

# VERSE WISCONSIN

FOUNDED BY LINDA ASCHBRENNER AS FREEVERSE 1998

## VERSE DRAMA VERSE DRAMA

### PROSE FEATURES

DRAMATIC POETRY & FERMAT'S LAST THEOREM  
BY AMIT MAJMUDAR

OUR EXPANDING DRAMAVERSE  
BY WENDY VARDAMAN & GREER DUBOIS

“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 unison, 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.”

—Wendy Vardaman & Greer DuBois

VERSE DRAMAS BY CAROL DORF &  
AUTUMN STEPHENS ▣ KEVIN DRZAKOWSKI  
▣ AMIT MAJMUDAR ▣ CHARLOTTE  
MANDEL ▣ ANGELA ALAIMO O'DONNELL  
▣ MONICA RAYMOND ▣ DAVID YEZZI ▣

“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

POETRY BY JAMES BABBS ▣ ALESSANDRA  
BAVA ▣ GUY R. BEINING ▣ MICHAEL  
BELONGIE ▣ CAROL BERG ▣ STEPHEN BETT  
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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 Of the poetic dramas featured in the issue, both in print and online, some are in process; some unpublished and, as yet, unstaged; some have been performed but unprinted; some have had a staged reading, but not a full staging; some were written to be performed as a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 Monlogue,” 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.**

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## Books Received May-August 2011

Seth Abramson, *Northerners*, New Issues, Western Michigan U, 2011  
 Ellen Wade Beals, Ed., *Solace, in So Many Words*, Weighed Words, 2011  
 Richard Broderick, *Rain Dance*, Parallel Press, 2011  
 Lynn Domina, *Framed in Silence*, Main Street Rag, 2011  
 Moira Egan and Clarinda Harriss, Eds., *Hot Sonnets*, Entasis Press, 2011  
 Fabu, *Journey to Wisconsin: African American Life in Haiku*, Parallel Press, 2011  
 Richard Fein, *The Required Accompanying Cover Letter*, Parallel Press, 2011  
 Jessica Goodfellow, *The Insomniac's Weather Report*, Three Candles Press, 2011  
 Shelly L. Hall, *Alum*, Popcorn Press, 2011  
 Scott King, Ed., *Perfect Dragonfly, A Commonplace Book of Poems Celebrating a Decade & a Half of Printing & Publishing at Red Dragonfly Press*, Red Dragonfly Press, 2011  
 Kim Nelson, *Woman's Evolution*, Finishing Line Press, 2011  
 Thomas R. Smith, *Wisconsin Spring, Poems and an Essay*, Lost Music Press, 2011  
 Bianca Spriggs, *How Swallowtails Become Dragons*, Accents Publishing, 2011  
 Jeanine Stevens, *Caught in Clouds*, Finishing Line Press, 2011  
 Matthew Stolte, *D10J11Po* (Visual Poetry), eMTeVisPub #5, 2011  
 Jeanie Tomasko, *Sharp as Want*, Art by Sharon Auberle, Little Eagle Press, 2011  
 Marly Youmans, *The Throne of Psyche*, Mercer University Press, 2011

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

## Books Reviewed & Noted Online

Bruce Dethlefsen, *Unexpected Shiny Things*, Cowfeather Press, 2011, by Julie L. Moore  
 Moira Egan and Clarinda Harriss, Eds., *Hot Sonnets*, Entasis Press, 2011, by Moira Richards  
 Dave Etter, *Dandelions*, Red Dragonfly Press, 2010, by Lou Roach  
 Jean Feraca, *I Hear Voices, A Memoir of Love, Death, and the Radio*, Terrace Books (UW Press), 2011, by Linda Aschbrenner  
 Jessica Goodfellow, *The Insomniac's Weather Report*, Three Candles Press, 2011, by Athena Kildegaard  
 Sarah Gorham, *Bad Daughter*, Four Way Books, 2011, by Charles Byrne  
 Steve Healey, *10 Mississippi*, Coffee House Press, 2010, by Melissa J. Lindstrum  
 Scott King, Ed., *Perfect Dragonfly, A Commonplace Book of Poems Celebrating a Decade & a Half of Printing & Publishing at Red Dragonfly Press*, Red Dragonfly Press, 2011, by Linda Aschbrenner  
 Amit Majmudar, *Heaven and Earth*, Story Line Press, 2011, by Zara Raab  
 Linda Back McKay, *The Next Best Thing*, Nodin Press, 2011, by Lou Roach  
 Kim Nelson, *Woman's Evolution*, Finishing Line Press, 2011, by Zara Raab  
 Margot Peters, *Lorine Niedecker, A Poet's Life*, UW Press, 2011, by Linda Aschbrenner  
 Zara Raab, *Swimming the Eel*, David Robert Books, 2011, by Athena Kildegaard  
 Edwin Romond, *Alone with Love Songs*, Grayson Books, 2011, by Caroline Collins  
 Margaret Rozga, *Though I Haven't Been to Baghdad*, Benu Press, 2012, by Chloe Yelena Miller  
 Emily Scudder, *Feeding Time*, Pecan Grove Press, 2011, by Moira Richards  
 Bianca Spriggs, *How Swallowtails Become Dragons*, Accents Publishing, 2011, by Margaret Rozga  
 Sarah Stern, *Another Word for Love*, Finishing Line Press, 2011, by Ellen Miller-Mack  
 Jeanine Stevens, *Caught in Clouds*, Finishing Line Press, 2011, by Zara Raab  
 Matthew Stolte, *D10J11Po* (Visual Poetry), eMTeVisPub #5 & *Don't Cut, WI ProTestPO*, eMTeVisPub #6, 2011, by Lisa Vihos  
 Elizabeth Tornes, *Snowbound*, 2011, by Elmae Passineau  
 Tony Trigilio, *Historic Diary*, BlazeVOX [books], 2011, by Margaret Rozga  
 Lisa Vihos, *A Brief History of Mail*, Pebblebrook Press, 2011, by Richard Swanson  
 Cary Waterman, *Book of Fire*, Nodin Press, 2011, by Kathleen Serley  
 Mishka Zakharin, *The Spleen of Fiery Dragons*, Infinity Publishing, 2010, by Jamie Lynn Morris

