in the Shakespearean tragedies, but by Faust Part II, Goethe is presenting a quite idiosyncratic riff on classical themes; but the farther away he goes from Shakespeare, the closer he gets to mere pageantry, the kind of court masque that Ben Jonson and John Milton wrote, but Shakespeare never did.

Actually, Shakespeare seems to inspire artists outside English to outdo themselves—consider the late operas of Verdi, Otello and Falstaff, in whose librettos Arrigo Boito produced some of his most dramatically effective verse. Where is the great English opera based on Lear? In the English-speaking world, Shakespeare has inspired performers to outdo themselves; he has inspired poets to redo Shakespeare.

What do I mean?


It seems that every ambitious poet has a failed blank verse drama in the Collected somewhere. Only Alexander Pope seemed practical enough to know he best not try such a thing. We don’t read these plays, not even as closet dramas. Sweet Keats writing about bloody murder and palace intrigue? That holy firebrand Shelley writing about incest in an Italian Renaissance family? We don’t want to read this kind of thing from our favorite poets. Who wants to see a ballerina in boxing gloves? Yet it’s not that these were exclusively lyric poets, either; Byron wrote widely read (in his time) narrative poems like The Giaour, and a highly readable (in our time) comic epic, Don Juan. Tennyson, too, had his Idylls of the King. But when it came to verse drama, they became pseudo-Shakespeares. With Byron, it was the blank verse:

SARDANAPALUS (speaking to some of his attendants).

Let the pavilion over the Euphrates

Be garlanded, and lit, and furnished forth
For an especial banquet; at the hour
Of midnight we will sup there; see nought wanting,
And bid the galley be prepared. There is
A cooling breeze which crisps the broad clear river:
We will embark anon. Fair nymphs, who deign
To share the soft hours of Sardanapalus,
We’ll meet again in that the sweetest hour,
When we shall gather like the stars above us,
And you will form a heaven as bright as theirs;
Till then, let each be mistress of her time,
And thou, my own Ionian Myrrha, choose,
Will thou along with them or me?

With neither of you, if that’s how you insist on talking. With Tennyson, over half a century on, the imitation actually gets worse. Tennyson mimicked everything—both the blank verse and the occasional “low prose” passages you find in Shakespeare:

Walter Map. Nay, my lord, take heart; for tho’ you suspended yourself, the Pope let you down again; and though you suspend Foliot or another, the Pope will not leave them in suspense, for the Pope himself is in suspense, like Mahound’s coffin hung between heaven and earth—always in suspense, like the scales, till the weight of Germany or the gold of England brings one of them down to the dust—always in suspense, like the tail of the horoscope—to and fro—tick-tack—we make the time, we keep the time, ay, and we serve the time; for I have heard say that if you boxed the Pope’s ears with a purse, you might stagger him, but he would pocket the purse.

This is at once a long way from Falstaff—and not a long way from Elizabethan England. Byron stuck to writing bad Stately Shakespeare; Tennyson wrote every kind of Shakespeare badly, but Witty Shakespeare worst of all. Tennyson’s contemporary theatergoers felt that way, too, as did Byron’s. The most popular poets of their time, both Byron and Tennyson were failures at writing for the stage.

In the 20th century, the big names have a go at it still. Yeats has several plays, some in prose with verse songs, others, like the short late play “Resurrection,” in blank verse. (Auden attempted something in dramatic format called The Sea and the Mirror, which he himself called a “commentary” on The Tempest, and it would be a mistake to consider it a failed “verse play.”) Eliot is the poet who made the most sustained, most self-conscious attempts at the verse play in English, with The Cocktail Party and Murder in the Cathedral. In Eliot’s case, we are perhaps too close in time to accurately judge his success or failure; as of now, it would seem that his plays are for the Eliot specialists, while poems like The Waste Land, “Prufrock,” and “Four Quartets” will be how he is remembered.

We do have an example of a 20th-century writer making a reasonable success of a verse play. Christopher Fry is universally classified as a “dramatist” or “playwright,” not as a “poet”—and this is, to my mind, a crucial detail, one that proves just how successful he was with it. Yet it’s precisely in the poetry of his work that the trouble arises. While Eliot tried to create a distinctive, modern dramatic verse that owed something but not everything to the Elizabethans, Fry made the same mistake as Tennyson and Byron—only he made it more effectively. The briefest excerpt of Kenneth Branagh’s production of The Lady’s not for Burning (available, as of this writing, on YouTube) shows us the Shakespearean actor quite at home speaking Fry’s blank verse. Fry’s most famous play is set in medieval England, after all; move this verse anywhere else, geographically or temporally, and its
unsuitability becomes evident. Fry's play is in dramatic verse, but his dramatic verse isn't a viable dramatic idiom.

And that is what Eliot was trying to do: create a dramatic idiom that would also be poetry. He wasn't the last to try. Contemporary poets like J. D. McClatchy and Glyn Maxwell are trying to do the same thing. Naturally their work goes unwelcomed by the main outlets for drama in our time—television and film. Their work for the stage isn't in the tradition of Shakespeare and Racine, though on the surface it seems that way; Hollywood screenwriters have the same role in today's society as the great verse playwrights did in theirs. The work of today's verse dramatists is part of the larger phenomenon of "experimental theater"—something that began in the late 19th and 20th centuries, as the center of gravity shifted from stage to screen.

A Hollywood producer (go ahead, try pitching him your original verse screenplay) might take his cigar out of his mouth and tell you, with some impatience, that the contemporary audience doesn't 'want' dramatic poetry. But it would be just as accurate to say the audience doesn't need dramatic poetry. We forget the role that poetry—and evocative language in general—had onstage before the advent of film and special effects in the 20th, and melodrama (drama with music) in the 19th. Poetry served as a kind of poor man's special effect, a poor man's background music.

Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.

Macbeth's seven-line hallucination makes the drawing of the knife infinitely more ominous than if he had simply slid it out. This effect would be expressed, in a film, with ominous-sounding background music and a close-up on the villain's face. No language needed.

In Elizabethan times, Shakespeare's stage was almost bare. The stage machinery of the court masque, meanwhile, was elaborate; the production and costumes were the thing; accordingly the poetry was weaker, even when written by poets like Ben Jonson. It's the same reason opera librettos are impoverished of metaphor. You can't follow the music and the complex language at the same time, and that confusion, that constant sense of missing something, is fatal to dramatic momentum. The Greek tragedies and French tragedies were simply staged, by any standard. (Simply sending a third actor away from the script. The technology of the screen makes poetry to see what's going to happen next; as in conflict, argument, violence, resolution—that is also poetic—as in the top of the head being taken off. To combine these two characteristics, the dramatic and the poetic, is to the English language what Fermat's last, insoluble Theorem is to number theory. (Did I say insoluble? Did I say it? My mistake: A proof was published in 1995.) This particular "insoluble" literary problem has stumped everyone from Dryden to Eliot.

Let's get to work.
Schnauzer—a play in one act
by David Yezzi

Scene Two

(Far-away sound of dogs barking. Water sound. Lights up on a swimming pool. CLIP in shorts and sunglasses dozes in a lounge chair, with a newspaper across his chest. He is listening to music through headphones and, in his conscious moments, sipping a gin and tonic through a straw. PAM, downstage, in a bathing suit and terrycloth robe is skimming the pool. Light reflects off the water onto her legs. After a moment . . .)

PAM
I am so . . . O, so, so, so, so . . . (She shudders.) God . . . What is wrong with me? I’m such a baby. Can you even hear me with those things on?
(Testing him . . .)
Whoa, something’s on the bottom
Some kind of animal, I think.
(Short pause.)
Just kidding.
(Still no response.)
Okey-dokey. (Loudly.) What are you listening to?
(She waves. He removes his earphones.)
Hey! Are you listening to something good?

CLIP
(Testily.) Nothing. It’s just . . .
The Stones. I’m listening to the Rolling Stones, ok?

PAM
Which one?

CLIP
Which what?

PAM
Which album are you listening to?

CLIP
(Exhaling loudly.) Exile, all right? On Main Street?
I’m listening to Keith Richards sing a song called “Happy,” ok? You happy?
(He stares at her. A pause. She goes back to skimming, then . . .)

PAM
Exile on Main Street. Is that your favorite?

CLIP
Ah, mmm-hmm. Look, I’m listening. Okay?
I’m listening!
(He holds up his iPod.)

PAM
Okay! Jeez.
(He shakes his head and puts his ear buds back in. Pause.)

(In a deep voice.) “Yes, Pam. Exile on Main Street is a critical favorite of the Rolling Stones, the culmination of their classic period in the early 70s. I particularly admire Keith Richards’ vocals on this one, though some think he sounds too raw. It’s really just a matter of taste.” And I do have good taste. In music. You (she mouths silently) a-hole.

That’s one of the things you don’t know about me. Or maybe you do know. I don’t know. Who knows?
(Mouthing again.) Check, please!

(A pause. Then, blithely . . .)
Always the clever conversationalist.
It’s okay, just ignore me. It’s fine with me. ‘Cause I don’t need to talk to anyone—except maybe to a shrink (laughs); that would be nice.
I mean, I used to need it, need to talk. Talk to people. Talk to other people. But not anymore. I gave it up. It gave me up, I guess, might be the way to put it. Oh god, not you. I don’t mean that you did, not you all by yourself, in isolation. But everyone. And sometimes I go days without talking to another living soul. Well, pleasantries. Like “Have a nice day, Charles.” Or “Could you drop my dress off at the drycleaners?” But that’s to you. I don’t mean you, not you exclusively.

If I go out, like to the grocery store, I maybe, if I see my friends, say, “Hi,” like to a neighbor or the grocery guy.

(Barking in the distance.)
Hear that? Whose dog is that? That dog’s been getting bolder every morning. He was over here. Did you see him, Clip?

(PAM laughs, and, seeing that he is still wearing his headphones, she shakes her head and waves him off.)
Well, that would solve the problem, a nice dog, a little fur-ball sleeping on the bed. Its little food bowl waiting in the kitchen, its tail wagging to take it out for a pee? Sweet little poochie.

I’m not sure, though, it’s right that pets rely completely on one owner. It’s too much. Plus, that’s a lot of responsibility to have for a creature that leaves messes on the rug.

Rrruff. (She barks suddenly, then smiles at herself.)

(A pause. She skims. He swats at a black fly.

She sings, distractedly.)

(Rrruff.

Did you just love the water, when you were young? When I was six or seven, I remember we used to spend whole summers by the pool. I’d stay in till my lips turned purple and I’d come out come out shaking. And then I’d just lie across the hot stones where the sun had baked them and feel the heat seep back into my body. As soon as school was out, I’d want to swim, but it was so cold still in June. We had a rule, my mother had this rule: it had to be seventy-five degrees. Before we could even go it had to be seventy-five, not seventy-three or -four. The problem is we didn’t have a thermometer, so we’d have to check the temperature by phone. We’d call in every minute just to see if it had gotten warmer. On the phone.

Remember when you could do that? Charlie? Clip?

CLIP
What?

PAM
Remember when there was a number you could call to check the temperature?

CLIP
You want to know the temperature?

PAM
That’s not . . .

CLIP
It’s seventy-five degrees.
PAM I should go swimming.

CLIP Not me. It’s way too freaking cold for swimming.

PAM Hey, Clip, I want to tell you something.

CLIP What? Why do you say that?

PAM I’m not kidding. I think I may be crazy.

CLIP I don’t think so. I think you’re just a little stressed right now. Have a drink or take a nap or . . . swim. You know, just take a swim. You’re all wound up.

PAM Listen: last week I went completely berserk. I mean I lost my head, completely lost it. I was walking by the corner of Lexington Avenue with a bag—I had couple shopping bags, from the liquor store and from the grocery store—and it’s hot, I think that’s part of it, it’s hot, and humid like it was all week last week. So, I’m half way, walking in the crosswalk, when the light turns green before I get across. But I’m so completely almost on the curb, but walking in the crosswalk. So this guy comes speeding up to me . . .

CLIP The light was green?

PAM Yes, the light was green. His light was green. So what? So what is that supposed to mean?

CLIP Nothing. Nothing. God. It’s just a question. I’m trying to understand the situation. So the light goes green, and he starts going.

PAM But just green, just then green. It just turned green and he starts moving, speeds up, because he sees me.

CLIP That’s the thing I’m trying to tell you, he steps on the gas because he sees me there. And so I stop. I see him, so I stop right where I am.

PAM I’m sure he scared you. You probably just froze.

CLIP I’m sure he scared you. You probably just froze.

PAM No, I wasn’t scared. I wasn’t scared at all. I was absolutely freaking furious. I’m sure that’s what he wanted to scare me. But why does he have to speed up just because I was still walking after the light had changed?

CLIP So did he stop?

PAM Yes, he stopped. You’re goddamned right he stopped. About an inch away from me. So then, I lost it. I started pounding on his car, which wasn’t very smart of me because it hurt. But at the time I didn’t notice, just pounding on his hood. I tried to dent it. And then it got a little out of hand.

CLIP Oh, my god. What happened? What did you do?

PAM What did I do? I freaking screamed at him. I went around and tried to open the door. Then he gets out and starts dialing on his phone and tells me that he’s going to call the cops. “Call the cops,” I say, “go call the cops. I’ll wait right here you homicidal jerk.”

CLIP Jesus, Pammy. So what the hell did you do?

PAM I don’t know. I think I went too far. It pretty much got out of hand from there.

CLIP Um. Okay?

PAM So he gets out. He gets out of the car. And he sort of hits me, pushes me like, but with the door. It’s like the door swings and it pushes me, you know? So I grab him as he’s getting out, I grab his jacket, or I guess maybe his arm, because he starts yelling that I scratched him. But I swear I didn’t, not that I remember. Then he grabs me with his arm and holds me there.

CLIP So . . .

CLIP So?

PAM So, I bit him.

CLIP You bit him?

PAM Yes, I bit him. I know because I felt him in my mouth. I felt his skin for a second between my teeth. And then I ran. His blood was in my mouth, like metal. “You’re crazy, lady, you are freaking crazy,” he yells at me, and in my mind he’s right. I’m crazy. I think I’ve lost my freaking mind. I’m standing in the middle of the street, screaming like a total psychopath, like it’s a crime scene or an accident or something.
And you know what? I couldn’t give a shit.
I just watched it happen, just like on TV.
Like on a cop show, when people act like that.

PAM
Yeah, maybe. Yeah, okay.

CLIP
Okay.
We’ll just go out and have a quiet time.