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## Unexpected Shiny Things

by Wisconsin Poet Laureate

Bruce Dethlefsen

Sixty-one

monday I crossed off cowboy  
 tuesday fireman  
 wednesday president  
 thursday I couldn't find the list  
 friday my own fishing show  
 saturday catching for the cardinals  
 sunday I took a nap  
 sorry  
 I had to  
 the moons flew by too soon

## 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  
 Rick McMonagle, *Spencer Butte Meditations*, Mountains and Rivers Press, 2011  
 Rosemary Boehm, *Tangents*, Black Leaf, 2011  
 Pepe Oulahan, *It's Just Business* [Music CD], A Bare Bones Production, 2011  
 Tina Chang, *Of Gods & Strangers*, Four Way Books, 2011  
 Margot Peters, *Lorine Niedecker, A Poet's Life*, UW Press, 2011  
 Robin Chapman, *The Eelgrass Meadow*, Tebott Bach, 2011  
 Charles Portolano, *All Eyes on US, A Trilogy of Poetry*, RWG Press, 2007  
 Jean Feraca, *I Hear Voices, A Memoir of Love, Death, and the Radio*, Terrace Books (UW Press), 2011  
 Zara Raab, *Swimming the Eel*, David Robert Books, 2011  
 Edwin Romond, *Alone with Love Songs*, Grayson Books, 2011  
 Rigoberto González, *Black Blossoms*, Four Way Books, 2011  
 Sarah Gorham, *Bad Daughter*, Four Way Books, 2011  
 Alison Stine, *Wait* [Winner of The Brittingham Prize in Poetry], UW Press, 2011  
 Deborah Hauser, *Ennui, From the Diagnostic and Statistical Field Guide of Feminine Disorders*, Finishing Line Press, 2011  
 Bill Hendersson (Ed.), *2012 Pushcart Prize XXXVI, Best of the Small Presses*, Pushcart Press, 2011  
 Sarah Stern, *Another Word for Love*, Finishing Line Press, 2011  
 Tom C. Hunley, *The Poetry Gymnasium: 94 Proven Exercises to Shape Your Best Verse*, McFarland & Co, 2012  
 Jacqueline Jones LaMon, *Last Seen* [Winner of the Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry], UW Press, 2011  
 Claire Kageyama-Ramakrishnan, *Bear, Diamonds and Crane*, Four Way Books, 2011  
 Amit Majmudar, *Heaven and Earth*, Story Line Press, 2011 [Winner of the Donald Justice Prize]  
 Blair Matthews (Poetry) & Bruce Murray (Painting), *Echo*, Parallel Press, 2011  
 Linda Back McKay, *The Next Best Thing*, Nodin Press, 2011  
 Johnathan Wells, *Tricks of Light*, Parallel Press, 2011  
 Elizabeth Tornes, *Snowbound*, 2011  
 Lisa Vihos, *A Brief History of Mail*, Pebblebrook Press, 2011  
 Johnathan Wells, *Train Dance*, Four Way Books, 2011  
 Cary Waterman, *Book of Fire*, Nodin Press, 2011  
 Greg Watson, *What Music Remains*, Nodin Press, 2011  
 Cynthia Zarin, *The Ada Poems*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2010

# Our Expanding *Dramaverse*

by Wendy Vardaman & Greer DuBois

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

So what do we even mean by *verse drama*? A play, or any other piece of theater, written in poetry? Of course, this definition comes with problems, since the definition of neither "theater" nor "poetry" is clear. We often show what we mean by verse drama by mentioning its greatest practitioners: Shakespeare and the other Elizabethan dramatists; Sophocles, Aristophanes, and all Greek and Roman playwrights; and the great majesty of traditional theater, folk theater, and theater before the 18th century. Theater and poetry formed together, through their common roots in music: the earliest poetry was always performed, and the earliest performances were always in verse. If we take the long view, then our period is the exception, with poets writing for the page and playwrights aspiring to naturalistic, you-could-hear-it-on-the-street language.

It's only in the recent past—say the last two- or three-hundred years—that poetry and theater became separate. A quick overview since Shakespeare seems to support the commonplace that verse drama, though continuously written, has declined steadily in quantity and quality since that peak. In the Elizabethan era, playwrights had already begun writing in dramatic prose, often for comedy or low-class characters (Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*, for example, is entirely in prose). By the end of the 18th century, the most popular plays were romantic comedies (written in prose) and sensational melodramas (theater set to music to avoid licensing laws).

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

Few playwrights worked in verse in the early 20th century, but poets rediscovered the form. T.S. Eliot first wrote about this "revival" of verse drama in his essay, "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama" (1921). Eliot, as well as the many poet-playwrights who were his disciples, such as Christopher Fry, assumed that verse drama was a dead form that needed to be re-created from scratch, or at least from something basic, like music hall reviews (a "dangerous suggestion," Eliot says) or light opera. This re-creation would be the task of educated poets, like Eliot himself, who applied what they knew about page poetry to stage poetry. Once they reestablished the form, an individual poet could perfect it—maybe, Eliot suggests in his essay, a Modernist Shakespeare, who would understand both Modernist poetic innovation and popular entertainment. Perhaps inspired by his ambitious ideas of revival, Eliot wrote his own plays, including *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Cocktail Party* (1949), and the fragmentary *Sweeney Agonistes* (1926). Other pro-revival writers joined Eliot, including, in England, Christopher Fry (best known for *The Lady's Not for Burning* (1948)); and in America, Maxwell Anderson (*Winterset*, 1935) and the poet Archibald MacLeish (whose 1958 *J.B.* won a Pulitzer and a Tony Award). In Ireland, where poetic language has always been tolerated in theater more than in the United States or Britain, Yeats wrote poetic dramas at the Abbey Theatre, followed by poet-dramatists like Austin Clarke. At the same time, poets were increasingly called upon to write librettos for operas and musicals: Auden is well-known for his collaborations with Stravinsky and Benjamin Britten, but Richard Wilbur wrote part of Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*. Among critics verse drama was a heavily trafficked topic for the New Critics in particular, though by 1955, the taste for verse drama that Eliot had described in "Poetic Drama" seems to have evaporated. Mainstream productions of verse plays were no longer commercially viable.