PAM
Yeah, that’s good. I’m sorry.
(CLIP puts on his music and lies back. She sings.
I need a love to keep me happy.
Baby. Baby, keep me happy.
Disappointed, that’s the word I want.
Oh, god, that’s it. I’m so completely disappointed.
And I know that I don’t have a right to feel
this way, which makes it worse, unbearable
almost, almost completely stifling,
so that it feels like there’s this heavy weight,
like this heavy weight is sitting on my chest
whenever I stop and think about my life.
God, I’m such a baby.
And everyone I know feels just like I do.
I can’t remember what I thought I wanted.
I want a baby. It’s not your fault, I know.
And I realize that that is not the answer
to why I’m so unhappy most of the time.
But actually it is.
It’s just that nothing else has any value.
Work means nothing. So I sell a house?
I make some money. Maybe we buy a house.
Why can’t things like that just be enough?
Oh, this is stupid.
The sun is shining, the temperature
is a lovely seventy-five degrees. (Laughs.)
I should go for a swim.
(Sounds of barking nearby. Fade out.)

—William Ford, Iowa City, IA

The Doomsayer

Omen of this poem, smoke
swirls out of nowhere, gathers
and descends as if small tornadoes
inhaled at slow intervals
like a fire-eater might without a brand.

As to the verse, may it
be more than a version
of your act in reverse—

behind the scene the stem of the pipe,
the bowl’s interior,
which is cooling, growing
the tobacco and, in doing so, accepts
the smoke like so many genies back in a bottle,
transformed, trapped in their latent state
as a flame collapses into a match.

You are reminded of when there were wishes,
your only hope.

Drumroll.

The end is near.

And already here.

—Karl Elder, Howards Grove, WI

Bly Land

How strange it is to wake up
without you and to struggle
with padded overalls and mittens
before shoveling snow.
Crows drop no more feathers.
Ink blots freeze on the page.

I think of our winters in L.A.,
how the grass turned green after rain
and we watched TV football
played in the worst conditions
and then went out for a swim
and licked the salt from our hands.

Here there are prayers to write
of the caves that open under
my hands like the potholes
and riptides that made a wet suit
the smart thing to wear
even if we didn’t swim solo.

—Karl Elder, Howards Grove, WI

Bly Land
The Poet as Plumber

A person with ambition wouldn’t call
a plumber to stop the leaky faucet
of a clock, yet its tick is a steady
drip you could do without if only you

had the part, the right tool, the wherewithal
as to where to start. What about this part?
Go ahead. Don’t be a fool. What’s to lose
when what’s to choose is a flood of silence.

—Karl Elder, Howards Grove, WI

The Weekly Reader

Fridays were good—they meant
Saturday matinees, baby sitters,
hamburgers and my parents dancing
at the Indiana Roof Ballroom.

After lunch, The Weekly Reader appeared
on our desks, the type in narrow columns,
a treat designed by well meaning educators,
a diversion from food rationing and air-raid drills.

There were stories about the Liberty Bell,
the invention of the auto, and a few jokes
—pale ink on dull newsprint. We became
sleepy and boys picked mosquito bites.

In the afternoon, Life came
in the mail. I scoured the pages:
gray tanks, warplanes, fat bombs,
injuries, bandages, and one—

a chubby toddler in her jade green jacket,
warm pants and cloth slippers on the steps
of a demolished temple—no wound showing:

In color, the shiny paper made war seem
real. But most photos were black and white.

—Jeanine Stevens, Sacramento, CA

At the Writing Desk

(to Lorine Niedecker)

Can I learn the trade?
No one was
here to advise me.

My Muses and I
sit at your desk
and whilst

you condense,
we hammer away
at our keys.

—Alessandra Bava, Rome, Italy

The Magpie

She caws at
me from the swaying
branch of an oak tree.

“Are you a poet?” she asks.
I nod my head ashamed.
“Then we two are alike,
honey,” she says. “We
both steal what glitters
best out there.”

—Alessandra Bava, Rome, Italy

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a plumber to stop the leaky faucet
of a clock, yet its tick is a steady
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In color, the shiny paper made war seem
real. But most photos were black and white.

—Jeanine Stevens, Sacramento, CA

Princess of Pretense

She reads another book,
certain someone else’s words
might present all the steps
she needs to follow to find
the life she wants to lead.

She studies many novels,
seeks out stories of celebrities,
loves King Arthur and his lovely lady,
and finds education in romance.
She believes she’s making progress,
growing wiser, more informed.

She has not thought to question
why she chooses to spend hours
every day with characters
who are no longer living
or who never lived at all.

Well-defended in her fortress
of printed words, a private realm
of black and white, and still resists
joining those who might talk with her,
touch or tempt her to take the risk
of being real.

—Lou Roach, Poynette, WI
Excerpt from Four Riffs for a Sailor—Calypso
by Monica Raymond

(sings)
Down the way where the nights are gay
And the sun shines daily on the mountain top
I took a trip on a sailing ship
And when I reach ba bum bum I made a stop

Was it Jamaica, my island? No, don't think so.

Ba bum bum
Ba bum bum

Some three syllable island—come on, quiz kids in the audience, press that buzzer.

Was it Jamaica, my island?

No, I don't think so, though on one side it had the plateau of faintly sloping sand beaches of Jamaica. Was it Sicily? On one side, the rocky outcrops and thyme nibbling goats. Sardinia—no fishermen hauling nets? Samos, Patmos, Skyros, Santorini—no volcanos, no murals, no eclipses, the curve of the shore which is the eyelash curve of sleep, the island which a man and woman make on a sheet—

An undiscovered island
I don't think you will find it. Nor do you need to.

(sings)
It's not on any chart
You must find it with your heart…

Of necessity, I will be a pastiche, I'll have to show you the way to the place you can't get to, through a series of riffs, gests, gestures, hands, butts, bits—

You wake up to find a man in your bed, the rustling walls let in blue night, the tent top open to the moon

Asleep, unshaven, full lips,
black curls, rimed with gray and salt
bandy legged

Feet calloused almost thick, like a faun's

And how do I know that, you wonder.

Yes. And yes.

And others. Yes.
Use your imagination.

Did I mess around as a girl?
Yes, if you must know.

I'm on an island.

What do you think comes my way? Or should I say who?

Use your imagination.

Dolphin and squid from the water.
Gods descend from the air.

Was I always on an island?
Sometimes it feels that way, yes.

I don't know how to answer that question.

And sometimes in my bed, a specimen, skeleton, I don't know how he got there, how long he'll stay, when he'll leave

My Love and nourishment
both come from the sea

One night I'll caress every tentacle,
And next morning, I'll fire up the brazier,
grill him over branches
a girl's gotta eat

The wild goats know better than to get within shouting distance.
I pull their hair from the thorns.

He sleeps like someone drugged past midday,
the stubble on his face rising and falling with his breath
like some hairy sea urchin moved by the tides

He's wrapped in white cloth, unspeckled
That's got to be Athena's doing

Like a newborn
little bundle of joy

I run a hospice for the gods—
Maybe that's not the right word intensive care unit?
detox center?
They outfit me—accordingly.
But sporadically.
Three years of scraping hide for pillows and gathering dandelion duff for down like a housewife at any meager outpost remote from the affairs of state
when one day, weeks before this sailor's arrival, a load of Indian silk

dyed Tyrian purple drops from the blue
among the conch and tortoise shells on the beach, the boulders—
gold tankards, incised with vines and long scenes of faithfulness

thankfulness and forgetfulness

that's Hephaestus' work
and at his best

no thrift store goblets
bitter residue in the corners
abrasives will never scrub out

these untouched, like candy
still in the wrapper

and in the storeroom, amphoras fill
with new green olive oil
and honeyed wines
I have not tasted in many a year

mead and oloroso
amber, velvets

So this a big fish we're hauling in

Not the usual riffraff
iron smelters, spear carriers

who only get a cask or two of retsina

Not that they're not grateful for it

And I as well

I'm no winemaker
though I've been known, when desperate
to suck at the wrinkled teats of the wild grapes

hoping for some sweet knowledge of dissolution
So even a toast of rotgut out of a tortoise shell
the sandy pawings of some rube from the outback
give what I crave

a blurring
woozy meltdown
of what's otherwise all too clear

the stipple of faint thorns on wildflowers
thistle on the beach at dawn
the sky
implacable blue

I’m therapist, courtesan,
anything but wife

“But you knew that from the first,”
says Hermes, trying to be helpful
or rubbing salt in—
maybe both.