Among poets, however, interest in poetic drama continued throughout the 20th century, although its dominant mode shifted away from what Eliot meant by "poetic drama." Closet dramas remained popular among

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

Many more such theaters have existed and continue to be founded, from San Francisco to Chicago to Providence, including the Nuyorican Poets 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 Poetry Theater, founded in 2007 by Joseph Churchwell and Dasan Ahanu in Durham, North Carolina, uses a variation on the name, and incorporates poetry and Spoken Word into theater performances. Poetic 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 Surowiecki for *My Nose and Me*). Many poet-critics, influenced, perhaps, by Eliot, talk about verse drama in terms of revival and being able (or not) to re-create a dead form. Joel Brouwer posted a short

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

*I think we can still agree that verse drama is not well represented in print or on the stage. When did you last go to see a play? When did you last go to see a verse play? When did you last see a verse play by a living writer?*

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

piece on Harriet, the Poetry Foundation’s blog in 2009, in which he pronounced both verse drama and theater dead. (“The Possibility of a Poetic Drama,” poetryfoundation.org.) A parallel post on *The Guardian’s* theater blog (November, 2011), also takes a narrow view of poetry drama and a dim view of its viability. Glyn Maxwell, possibly the most successful traditional verse dramatist said in an interview last year: “I’m aware that ‘verse drama’ barely exists now beyond myself and a couple of other eccentrics, and has a unique burden to bear—the weight of the great ones and the almost total failure of everyone since... All I can do is keep trying to show that verse on stage can make the sound we make now on the street, in the pub, in the bedroom, in Parliament.” (<http://www.cherwell.org/culture/feature/2011/03/03/interview-glyn-maxwell>)

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

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

Would Shakespeare, alive today and writing contemporary verse drama, insist on writing *either* in Elizabethan language *or* using only the tools available to an Elizabethan poet and playwright? We very much doubt it, although the subjects he wrote about then, the sentiments he expressed about many of them, his techniques for constructing a drama and for holding an

audience, and the components of his poetry, his verse drama, are all incredibly vital. But the poetic tools, as well as the dramatic modes and the narrative strategies, available to a 21st century poet are vastly different than those available to a 16th century one. These include, to mention just a handful, free verse, the prose poem, collage, syllabic forms from haiku to Fibonacci to invented, sound poetry, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry, Projectivism, Objectivism, Spoken Word, Hip Hop, polyphony, unreliable narrators, multiple perspectives, the choreopoem, and yes, all the tools also available to Shakespeare—those don’t need to be thrown out just because they are “old,” as the recent work of formalists and playwrights working in blank verse reminds us.

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

The same 2011 AWP conference included some fascinating women’s collaborations between poetry and performance arts—poetry and dance, poetry and theater, music and art and poetry—including a clip from the staging of Patricia Smith’s *Blood Dazzler*. An inquiry to the Women’s Poetry Listserv produced a wealth of leads on women currently working in hybrid poetry/performance forms, from experimental to, well, experimental—jazz operas, choreopoems, one-woman performance pieces (e.g., Anne Carson’s “Lots of Guns: An Oratorio for Five Voices” in *Decreation*; Heather Raffo’s *Nine Parts of Desire*; Ntozake Shange, of course, whose ground-breaking for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf created the choreopoem; Virginia Grise’s recent, award-winning *Blu*; Caridad Svich; Lois Roma-Deeley’s *High Notes*; Wendy Brown-Baez; Karren L. Alenier; Sharon Bridgforth’s *Theatrical Jazz*; and some of the authors who appear in this issue of *VW*). Rather than writing iambic-pentameter verse plays, these women seem more inclined to include a little of this, a little of that, including blank verse, into their poetry drama.

The story among multi-ethnic writers—and there are many—who write poetry drama is, not surprisingly, also complex. Verse plays by well-established African American authors, like Smith (*Blood Dazzler*), Rita Dove (*The Darker Face of the Earth*), Derek Walcott (most recently, *Moon-Child*, a rhyming verse drama), Toni Morrison (*Desdemona*), Yusef Komunyakaa (*Gilgamesh*), are literary and well-crafted, at the same time that they’re intended for performance. We imagine there might also be dynamic verse plays coming from younger fellows of Cave Canem, which supports African-American poets and encourages a deep knowledge of traditional verse forms—Komunyakaa, Dove, and Smith have all been teachers there, and co-

founder Cornelius Eady writes plays as well as poetry. In general these poets seem very invested in creating performable poetry, whether or not they’re writing poetic drama or dramatic poetry, invested in the voices of others and those unable to speak for themselves, and willing and capable of producing work that employs techniques from 16th century poetry alongside those from the 21st. Willing to risk dramatic language.

Dramatic, poetic language is also abundant in Hip Hop and Spoken Word Theater. Holly Bass, a Cave Canem fellow, journalist and performance artist, was the first person to use the term Hip Hop Theater in print in 1999, though the forms originate in 1970s/80s urban youth culture. As a wider art form, Hip Hop is a global movement located in the power of words, community, and social justice. With respect to theatrical performances, Spoken Word and Hip Hop Theater are multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural, with contributions, especially, from African American and Latino artists. Considering these forms only briefly, as represented in anthologies like *Plays from the Boom Box Galaxy* (ed., Kim Euell with Robert Alexander) or *Say Word! Voices from Hip Hop Theater* (ed., Daniel Banks), opens up a range of new language and new approaches to poetry dramas: from the agile mix of rap, rhymed poetry, and remixed/sampled Shakespeare (*Deep Azure*, Derek Boseman), to plays that include prose, DJs, and MCs who rap (Kristoffer Diaz’s *Welcome to Arroyo’s*), to choreopoems and solo performance poetry pieces in the tradition of Shange and others. The amount and use of poetry varies, and the aesthetics are often very different than those of “literary” verse drama, but these are compelling pieces written by well-educated, well-trained poets/performers making deliberate and considered choices. Commercial productions, from Broadway shows to new takes on classic verse, like the Q Brothers’ *Funk It Up About Nothin’* (2011) at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, bring a probably more palatable version of this kind of poetic drama to an older, whiter, wealthier audience, but raise questions about commodification, co-option, and dilution of the form, if it is the same form.