Yuh—how did I forget it
with him muttering Penelope, Penelope
she singing some dove gray lullaby
he tied to the mast
and twitching

“Cut me down,” he’s saying
“You bastards, none of you’s worth
the pittance it costs to feed you! Cut me down
and I’ll swim back to Ithaka
the three pronged glyph
at the heart of the Siren’s song
Ithaka, Ithaka
riding the gray backs of dolphins—
Cut me down! Cut me down!”

He thrashed in bed like something tied
and trying to peel free
frantically this way and that,
the memory of those bonds
stronger than the ample air around him

“Penelope, Penelope,” he cried.
But I didn’t know it at first.
I thought he was saying
“Envelop me! Envelop me!”
So I did.

I’m the whore of peace
and this is the brothel of peace.

The gods knew what they were doing
when they put us at such a remove

That Zeus, he’s damn clever
And all that tabloid bullshit he does
fucking swans or whatever
is just to make him come off
like some randy man of the people

it’s thought through, believe me
than juiced up and scrambled
to appear
spontaneous
but I digress

point is—what looks like mess
is Fascist, under a layer of guile
and wistfulness

you didn’t come here for philosophy
you came for a good play
or lay

but you see
it’s not your day
it is Odysseus’ day

I straddle him and say
“wake up it’s time
you’re not where you were
not where you thing you are
this island is unknown
in Ithaka”

but he snores on
a train
stowed in the railyard
that can’t forget its rough
journey

And so, another day in his long sleep
which seems to have its own rhythm—

now baby sleep in which the knitted brow
grows sheer as muslin
years lift from his face
and I see the bright boy who first set out

now labored breathing
fits, dream fragments—
muttered or stuttered words
“My name is NO MAN”—existentialist—
even in sleep, the trickster.

I know who you are, you are Odysseus,
nine years storm-tossed from home.
I’m your last shot before oblivion,
before the gods give up on you for good.

---

Reading Aloud

In the lamp’s arc, in your little bed-boat
you are ferried to sleep by pictures and words;
a ritual ballast to keep you afloat—
in the lamp’s glow, your bed rocks like a boat
on a deep sea and the story’s a moat
against monsters, against all night hazards.
See? The lamp is a moon, your bed is a boat
and sleep is a river of pictures and words...

—Lorna Knowles Blake, New York City

Diagnosis

A striped umbrella planted in the sand
is casting arcs of crayoned light
that shade us as we read.
A toddler sleeps, another shrieks.
In terror? Joy? She can’t yet know,
and all around us these tableaux
repeat their variations endlessly...

The surf breaks white along the shore
as terns and seagulls circle back for more
of what their graceful labor yields,
and nothing—not one thing
could possibly invade the glazed
midsummer satisfaction of this day
until the lifeguard shades his eyes.

He blows his whistle
(three staccato blasts),
and people crowd and point and squint
beyond the sand bar where the sea is dark—
too dark to tell if that creature
racing toward us is a dolphin,
or a shark.

—Lorna Knowles Blake, New York City
Cross-eyed

superintendent sutherland
demanded to meet with my family
wednesday night after supper
he smiled briefly at my parents
then focused squarely on me

and what exactly were you thinking
don’t you realize you’ve sinned
against the trinity babdist church
and the entire eastman kodak company
why for the love of god did you
want to make baby jesus cry

I had to admit it was a split
second decision on my part
just as the superintendent was about to snap
our third grade sunday school
class graduation picture
to grin and cross my eyes

my parents were struck dumb
when he produced the photograph in evidence
your son has managed single handedly
to ruin our 1956 church family album

tears welled in my mother’s eyes
as she stared at the portrait
of her white shirted bow tied boy
surrounded by girls in easter pastel pinafores

mom started to speak
but broke out in a laugh
grabbed her stomach rocking
back and forth trying clearly
not to split a gut

my dad glanced at the photo and guffawed
that’s hilarious he said and slapped my knee

superintendent sutherland stood up
when the laughter died down
I took a breath and apologized
I never intended to make baby jesus cry I said
my mother rose and suppressed another chuckle
as she showed him the door saying
I’m so sorry it won’t happen again
goodnight

he left she shut the front door
and turned to face me
winked and pulled her dentures out
tugged her ears up
and crossed her eyes

—BRUCE DETHLEFSEN, WESTFIELD, WI
visit VW Online for video by this author

O Hair

after Donald Hall

Glory be to hair wrapped in rags, pincurled or twisted
‘round steaming irons or frothed with Toni home perms,
part frizz and stink, the next day’s disgrace. Perhaps
the beauty of bangs cut crooked, of braids and ponytails.

O hair of childhood, hair of sweet and nice, the way
mother pushed in waves, set, then spilled them to a surge.
O hair of youth, SunIn streaked or Nestlés incensed reds,
the curvy and asymmetrical, the bouffant, the ooh la la.

Splendiferous pixie and poodle and poof
and abundant Aqua Net to hold them stiff or flipped.
Then soft and insolent, begging to be ironed
straight, middle-parted, tucked behind ears.

O hair of dance and swing, O bob and beehive,
the Watusi of hair, the Shing-a-ling, the Philly Soul.
O rock of hair ‘n’ roll and California dreamin’
and bandanas tied mid-brow. O hair of war and peace.

The fabulous shag, the mullet, the rattail, the spikes,
spin curls and finger waves, the swing, the spunky funk.
Still crazy side ponies and messy buns. O hair of the famous:
the Rachel, the Farrah, the Dorothy Hamill wedge.

O hair of speculation, I give you permission to fade.
O happiness of hair, wispy browns and grays.
O ghostly hair and mystery, I love the way you’ve grown.
Given this silver halo, this moonlit me, the longing to be known.

—KARLA HUSTON, APPLETON, WI

“O Hair,” by Karla Huston, won the 2011 Jade Ring Award, offered
by the Wisconsin Writers Association. Future winners of WWA
poetry contests will be published by Verse Wisconsin. The WWA was
started by Robert Gard in 1948. Members enjoy annual contests
with cash prizes, two conferences, five publications, and publishing
opportunities. The WWA welcomes all writers of every genre and
category of creative writing. For more information, please visit www.
wiwrite.org.
Blood Ties

*Behind him is my grandfather, who told me lurid tales about law enforcement in the Wild West—but my grandmother told me not to believe a word of it.*  
—Man on *Antiques Roadshow*

Perhaps he didn’t really endure a savage beating by outlaws and then drag his broken body from bed to gun them down at the Silver Slipper. 
Maybe he exaggerated when, pointing to his bald spot, he claimed an Indian brave had half scalped him before he came to and sunk a Bowie knife into the brave’s belly. 
And I suppose it’s unlikely that he outdrew Billy the Kid, winged him, then patched him up and got drunk with him. But curled up in bed in my pajamas I took every word as gospel – tales of what true men are called upon to do. While he was in the room, my courage soared, though when he left, the villains of his stories rose up in the shadows: Snarling Sam Jackson, who cut off a man’s nose in a knife fight. Belle Harrington, who poisoned five husbands. Doke Gray, who blew off a deputy’s head with a point-blank shotgun blast. 
Still, I wouldn’t trade those sleepless nights for anything. Red blood coursed through my grandfather’s veins, was splashed across his stories, and to this day, no pallid tales of interior struggle can satisfy my longing for a hero. 

—*Lawrence Kessenich, Watertown, MA*

Home Affair

The back room’s beveled window has split the light into tiny rainbows. 
Now the leaves rustle barely three yards away but rustle they do. 
I’ll smudge the air reluctantly with pine deodorizer while you make the bed. 
The kids will enter with the same homework blues and empty bellies as yesterday, thinking as they always do that dad’s home early helping their mother-the-maid with one more version of gender resettlement. 
After dinner we’ll play them into yawns with songs from the fifties until bed’s for them then tip-toe back here and break ourselves up all over again.

—*William Ford, Iowa City, IA*

Old Clothes

Wardrobe of who I was now that I nearly know who I am. 
Forgotten in drawers dark corners of closets folded layers of life. 
Wrinkles in work shirts around my eyes across my forehead. Creases carved by tears. Seersucker of an old man’s skin. 
A being in bags and boxes collected for a rummage sale. 

—*David Gross, Pinckneyville, IL*
Dear Cruel World—a ten-minute play
by Kevin Drzakowski

CHARACTERS
CURT, twenties to forties, a rather depressed man.
DOUG, twenties to forties, Curt's friend, just as depressed but a lot less subdued.
ANDREA, twenties to forties, Doug's girlfriend and an acquaintance of Curt.

SCENE
SETTING: A drab, poorly lit bedroom. The only important piece of scenery is a desk with a rolling swivel chair.
TIME: The present.

(CURT enters the bedroom. He closes the door, then lightly bangs his head against it. He leans with his back on the door and sighs.)

CURT
I can't believe I ran over that cat.
(He crosses to the rolling swivel chair behind his desk. He stares blankly for a bit.)
My whole entire life is a disaster.
Well, this is it. The final straw. I'm done.
(He opens the desk drawer and takes out a gun. He then takes out a box, opens it, and pulls out one bullet. He loads the gun. He sets the gun on the desk and studies it for a while.)

CURT
Blindly.
I guess I probably should write a note.
(CURT ransacks through his desk drawer for a while. He comes up with a notepad. He studies the notepad with a frown.)
I can't use Garfield paper for this note.
(He digs through the drawer a little more. Finally, he looks back at the notepad in his hand.)
But then again, it's Monday, so it works.
(He half shrugs, then sits down and pulls a pen out of the drawer. He starts to write on the notepad, but the pen won't write. He scratches the pen on the paper in frustration.)
Why don't I have a single pen that writes?
(He finds a pencil somewhere in the room, then searches the room in a futile effort.)

Who do I even write this to?
“Dear...Friend.”
(He frowns, pulls the paper off the notepad, then throws it in the trash. He writes again.)

“Whom It May Concern.” No, that's no good.
(He rips off that page, too. He rolls his eyes and shrugs.)

CURT
Whatever. I'm not writing poetry.
(He writes, this time resolutely.)
Dear Cruel World.
(He looks at the paper.)
Is that how you spell cruel?
(He scratches his first line out, then keeps writing on the same sheet of paper.)
(Beat.)
I'm very sorry to resort to this.
(He scratches the word out, then keeps writing.)

Dear Cruel World.
(He looks at the notepad.)
Why did I think it was E-U?
(He scratches his first line out, then keeps writing on the same sheet of paper.)
(Beat.)
I'm very sorry to resort to this.
(He stops.)
I can't have that scratched out word at the top.
My friends will think that I'm killing myself because of my lackluster spelling skills.
(He throws the whole notepad away.)
Forget the note.
(He picks up the gun once more.)
OK. So this is it.
(He inhales deeply and shuts his eyes. A noise outside the door surprises him.)
Someone knocks at the bedroom door.
CURT quickly shoves the gun in the desk drawer and closes it, just as his friend
DOUG enters the room.

CURT
I'm kind of in the middle of something.
DOUG
(Sitting on the bed.)
To tell the truth, things aren't so good for me.
CURT
Me neither, Doug.

DOUG
No, man, I got real problems.
I cheated on my girlfriend. You know that.
And Andrea deserves better than that.
I feel like there's a dark pit in my stomach that's eaten its way through into my soul.
I don't know how to say this, Curt, but you're the only one I feel like I can talk to.
The situation bothers me so much...
(He leans close to CURT and whispers.)
I've actually thought of suicide.
(CURT looks back at the desk, then turns to DOUG.)

DOUG
He speaks rather half-heartedly.)
CURT
No, don't do that.
DOUG
You tell me why I shouldn't.
CURT
Because...we all have just so much to live for.
DOUG
Oh yeah? Like what?
CURT
Like...Garfield cartoons.

DOUG
Garfield cartoons? That comic sucks!
That cat hates Mondays, man. But he's a cat!
Cats don't get up and have to go to work or get stuck in a morning traffic jam.
What reason could a cat possibly have for caring whether people drive to work?

CURT
There's definitely one reason I know.

DOUG
(Getting up and pacing.)
It's me who should be hating days like Monday.
I have to go to work. I hate my job.
And by the way, today is Monday, Curt.
Now I feel even worse about my life.

CURT
I kind of have my own things going on.

DOUG
(Sarcastic.)
Oh, sorry! What a selfish thing to think, that I could come here in my hour of need, to my best friend to open up my soul!
'Cause after all, when someone is depressed, the last one he should count on is his friend.
You really are an awful person, Curt.

CURT
Thanks, Doug. That's just what I needed to hear.

DOUG
I'm contemplating suicide, but you're so self-absorbed, so focused on yourself, you fail to recognize when your best friend needs help. So thanks a lot for nothing, pal.

CURT
I'm sorry, Doug, it's just...
DOUG I wrote a note.

CURT A note?

DOUG I did. About my suicide.

CURT So tell me what you wrote.

DOUG At first, I wrote “dear cruel world,” but then I figured I could come up with a less pathetic line. (DOUG takes a piece of paper out of his back pocket. He takes a deep breath, then begins reading.)

“You’re probably wondering how it came to this. I wish that I could offer better reasons. The truth is that I have no real excuse. I write this only as a means of saying how truly sorry I am to cause pain.” (As DOUG reads, CURT discreetly reaches into the trash can and pulls out one of his crumpled up pieces of paper. He unfurls it and starts to write, copying down what DOUG is saying.)

“If I had strength, I would try to continue. But ever since I…”

(Seeing what CURT is doing.)

Hey! What are you doing?

CURT I might have been.

DOUG You must be kidding me!

CURT (After a pause.) I might have been.

DOUG You must be kidding me!

CURT (Crossing to the desk to open it.)

I told you this in confidence, okay?

DOUG (To CURT.)

Give me that paper!

CURT No! You stay away!

DOUG (To CURT.)

I knew it! You were copying my note!

CURT (As they wrestle.)

You’d better tell me why you have a gun.

DOUG (As they wrestle.)

You’ve got way more than me. Give me that gun!

CURT (As they wrestle.)

They are now both on their knees, playing a game of tug of war with the gun. A voice from outside the door surprises them.)

ANDREA Where are you, Curt, you bastard?

(ANDREA enters the door in a hurry, eyes blazing. She is furious. DOUG and CURT hurriedly stand up and hide the gun behind their backs, even though neither relinquishes his hold on it.)

DOUG Andrea?

ANDREA Doug! You’re here, too?

(This only seems to make Andrea angrier.)

CURT What are you doing here?

ANDREA I’m gonna kill you both, you idiot!

CURT But why?