We turn from a description of contemporary verse drama to its purpose: What does drama offer poetry? Do we even need verse drama? What is it about Shakespearian drama—or any good dramatic verse—that is so compelling? Historically, verse drama has existed in situations where drama required portability. In Elizabethan theater, there were no sets, no lights, and only minimal contemporary costumes. They staked everything on the words and the actors. Without spectacular images or effects, what did Shakespeare have that made him one of the most popular writers of his generation? Words. And because there were no extras in his productions—no flashing lights, no explosions—he had to decorate his stories using verse. In doing that he engages

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

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

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

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

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](http://newcriterion.com)), provides a good discussion of the techniques even "lyric" poets with no interest in the stage have borrowed and should continue to borrow from dramatists: character, voice, and dialogue or talk, which more poets would do well to pay more attention to. Maxwell, a poet-playwright, has this to say about what drama offers poetry:

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

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

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

Is "who is writing contemporary (Shakespearean blank) verse drama?" or "why isn't there more (Shakespearean blank) verse drama?" the right question? We don't believe it is. Does that mean

that blank verse is unavailable to contemporary poet-playwrights? A resounding *no!* Metered verse, iambic or not, rhymed or not, is one poetic tool that contemporary poet dramatists would do well to master and to consider using sometimes—either as a way to write an entire drama, or as a way to write particular characters/voices, or as a means to mark a departure from the ordinary or for some other dramatic purpose in a play. The flat language of much contemporary drama (and poetry, for that matter) could benefit from a more eclectic, and riskier, aesthetic. And be one way to differentiate poetry drama from the movies and build an audience for poetry and theater.

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

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.*

Excerpt from

# Guarding Lincoln—A Verse Play in Five Acts

by Amit Majmudar

**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

Besppectacled, 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  
Am Ward Hill Lamon. Friend: always.  
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?  
[Hill 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?  
[Hill 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.

FORBES.  
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.  
Come easy, after Appomattox. 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,  
Uncountried. 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 a 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.

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 (*grinning*).  
Hear, hear.

PARKER.  
"Would you care for a little ale?"

FORBES (*glancing at Burns, shrugging*).  
Sounds good.  
[Exit 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.]

These all are moments I was never there for—  
But God, I can imagine—he's so *close*—  
[Hill takes out a pistol of his own and  
points it at the oblivious Booth. Hill  
looks at the audience.]

You wouldn't mind it, would you, if I change

A detail here? If I indulge my heart  
And down a shotglass full of wish-I-had,  
Wink at the barman,  
Tell him to put it on history's tab?  
[Hill pauses.]

No way to shoot a bullet through time past.  
[Booth begins to whistle and turns to  
enter Ford's Theater. Hill puts his pistol  
away and exits.]

*Scene 4. The Lobby of Ford's Theater. John  
Buckingham, the ticket-taker, reading a book. He  
holds out his hand without looking.*

BUCKINGHAM.  
Ticket please. The play's already started, though.

BOOTH (*tilting up his stovepipe hat*).  
"You don't need a ticket from *me*, do you?"

BUCKINGHAM.  
Why, Mr. Booth! I did not recognize you!

BOOTH.  
You care much for the comedy, Mr. Buckingham?

BUCKINGHAM.  
It's a good one. *Our American Cousin*.  
Been running off and on five years this June.

BOOTH.  
You know it line for line by now, I bet.

BUCKINGHAM.  
Ain't no way could I say those lines like you.

BOOTH.  
So what's your favorite line in the whole thing?

BUCKINGHAM.  
Don't s'pose I could think of one, just like that.

BOOTH.  
I acted in this play, in Richmond once.  
I'll tell you what my favorite line was:  
(*affecting a caricatured, country-bumpkin  
voice*)  
"Well, I guess I know enough to turn you inside  
out, old gal—you sockdologizing old man-trap!"  
[Buckingham bursts out laughing.]

BUCKINGHAM.  
Low comedy, high tragedy, how *do* you do it?  
Now here you are a better Asa Trenchard  
Than Mr. Harry Hawk himself—when just  
Last January, I saw you as Brutus.

BOOTH (*smile fading*).  
I see myself as Brutus this month and ever after.

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?

BOOTH.  
*The Marble Heart*. You know I debuted Roderick  
Before the President himself, in that one.  
That night the fellow opposite me fell  
Into the pit when I lunged at him first  
Earlier than we rehearsed.

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.]

### ***End of Act I.***

## 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

## 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

## 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

## 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

### 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

## 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

Excerpt from

# The Gardener's Wife—a play in free verse

by Charlotte Mandel

**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—pin 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 sits 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, imaginary to the audience. She seems to stiffen and vibrate with each re-start of the chainsaw.*

*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.

EVE  
Amputate, uproot and dig. So ends  
my window world. *(Throws up her hands)*

These keys  
die without the woodpecker tapping rhythm!  
*(Looks towards her husband)* Adam, didn't I have  
equal right to the grove?  
*(She gets up and goes out to the patio speaking  
directly towards him)*  
Didn't I? Didn't I have a right to those trees?

ADAM  
*(speaking to himself as much as to his wife)*  
No flowers—this is to be a meditation garden—  
rocks, water, fish.

EVE  
*(to anyone who will listen)*  
You know how birds get into disputes—those trills  
and chucks of the tongue have to do  
with nesting privilege, pride of place. Adam!  
*(he does not look up)*

Did you see the oriole this morning *(points  
down at a stump)*—  
on the stump of its nesting tree, scolding and  
pecking  
imaginary rivals out of habit. The cardinals stood  
like figures to decorate a flower pot—  
scarlet cock, washed-out pink hen.

ADAM  
The rock border will reflect onto gold and red carp.  
They will appear to be swimming through  
mountains.  
Gazing at goldfish elicits mindfulness towards  
the truth of ambiguity—

EVE  
The oriole's wings were yellow and black.  
*(Sniffing, blinking)*  
The house is full of smoke—you've choked up  
the fireplace  
with fresh-cut pine—resins are oozing and  
dripping onto the grate.  
My eyes are burning.