ANDREA I heard you’re cheating on me, Doug!

DOUG Hey, Andrea…

ANDREA I’m sorry, look…

ANDREA And Curt…that was my cat!

CURT I’m sorry, look…

ANDREA The two of you are dead! I’m so not even joking. If I had a gun, I swear I’d kill the both of you. What’s that you guys are hiding over there?

CURT It’s nothing.

DOUG Yeah, Curt’s right. There’s nothing here.

ANDREA Don’t lie to me! What is that?

(ANDREA pushes between them and pulls the gun away from them. She looks at it.)

How ‘bout that?
Wait, Andrea, I think you should calm down.

(ANDREA points the gun at him.)

Hey I’m the one who cheated, broke your trust. If you kill someone, you’d better kill me.

(She turns the gun to DOUG.)

I ran over your cat. It should be me!

(She points the gun at CURT again.)

I think it’s pretty clear I wronged you more.

Your issue here is obviously with me.

The cheating, by the way? Yeah, it was great.

Your cat deserved it! Cats deserve to die!

(ANDREA keeps pointing the gun back and forth, unable to decide. She lowers the gun.)

You two are sick.

(ANDREA exits, taking the gun with her.)

Well. That was quite the rush. Can you believe that she was gonna kill us?

I can’t believe she’d want to see us die.

(Taking his note out of his pocket.) Let’s not give her the satisfaction.

Right.

(Taking his note out of his pocket. CURT does the same with the copied note on his desk.)

When someone wants you dead, then it’s no good to kill yourself. It messes up the point.

I hear you, Doug.

We’ve got too much to live for.

You’re right, my friend. We both have way too much.

(End of play.)
**Knife Grinder**

In the age of backyard laundry lines & rhubarb patches, a knife-grinder, once each summer, came around pushing his hand cart with its giant’s whetstone, pushing it from house to alley to house & letting out with a wildman’s yell no one could fathom as he walked his itinerate immigrant’s unshackled life, mad grackles screaming from telephone lines overhead while he scuffled along. Housewives spilled out backdoors with dulled knives, sewing scissors, shears in cardboard boxes or a rattle in apron pockets, his gypsy shirt refracted in their sluggish, hausfrau eyes, a sweat-stained bandana wrapped about his sweat-leathery neck. On a Sunday afternoon beneath brilliant autumn leaves I went with my father to the Croatian Folk Festival to have my first taste of a thick & greasy slice of roasted goat when we chanced on the knife-grinder with his whetstone, sharpening, sharpening, his soup-strainer mustache glistening in goat grease as he laughed up a storm with his harem circling about him, clucking & scratching up dust, in that time that’s gone.

—Milwaukee, 1956

—TERRY SAVOIE, CORALVILLE, IA

**In the Wisconsin Backwoods**

“Five hours to myself!” I said, “five huge, solid hours.”

—John Muir

Before bed, the boy fixes his mind on waking at one, the moon-hour for a ploughboy’s single earth-bound pleasure, the delectable five unharnessed & hermetic hours before milking, hours stolen from sleep, luxurious, chore-less hours salubriously & solely his in the cold cellar directly beneath the floorboards of his father’s bedstead, hours to begin the hungering, idler’s dream, a whittled timekeeper, a journal, a self-setting sawmill, the inventions blueprinted already during weeks of fieldwork in the brooding furrows of a boy’s imagination.

—TERRY SAVOIE, CORALVILLE, IA

**Lies I Tell Myself at Night**

_Here’s the clear shit._ Reaching under his basement workbench, Grandpa hands me a Mason jar innocent of content.

Years later I’m working with mirrors, practicing my poker face while placing Nessie on that grassy knoll in Dallas.

_But how’d it pull the trigger with those prehistoric flippers?_ someone wonders from the audience.

_Cartilage!_ I lie without batting an eye. Reverse-engineering the truth, I strive toward six months in my seventies when my apprenticeship is finally done and death can only finish me, like Ed Markoweicz, 83, who broke his wrist while bowling. When the nurse asked him to spell his name, he looked her in the eye. Said E.D.

—MIKE KRIESEL, ANIWA, WI

**Send Shivers Up Your Spine**

By mistake, a wild vertebrae, raised by a pack of wolves, wanders into a movie theater.

Soon it is surrounded by boxes of hot buttered popcorn madly throwing goobers.

Now anchored against the stage, keystones grab pitch forks and lynchpins light torches.

The crowd taunts and chants: “Why don’t you get a backbone?” The ignorant bone cowers beneath a chair, spineless.
The Museum of Unnatural History—**a drama in verse**

by Carol Dorf and Autumn Stephens

**BOTH VOICES**

**Prologue:**

The nature of this unnatural museum:
to curate, as in a religious manner,
a collection into comprehensible narrative.

**Act 1: Tuesday’s Lecture Series**

**VOICE TWO**
Tuesday’s lecture series features sightless painters, tiny giants, a 19th century piano prodigy who had no hands or ears.

**VOICE ONE**
In the hall of near extinction photos of Rothchild’s Giraffe, Nelson’s Small-Eared Shrew, the Otago Skink and too many others stare back at the viewer.

**VOICE TWO**
Who’s culpable? Birthers point narrow fingers at the disappeared. The Androgynous Skink of New Zealand got what it deserved.

**VOICE ONE**
That attitude makes sense when we talk about Bonobos what with their promiscuity, so much like our unconstrained desires--

**VOICE TWO**
Without the boundary lines of church or state, but what of the Howler Monkey, which aside from being loud, models probity?

**VOICE ONE**
Like its companion volume, The Book of Nature contains multitudes. Seek, and ye shall find proof that the earth is flat as Creationist science.

**BOTH**

**Act 2: Declarations**

**VOICE ONE**
When authority monitors the call we speak in unnatural tones, stumbling over our innocent tongues, stifling sweat.

**VOICE TWO**
Have you anything to declare? Don’t we all—the pets we left behind, unfortunate affairs, and unconsummated dreams, declarative outbursts.

**VOICE ONE**
A fortunate affair, the way we contract joy from others, discrete bouts of happiness or, between lovers, Venereal disease.

**VOICE TWO**
Don’t get started on the diseases or we’ll be like the prematurely aged AIDS generation when we expected

**VOICE ONE**
every gay friend to drop before we could read the future in his tea leaves.

**VOICE TWO**
“Life isn’t fair,”

**VOICE ONE**
but we’re not resigned to fate, keep searching for loopholes, chapter two, happily ever after on Easter Island.

**VOICE TWO**
The children ignore our bad acting, run ahead to pursue the secret of the Bermuda Triangle and what really happened to Virginia Dare.

**BOTH**

**Act 3: Provisional**

**VOICE ONE**
The Hall of Extinct Bacteria’s provisional quality has been described in many guidebooks, as the family’s members reappear unexpectedly.

**VOICE TWO**
Polarizing, our nature. The naked girl at the stag party: a virgin then. What do we mean by “sacrifice?”

**VOICE ONE**
In the privacy of home view the downloaded videos; Where does the law hideout? We’d wrap our daughters in tinfoil if it would do any good.

**VOICE TWO**
Or rocket them to Pluto, where they’d highlight their hair by the glow of unnamed stars, caress moonscreen into the valleys between careless limbs.

**VOICE ONE**
They’ll develop scopes precise enough to measure the vicissitudes of gravity, emotion, the presence of a planet by its effects on a star.

**VOICE TWO**
An exotic extended latency, each limb and synapse bathed in light; comfort so perfect the body doesn’t even cross the mind.

**VOICE ONE**
Everything explodes; Tesla’s machine partially harvests lightning; pre-teens open chemistry sets without adult supervision.

**VOICE TWO**
Alone among mammals, we adore what we deplore, disasters done with such a deft hand it almost makes us believe in God.

**VOICE ONE**
Then like children coloring a landscape, we demand nouns: idea of tree—falling cypress; or a pet—the bunny’s absurd ears.

**VOICE TWO**
Syneccdoche: figure of speech for a shrunken world, the small part—skin, skirt, hand—that stands for something realized, life sized, whole.

**BOTH**

**Act 4: Curate the Drama**

**VOICE ONE**
Optimist or Pessimist—send out the children to argue with the wrens, or better yet on a hike uphill; there has to be a waterfall someplace.

**VOICE TWO**
Fog is water too, though no one seeks it out, the way we falter toward sun or sex or what we think of as nature.

**VOICE ONE**
Chamber music in the hen house and a mockingbird chides the fiddle but the crowd checked irony at the gate.

**VOICE TWO**
The cloakroom grows full of discarded umbrellas and dismay. What the hat check boy would do for something bright and floral—

**VOICE ONE**
The junior docent would prefer the patrons at least notice her jokes, rather than focusing on her tattoos, and nose-ring. Whose museum is it?

**BOTH**

The very act of preservation renatures the excluded imagination, though we’ve yet to enter the Monte Hall:

**VOICE TWO**
This problem concerns the cash nexus,
and whether it increases your chances of winning to choose another door (it does.)

VOICE ONE
And isn’t free admission a lie; the small print notes that to witness is to confess your interest, your participation

VOICE TWO
in the human drama. Plus, a surcharge if you want the curated to witness your distress with invisible ink, exquisite old-world hands.

BOTH
Act 5: Refining Normal

VOICE TWO
Light frightens them all. They spend the brilliant morning in half-lit corridors and before dimmed dioramas: light bleaches time.

VOICE ONE
At 16 everyone wants to be “normal” however that is defined; but approach/avoidance of exposure continues—

VOICE TWO
Confessions in the free box, violation on chenille; we give away everything but the story inside our skins

VOICE ONE
Why anonymous when confession only a blog away in the media room? Text or audio speakers, you choose.

VOICE ONE
Confession, the modern uniform—no one wants to show up naked or wearing the wrong designer.

VOICE TWO
Brown man, red robes: who’s curating this thing—mimes, sickos, performance artists? Cut off the hands that offend you.

VOICE TWO
The handoff is the most complex phase—who can catch the tumbling figures securely, while preparing to pass them on to the next act.

VOICE TWO
For the Om generation, down dog is an act of utter absorption. The dogma of simplicity means flexible spines, lazy eyes.

VOICE ONE
Do they hold fast to dogma, or does Dogma clutch them, ready prey for a nest of mewling furies, their maws always open for more.

VOICE TWO
For every grave ill, an antidote.

VOICE ONE
For every grave ill, an anecdote.

VOICE TWO
That bubble troubling the placid face of your drink, the flay marks on your toast—

BOTH
are you still collecting impossible portents?

Musical Interlude

Coda

BOTH
And troubled days can be concealed by Venetian glasses. Once you loved that hand-blown rippled effect, now you can’t stop thinking “fragile expense.”

No need to gawk; you’ll be back.
For every Coliseum, a catacomb;
for every grand cathedral, a graveyard.

VOICE TWO
For every grave ill, an antidote.

VOICE ONE
For every grave ill, an anecdote.

The Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets, one of the oldest American poetry societies, sponsors local poetry events, semi-annual conferences, contests, and a yearly anthology.

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The Actor’s (and Intelligent Reader’s) Guide to the Language of Shakespeare
by Richard DiPrima

In my 50 years of performing the classics, I have not seen so comprehensive a guide for the use of Shakespeare’s language. —Randall Duk Kim, actor & co-founder of the American Players Theatre

Published by The Young Shakespeare Players, Madison, WI, 2010, 852 pp.
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VerseWisconsin.org 35
Her Piano

There are days she polishes the case
to a mirroring tool, yet never sees
her own reflection, only the brilliance
of a walnut face where too many ghosts
have gathered—she admires the frayed bench;
horse hair poking through; an unlikely box of music
rolled away for safekeeping where fingered keys
once pressed with exaltation and graced
the room to a sympathetic vibration
from cross stinging glory. She’s hostage to the fever
where simpatico is addictive, her hallelujah
haven; a place she remembers lost harmonies
that trembled through the harp with pedals
pushed beneath her feet as the weight of her body
shifted into a rhapsody of days gone by
that echoed the night-bird’s song
and swallowed wing-beats like tinselled stars
in a flickering frenzy all the way from heaven
and back. If she shared her innermost secrets,
she’d tell you how she imagines lying naked
on the hammer and strings until the action’s
completely immobilized, hitch pins locked
from the weight of years she can’t forget
88 levers of ivory and wood pounding unconscionably
into beautiful madness like a bridge between
all things near and far, her heart a collectable;
a piece of vintage art.

—CAROL LYNN GRELLAS, EL DORADO HILLS, CA
visit VW Online for audio by this author

late in april

last year’s lilies droop down the garden wall.
with all the stubbornness of the undead they refuse to be raked.
the corpse of last summer, fainting ridiculously on a couch of new grass
recalling the season you came back to me—
when the other mouldering corpses of my past loves
came running out to greet you,
falling pale and starved on your neck.

today I cannot take up the compost of a year of you.
not with the new lilies—
already resurrecting in the peat swamp pulp
of everything we didn’t clear up last fall.

—ELIZABETH COOK, MADISON, WI
Boarder

The boy breached up, up, up, up from the walk into the sky, high enough so that the sky made a halo around him as his wheels were silenced in the air. A pinwheel of beach sand flew up with him and just as easily fell as fireworks do, but mute, and in pastel. I stood aside and saw a seagull land and turn. We were oblivious, all three, to cars parading up and down nearby. He saw the bird, the bird saw him, and I saw him begin believing he could fly. Kree kree, he said—the boy!—as if to say, Just stay right there and watch. And then he took the board back up and cocked his head to try again, then flapped and went and leapt and Kree, the seagull said, you’re flying just like me. The cars were close. All I could do was look, amazed. The seagull did not fly away but hopped a little closer to the boy then closer still as if it would enjoy a turn on the boy’s skateboard, when it’s free. And when the boy alit upon the walk, they turned and faced each other with a squawk.

—JAMES B. NICOLA, NEW YORK, NY

The Man with an Ocean in Each Eye

sees everything undulate with a blue hue. Motes large as whales rise
and fall. When he flexes his arms
veins like blue tentacles thicken and then grow
thin. He watches as your phosphorescent footprint comes closer to him. When he brings himself
to look you in the eye, something pulses
in your gaze, like jellyfish flicking
long strands of sensuously poisonous signals.
And when he wakes one morning covered
in sand, eggshells cracked open and sticky goo on his hands, he wonders what violence
he has performed again on his dreams and where they have struggled their small flippers toward.

—CAROL BERG, GROTON, MA

Feedback

For A. L.

One night, my son-in-law, the therapist, opined I “over-think” things. I didn’t think to ask him what he meant; nor did I shoot him a snappy comeback. Stayed up all that night and thought and thought and thought some more: as light arranged the room, decided my son-in-law, rude as he might be, had got that right.

I brood, I ruminate on what he takes for granted—good and evil, light and shadow, subtle nuances in the nebulae.

I almost kissed the man for what he said, but, thinking it over, wrote this poem instead.