ADAM  
—to see orange and gold flames underwater.

EVE  
*(looking directly at her husband)*  
You are all that I see.

ADAM  
*(pause—he pays attention to her now)*  
Eve, sometimes I have trouble finding you.

EVE  
You see me as a fixture of this house—  
like the door frame, kitchen wainscoting,  
bench fitted into the bay window.

ADAM  
I built every part of this house with my own hands.  
And I made it to your measure.  
*(He takes a few steps towards her, opens his arms  
and outlines her form with his hands, not quite  
touching)*  
I am always seeing you for the first time.

*(Light fades to dark, bird songs are heard, light of morning  
rises as they continue to stand facing one another. They  
are young, in a sunfilled garden.)*

EVE  
Are you my creator?

ADAM  
If your name is Eve, I think you may be perfect.

EVE  
Are you testing me?

ADAM  
No, I want to taste you.  
*(As he moves to kiss her, she puts her hand between  
their mouths.)*

EVE  
Wait—there is a taste—I know words for this—  
tongue, teeth, lips—I am a cup filled with  
words—*(touching him)*  
barrier bone—pillow breast—  
*(He stops her words quickly to kiss her. Slowly  
they taste the surprise of each other's lips.)*

ADAM  
Salt . . . sweet . . .

EVE  
Sweat—your sweat is cool, then the heat of  
your skin—  
how hard fits to soft—Oh—I think we may  
both be perfect.  
*(They fully embrace, young, ardent, hands and  
lips eager)*

ADAM  
This shady oval of grass was our first bed.

EVE  
The orchard blossoms were falling in their  
first season.

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.  
We pleased him like colorful birds hatched  
inside an aviary —  
open to the blue sky but heads wary under a dome  
of invisible wire. Creator tossed us into play  
like pieces on a board game.

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.  
Why stipple our tongues with alphabet if  
only to spell  
words of congratulation?

EVE  
The letters we spit back spelled HUMAN!

ADAM  
“Banishment—exile”—paper words singed  
by his own lightning.  
Fire ate a road to freedom. We ran with  
outstretched arms—  
*(They gesture acting out their words)*

EVE  
revolving like blades of windmills —

ADAM  
stealing power from the air!  
*(They race off, triumphant, to right. Light darkens, then brightens. LILITH enters downstage, left, looking all about her. She checks out the varieties of plantings ADAM has set.)*

LILITH  
Ah ha—his garden is a scale model of the  
other one.  
That man never had an original thought in  
his head.  
*(Cataloging)* Hibiscus, Pumpkin facing south, to  
the west Blackberry, Lilac Chase—my  
favorite late bloomer,  
food for bees when Thyme turns to seed.  
*(ADAM is seen in the distance, working a far  
corner of the field.)*

EVE'S VOICE  
Adam, is that you?

EVE *(pregnant, near term, comes through the house, stands at the doorway. Her arms reach out with possibility at the sight of another woman in the world, then, in terror, wrap around her belly as though to protect her unborn child.)*  
What are you—sometimes I dream—are  
you real?

LILITH  
Touch me — my name is Lilith. Didn't either  
of your creators ever speak of me?

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  
*(She outlines Lilith's form with her hands,  
not quite touching.)*  
Your form is like mine. You were first.

LILITH  
I am a first draft. You're a revised version, Eve—  
more adaptable to wifeness. 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—  
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  
*(Laughs)* 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)*  
I think we are both perfect.

*(EVE's arms are wrapped around her belly as  
though trying to contain it.)*

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.

*(Out in the field, ADAM swings a heavy pick  
onto a boulder with a loud clang.)*

LILITH  
*(Holding 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.

*(Helps EVE enter 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.)*

LILITH  
Ah now, pain is your river.  
Ah now, pain is the raft.  
Ah now, little one, float—float —  
Ah now, push—

*(“Ab-ab-ab-” a newborn’s cry slices through all  
other sounds. LILITH crosses her arms to hold*

*the infant tightly to her chest for a moment  
before she gives it over to EVE. LILITH  
washes the baby as EVE admires in wonder.  
The baby cries and cries.)*

EVE  
It is a male, isn’t it? *(laughing)* Look,  
it has a tiny erection! *(To her infant, gazing  
into the newborn’s face)*  
Don’t make so much noise, tiny thing,  
please tell me why you’re wailing so.

LILITH  
Hunger—sign of an active future. Open  
your blouse, Eve—  
see—your nipple is leaking—let your baby’s  
lips and tongue taste you.  
*(EVE nurses the infant. LILITH watches.)*  
Forever so, the classic pose.

EVE  
*(Speaking to the infant, absorbed in watching)*  
How utterly, totally helpless you are.  
What is it like to be so helpless?  
I never had to suffer through a childhood.  
*(To LILITH)* Will it be painful to grow into  
a man?

LILITH  
Always.

EVE  
What do I have to do?

LILITH  
He will do it all—he inherits himself.

*(At that moment, ADAM, weary from his day’s  
work in the field, approaches the house. LILITH  
senses his approach and stands up to leave.)*

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.  
*(Bends and kisses EVE on the mouth, then slips  
away through a back door of the house, not the  
direction from which she came.)*

ADAM  
*(astonished and excited)* Eve—let me see!

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

*visit VW Online for audio*

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

## Sharecroppin'

old paperback  
writing my name  
under dad's

—MICHAEL KRIESEL, ANIWA, WI  
*visit VW Online for more work by this author*

## Sunday

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 mast-head 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.

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

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  
*visit VW Online for more work by this author*

## 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  
*visit VW Online for audio by this author*

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 it worked. From him I learned how to recognize great writing:  
It was strong & strange & dangerous to know.  
It was the kind of thing, that once it HAD you, would not let you go.

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* breached 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;  
deep 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,  
not 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—  
after 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 Whalewreck,  
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.

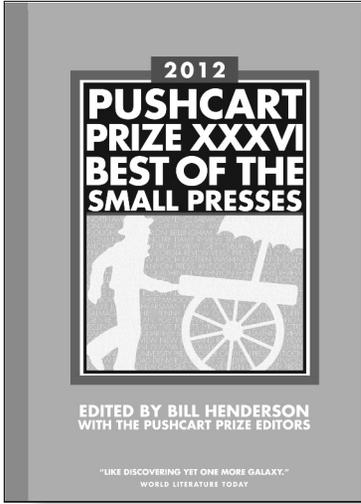
The chorus of voices sings him awake.  
Once a body's broken, it cannot break.  
He licks his lips and wags his muscled tongue.  
Flexes each foot till the warm blood comes.  
Turns from the darkness and moves toward  
the sun.

A step. A shamle. A dead-out run.

"St. Melville" appeared previously in *Christianity & Literature* and in *Moving House*; "St. Lazarus" in *Christian Century* and *Saint Sinatra*.

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# Dramatic Poetry and Fermat's Last Theorem

by Amit Majmudar

I used to think Shakespeare poisoned the soil like a eucalyptus. His leaves, medicinal, leeches 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?

I mean: *All for Love*; or, *The World Well Lost*. *The Borderers*. *Remorse*. *The Cenci*. *Otho the Great*. *Sardanapalus*, *Cain*, *Heaven and Earth*, *Marino Faliero*. *Queen Mary*, *Becket*, *Harold*, *The Cup and the Falcon*.

Which is to imply: John Dryden. William Wordsworth. Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Percy Bysshe Shelley. John Keats. Lord Byron. Alfred Tennyson.

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 furnish'd 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 horologe—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 onstage was considered, in Aeschylus's time, revolutionary.)

Today, the camera presents a relatively massive amount of information to the eye; a gesture or facial expression can be magnified to the size of a theater wall. There is no necessity for language to evoke a physical scene or to express an emotion—we can see for ourselves now, thank you very much. The burden of expression has shifted away from the script. The technology of the screen makes poetry redundant, if not counterproductive. Language has atrophied in drama for the same reason portrait-painting has atrophied in art. To be displaced by a technology is usually a permanent exile.

The only poem written for the screen was written *before* the invention of the motion picture: Goethe's *Faust Part II*, published in 1832, is a dramatic work one hundred and fifty years in advance of the cinematographic techniques required for its presentation. Formally, it is futuristic. But unlike Jules Verne, whose prophecies about submarines and lunar landings came true, Goethe, in his last crowning work, was the prophet of a dramatic art that was not to be. His *Faust Part II* was the first and last screenpoem.

The First Law of Succession is that there are no successors. There's a rider to that law. *Until someone succeeds.*

I haven't written this to say the obvious—*dramatic verse is dead*—or to explain the obvious obviously—*because no one likes verse dramas anymore.*

The interesting thing is, verse drama has died before. It flourishes randomly and briefly. The lasting Greek verse plays were written over a span of two generations; so were the lasting Elizabethan ones. In both cases, that curious explosion was followed by a long reign of comedies of manners and melodrama. Prose reasserted itself in drama, in both cases. Ancient Greek comedy, and eventually Roman comedy, developed from the example of Menander, not that of Aristophanes; similarly our situational comedies are closer, in form and substance, to Wycherly and Sheridan than they are to *Measure for Measure*.

This holds in more than one context: Racine and Corneille were contemporaries in France, just as Calderon and Lope de Vega were in Spain. Competition—from the ancient Dionysia, to the different companies of players in Shakespeare's time, to the rival studios of Hollywood—seems to play a role here. It's not an accident that great dramatists, unlike great poets, come in twos and threes; the example of a Marlowe drives a Shakespeare.

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. ("Lyric" as distinguished from "dramatic" and "narrative" poetry, according to the traditional division; in practice, as we all know, these categories overlap.) The poets' aversion to dramatic writing is matched by an aversion to poetry on the part of practicing screenwriters and playwrights—and, ahem, moviegoers and theatergoers.

So no, things don't look good for the return of verse drama. (I can tell you're surprised by *that* conclusion.) But is it impossible?

Verse drama, let us recall, withered long before the advent of film and television. I drew an analogy earlier between portrait-painting and dramatic verse; but it wasn't totally accurate. We can observe a sharp decline in portraiture, and realism in European art generally, that is coeval with the development and dissemination of photography. The centuries match. But with dramatic poetry, that's not the case. Technology may well have salted the earth. But we don't know that.

As for poets and playwrights, their ideas about their art tend to change rapidly. There are no *idees fixes* when it comes to aesthetics. One generation likes Tennyson, the next likes Eliot, the one after that, Plath. The screen, meanwhile, has no allegiances at all, which is another way of saying its only allegiance is to whatever works. So the burden is, as it has always been, on the writer—it's up to the writer to *make it work*. To make it work for the people in the seats and the critic in his or her head. To create something dramatic—as in *I have 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 *is*? 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* 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?

He was just standing in the middle of the yard.

He didn't move, just stood there like a statue.

He had one of those painful looking penises.

Why do their penises get red like that?

Like bloody. Maybe we should get a dog.

Ruff. Ruff. Ruff. Ruff.

*(More barking. She turns to him, pleased.)*

Do you hear that?

CLIP

Are you talking to me?

*(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.)*

*I need a love to keep me happy.*

*I need a love to keep me happy.*

*Baby. Baby, keep me happy.*

*Baby. Baby, keep me happy.*

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 swim,

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?

PAM  
Yesterday I saw this crazy thing.  
I was sitting by the park, last night, you know,  
just people watching, on a bench—it's dusk—  
when this little kid goes by, this boy. He's three  
or four, just sitting in his father's arms.  
And he's saying to his father, loud enough  
so everyone can hear, "I'll burn it down.  
I'm going to burn it down! If we go home,  
I'm going to burn it down." And the poor father  
is all tensed up and anxious, walking quickly  
and trying not to let it get to him.  
"I'm going to burn it down. If we go home,  
I'm going to burn it down." Can you imagine?  
The kid was talking about his own apartment!  
I mean, I can imagine. I think I know  
just how he feels. But of course he doesn't know  
what he's saying. I'm not saying that I want  
to burn down the apartment. Hahahaha!  
Though that would save us having to paint  
the place.