—DON KIMBALL, CONCORD, NH

Luna Moth

Where had she come from, landing on the warm cement of the porch steps that early summer day? Wet, it seemed, with exhaustion, she half-curled herself round a black spoke of the banister, pulsing there.

How far she carried me, on those pale, sheer wings: back to a downtown shop of my girlhood, the light green blouse with generous sleeves and long white neckstrings that must have been modeled on her, back to this same disbelief, this ecstasy that such beauty was even possible, back to her tired breathing, her wings stretched so wide, her long, thin antennae quivering there in the last sun.

—CAROLINE COLLINS, QUINCY, IL
Wayne Horvitz’s *Sweeter Than the Day* Ensemble

Too prolific for words...
Major improv guy
(from Seattle)

So many guises
& aliases

Bit parts:
Ponga
Bump the Renaissance

And big parts:
Zony Mash
Gravitas Quartet

(to name just a few)

But here you are
acoustic

Reaching for something
nice to say
(& hello Vancouver
Coastal Jazz & Blues
Society)

And doing so with
minimal fuss

And lovely, subtle
group interplay with
your “mashed friends”

It’s Zony Mash lite
& truly delight-
fully sweet

—Stephen Bett, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Bobby Previte

*Bobby Previte began his life in music as a
great way to
meet girls, but then fell in love with the
drums instead.*

Improv drum thrasher
& composer of suites
& mayhem

Projects galore, from
*Bump the Renaissance* to
*Coalition of the Willing*

On the meeting girls project,
this gal-lore:

*DIORAMA is an ongoing performance work in the form of a
series of solo drum concerts for one listener at a time in rotating
spaces.*

*In Previte’s Diorama, each listener [attractive young woman]
enters a small room and sits directly behind the drum set.
Unaware of their [sic] identity, Previte plays an improvised
piece for his solo audience member. The strange, heightened
intimacy of the interaction and the expansive, panoramic view
of Lower Manhattan from the space create a concert of...*

Well, ok, but it’s a walk-on part
té-dum

—Stephen Bett, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

*bobbyprevite.com*
James Babbs is not a real writer but he plays one on TV. He works for the government but doesn’t like to talk about it. He likes getting drunk and writing because both of them can be very intoxicating. He thinks poets should be treated more like rock stars and have swarms of beautiful groups chasing them wherever they go. His books are available from www.tbibros.com, www.lulu.com, & www.interiornoisepress.com.

Alessandra Bava is a translator living and working in Rome. She holds an MA in American Literature. Publishing credits include Poetry Quarterly, clime, Zzone Magazine & Miscellany and The Anemuem Saeedere. Her connections to Wisconsin are her love for the poems of Louise Niedecker and her youthful infatuation for Little House on the Prairie.

Guy R. Beising has had six poetry books and 25 chapbooks published over the years, and appeared in seven anthologies. His first book, In a Time of Stars, 2006, was shortlisted for the Anthony Hecht Prize. Beising's chapbook, Ophelia Unwinding (dancing girl press), and Small Perfume and the Woman Holding A Flood In Her Mouth (Barge Press), are forthcoming. His website is carolbergpoetry.com/wordpress.


Lorna Knowles Blakes first collection of poems, Permanent Address, won the Richard Snyder Memorial Prize from the Ashland Poetry Press. She has been the recipient of a residency from the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and a Walter E. Dakin Fellowship from the Sewanee Writers Conference. Ms. Blake teaches creative writing at the 92ndStreet Y and serves on the editorial board of Barrow Street. She lives in Cape Cod, New Orleans, and New York City.

Carol Collins is an assistant professor of English at Quinnipiac University. Her poems have appeared in such places as The Missouri Review, The Cortland Review, The New Englan d Review, Tanglewood Review, and The North American Review. As her vital 94-year-old father began to decline. He writes when his wife on five acres in northeast WI. Chickens, geese, orioles, and owls keep him tuned in. He writes for thomasrsmithpoet.com.

Carol Don't's poems have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies. She has taught in a variety of venues, including a number of writing workshops, a large urban high school, as a California Poet-in-the-Schools, and at Berkeley City College. She is poetry editor of Talking Writing.

Kevin Drzakowski, originally from St. Louis, is an associate professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. His plays have been performed in Missouri, Michigan, Wisconsin, and New York City. In addition to writing, Kevin acts (poet) and directs (neatly as badly) for his local community theater.

Debra D'Elia is an actress and director, a student in the Dept. of Theatre at Northwestern University, and a poet.

Karl Elder is Poet in Residence at Lakeland College near Sheboygan, where he also facilitates Sheboygan County's Poet in Residence. His first book, The Formalist, The Lyric, The Blue Unicorn, was published by Limberlost Press. He is the recipient of first-place poetry awards in the Utah Arts Council's Original Writing Contest and the Wisconsin Poets' Calendar Award. He also won the Dana Literary Award for poetry, was nominated for a Rhysling Award, and was a featured poet at the New Formalist in 2010. This is his fourth appearance in VW.

Amelia Eisner is the Editor of the Rainstorm Review and currently teaches poetry at West Windsor Art Center. Her chapbooks Swimmer's Song and Select Poems are available from Maristuck Deep Press. She has visited Michigan and Illinois, which she believes are near Wisconsin.

Ronikia Ford has two books. The Gourmet Picnic (Mid-American Press, 2002) and Past Perfect Imperfect (Turning Point, 2006). Two chapbooks, Allen & Eden and Descending with Alix, were published by Pudding House in 2010. His good friend, Paul Zimmer (poet and editor), lives in Crawford County. They roam around the Kickapoo River and hike along the high of Soo Lake. Carol Lynn Stevenson Grellas's six-time Pushcart nominee and a 2010 Best of the Net nominee. She is the author of seven chapbooks with her latest collection of poems, Epistemology of an Odd Girl, forthcoming from March Street Press. She lives in the High Country, near the base of the Sierra Foothills. According to family lore, she is a direct descendant of Robert Louis Stevenson.

Monica Raymond holds a doctorate in creative writing-poetry from Western Michigan University. His first collection of poems, I Am Enough, was published by cowfeather Press, and Poet Laureate of Michigan, 2012-2013. His work has been published in a score of publications including Pudding House, Unsplendid, Tor.com & Verse Wisconsin. His verse plays have been produced by Verse Theater Manhattan at the Bowery Poetry Club in New York. He won the 2011 Ruby Loft Award for poetry. His website is carolbergpoetry.com/wordpress.

Robert Schuler has been trying to write for fifty years. His fifteenth collection of poems, The Book of Voices, has recently been published by Tom Mottja's MWP Books, PO Box 8, Fairwater, WI 53539. Price: $12.50 plus $1.50 postage.

Jo Johnson is a native New Yorker but has lived in Wisconsin since 1986. Like so many others, she came here to go to school and never left. She's a painter and Music Together teacher. She began writing poetry very recently as her viral 94-year-old father began to decline. She enjoys nature and walks along the Wisconsin River near her house. She is the editor of Visions, 2012, and Cowfeather Press, and Poet Laureate of Wisconsin-Wisconsin Poets' Calendar. Her next collection of poems will be published by Cowfeather Press. Her poems have appeared in a number of small press publications, including Musica Poemata, Strange Fire, Unspeckled, and Pudding House, Unsplendid, Tor.com & Verse Wisconsin. His verse plays have been produced by Verse Theater Manhattan at the Bowery Poetry Club in New York.

Last year's winner of the Wisconsin Poets Prize was Michael Venzke. His book, The Anemone Sidecar, was forthcoming from Cherry Grove Collections. He lives in Wisconsin-Milwaukee and teaches at Silver Lake College.
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