No, he just knows that he is really mad.  
And the father knows he isn't really mad,  
he's hungry because he hasn't eaten anything  
or sick or tired or up late past his bedtime.  
He's screaming, but it's really something else  
that's bothering him, whatever it is, probably  
nothing.

But what?, I kept wondering. What's  
bothering you?

*(CLIP has put his headphones back in.)*

I need to tell you something:

I'm leaving you. I've decided I have to leave.

*(He doesn't hear her. She goes over to him  
and sits down.)*

Can you stop listening for a minute, Charles?  
I need to tell you something. Can you listen  
for just a minute? Just only for a second.

CLIP  
Okay. I'm listening.

PAM  
I think I may be having a nervous breakdown.

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.

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.

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 was 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.

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.

CLIP  
Pam, you gotta take it easy . . .

PAM  
Relax? Don't freaking tell me to relax!  
I mean, you're right. I do need to relax.  
I'm going crazy. Am I completely crazed?

CLIP  
No. God no, Pammy. That guy was a jerk.

PAM  
Don't you see that I was being the jerk.  
What's happening to me? That was my fault.

CLIP  
No, it wasn't.

PAM  
Yes, it was. It was.

CLIP  
He revs his car at people in the street.  
He should lose his license. What did the cops say?

PAM  
They never came. I don't think he ever called them.

CLIP  
Of course. Because he knew that he was wrong.

PAM  
But I couldn't let it go. Because I was right.  
But what does being right entitle you to?  
Nothing.  
What does being on the right side get you?  
You can do everything exactly by the book,  
go to the right schools, marry the right people.  
What's wrong with that? Why isn't that enough?

CLIP  
What's not enough?

PAM  
Never mind. I'm sorry. Look, I'm tired.  
Go back to listening. I'm okay now.

CLIP  
Okay. Forget that guy. It's not your fault.

PAM  
I know. Okay. I'm fine. I feel much better.

CLIP  
You want to go someplace for dinner later?

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.)*

---

## 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.

—WILLIAM FORD, IOWA CITY, IA

## 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

## 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  
*visit VW Online for audio by this author*

## 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  
*visit VW Online for audio by this author*

## 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

# 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, unspckled  
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 think 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—nothing—it now seems,  
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 Nestlé's 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](http://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

*(Blankly.)*

I guess I probably should write a note.

*(CURT rummages 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, then searches the room in a futile effort.*

*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 sits back down to the note.)*

Who do I even write this to? "Dear..."

*(Writing.)*

...Friend."

*(He frowns, pulls the paper off the notepad, then throws it in the trash. He writes again.)*

"To Whom It May Concern." No, that's no good.

*(He rips off that page, too. He rolls his eyes and shrugs.)*

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?

*(This clearly bothers him. He wrestles with himself, keeps looking over at the bookshelf, then finally goes over to get the dictionary.*

*He quickly finds the word.)*

U-E.

*(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.)*

"D-E-A-R-C-R-U-E-L World."

*(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.)*

DOUG

*(Not looking happy.)*

Hey, Curt. You got some time to talk with me?

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. 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 throws the piece of paper into the  
desk drawer and shuts it in a hurry.)*  
Don’t tell me you were copying that down!

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

DOUG  
You must be kidding me!  
I told you this in confidence, okay?  
*(Crossing to the desk to open it.)*  
Give me that paper!

CURT  
No! You stay away!  
*(CURT tries to block the desk drawer from  
DOUG as he sits. DOUG struggles to get  
around him, then succeeds in doing so by  
pushing away the rolling chair with CURT  
still in it. He flings open the desk drawer  
and pulls out the piece of paper.)*

DOUG  
*(Reading.)*  
“You’re probably wondering how it came to this.  
I wish that I could offer better reasons.”  
*(Holding up the paper to CURT.)*  
I knew it! You were copying my note!  
*(He gasps, seeing the gun and pulling it out*

*of the drawer.)*  
You’d better tell me why you have a gun.

CURT  
I couldn’t say.  
*(DOUG takes a deep breath, then holds  
the gun up to his head. CURT jumps out  
of his chair and holds up his hands.)*  
Doug, no! Don’t pull that trigger!

DOUG  
You give me one good reason why I shouldn’t.

CURT  
Because I only have one bullet left.  
*(Pause.)*  
I need it.

DOUG  
What?

CURT  
I need that one for me.

DOUG  
*(Lowering the gun.)*  
You mean to tell me you were going...

CURT  
Yes.

DOUG  
That’s such a stupid thing to even think!

CURT  
This coming from a guy about to do it.

DOUG  
You have to understand, it’s not the same.

CURT  
Don’t tell me that. I always mess things up.  
Just now, for instance, I ran over a cat.

DOUG  
Nobody cares. It’s just a stupid cat.  
I’m horrible. I cheated on my girlfriend.

CURT  
My life is worse!

DOUG  
No, mine is more screwed up!  
*(DOUG raises the gun back up to his head,  
but not before CURT dives toward him and  
grabs his arm. They both wrestle over the  
gun, slamming into the desk, then rolling  
around on the ground.)*

CURT  
*(As they wrestle.)*  
Let go! You’ve got so much to live for, Doug!

DOUG  
*(As they wrestle.)*  
You’ve got way more than me. Give me that gun!

*(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  
*(O.S.)*  
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  
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?

CURT  
Wait, Andrea, I think you should calm down.  
*(ANDREA points the gun at him.)*

DOUG  
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.)*

CURT  
I ran over your cat. It should be me!  
*(She points the gun at CURT again.)*

DOUG  
I think it's pretty clear I wronged you more.

CURT  
Your issue here is obviously with me.

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

CURT  
Your cat deserved it! Cats deserve to die!  
*(ANDREA keeps pointing the gun back and forth, unable to decide. She lowers the gun.)*

ANDREA  
You two are sick.  
*(ANDREA exits, taking the gun with her.)*

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

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

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

CURT  
Right.  
*(DOUG rips his note into pieces. CURT does the same with the copied note on his desk.)*

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

CURT  
I hear you, Doug.

DOUG  
We've got too much to live for.

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

*(End of play.)*

## My Dad Tries to Be Kind to Me After My Suicide Attempt

Remember when we stared  
into the sun when you were twelve  
and we both couldn't see  
for—what was it—ten minutes?  
There's an eclipse happening  
next week.

—Ron Riecki, Negaunee, MI  
*visit VW Online for more work by this author*

## I Hear My Calling Calling

Often I have heard it echoing in the canyons  
in the back of my head but this morning  
I've turned toward it cupping my ears.  
It calls me out, "This, this you have been doing,  
is not it,  
not it at all,  
don't you hear me  
I am your calling, calling."

I try to call back, "Hello, I hear you,"  
but it's like this dream I've had I open  
my mouth but no words come out  
I'm yelling the words are rattling  
in the front yard of my head  
"What is it  
what is it you want  
don't you hear me  
calling, tell me, tell me!"  
I think I hear an answer, "Remember,"  
I strain to hear  
what is it  
what is it I must remember  
Is it "Don't forget the cinnamon!"  
Is that what you're calling,  
the sins of men, the sentiment,  
mother, is it you calling?"

—R. VIRGIL ELLIS, CAMBRIDGE, WI

## Man of Few Words

growing up  
I don't recall  
my father and I  
having a lot of conversations  
a man of few words  
and he was always working  
either at his job  
or repairing something around the house  
and we really didn't have  
very much in common  
it was my older brother  
who shared his love  
for working on cars  
with my father  
I liked reading books  
and listening to music  
sitting in my room writing stories  
based on the giant-monster movies I'd seen  
my father didn't really have any hobbies  
none that I can remember anyway  
but he was good with his hands  
and could fix just about anything  
when I was older  
we started talking a lot more  
sitting out in the backyard  
under the shade from the apple trees  
by then my father was blind  
and had trouble walking  
my brother was dead  
killed years before  
in an automobile accident  
during his final years  
I remember my father  
having to go to dialysis  
three days a week  
and how he was restricted  
on how much he could drink  
and I knew I wasn't suppose to  
but I'd give him water  
whenever he asked me for it  
by tapping his glass on the table  
when my mother was out of the room

—JAMES BABBS, STANFORD, IL

## 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 time-keeper, 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

## 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.

—PHILIP VENZKE, STEVENS POINT, WI

## 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 Markowicz, 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  
*visit VW Online for more work by this author*

# 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.

“Life isn't fair,”

VOICE TWO

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

VOICE ONE

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

Synecdoche: 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 ONE

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 the skeptic, the position is never comfortable; prayer

seems tempting on a rainy day.

VOICE ONE

To pray implies belief—though what to make of the ritual of prayer before the exam—imagine hope; don't expect god to bubble the scantron.

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.

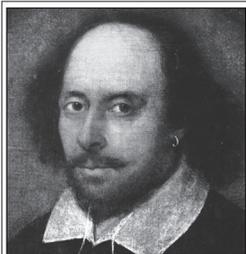
For every Coliseum, a catacomb;  
for every grand cathedral, a graveyard.

VOICE TWO

For every grave ill, an antidote.

VOICE ONE

For every grave ill, an anecdote.



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## 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 tinsel 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 unforgettably

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

## It Ends Now

*There's beauty in the breakdown.*—Frou Frou

A thousand April starlings let go dusk oaks  
all at once. The sky's expression, half  
brutal, half musing. *Oaks. Expression.*  
And the re-workings: Begging them to come  
to you, to sit still. They half listen, shift. *Who*  
*says "dusk"?* *Besides, you look like I need*  
*a drink*—cold slide of lime, juniper. Pack,  
unpack. Because of memory's death-grip. Because  
memory lets things slide: that book about Calvary,  
that girl with blue wings tattooed on her hidden  
shoulders. *You can make sense of it, with some*  
*rules. 'I before E, 'Red sky at night'—*  
*that sort of thing.* Make sense of spring  
dawdling, of—the color of the sky? the great  
cloud that starlings form, at dusk, as oaks  
let them go? Like that? *Not those*  
*rules: but you can make sense.* Stack,  
collapse. The brick-pile of words. The bone-  
pile of words: *Brinkmanship. Spring.*  
Giving back. No: giving in. The phrase,  
weighed. The poem, hell's handbasket.  
Hell's taxonomy: *kingdom, phylum, class...*  
But you're making a hash of it. A dog's  
breakfast of it. And that entropic  
slipping. A hill of piss. The Christ Child,  
appearing to Augustine, and trying  
to fill with the sea a hole He'd dug in  
the sand. The poem, singing *Love likes no laws*  
*like his own.* The poem, whinging in  
jargon. In breaking rules: *Who said you*  
*could—? Who told you to—? Period.*

—JAMES SCANNELL McCORMICK, ROCHESTER, MN

## 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 si-  
lenced 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-curved 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  
te-dum

---

\*bobbyprevite.com

—STEPHEN BETT, VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA

# Contributors' Notes

**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 groupies chasing them wherever they go. His books are available from [www.xlibris.com](http://www.xlibris.com), [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com), & [www.interioroisepress.com](http://www.interioroisepress.com).

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

**Guy R. Beining** has had six poetry books and 25 chapbooks published over the years, and appeared in seven anthologies. He is in the *Contemporary Authors Autobiography* series, Vol. 30, 1998 (Gale Research). He is also in the *Dictionary of the Avant Gardes*, 2nd Ed., 2000. Recent publications include *chain*, *epiphany*, *perspective* (Germany), *New Orleans Review*, and *The New Review of Literature*.

**Michael Belongie**, a past president of the WFOP and coditor of the 2007 *Wisconsin Poets' Calendar* has five published collections of poems; his most recent collection, *Now Is All We Have*, was co-exhibited with selected oils and watercolors of notable nature and wildlife artist, Jonathan Wilde in 2010.

**Carol Berg's** poems are forthcoming or in *Artifice*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, *qarrtsiluni*, *blossombones*, and elsewhere. Two chapbooks, *Ophelia Unraveling* (dancing girl press), and *Small Portrait and the Woman Holding A Flood In Her Mouth* (Binge Press), are forthcoming. Her website is [carolbergpoetry.com/wordpress/](http://carolbergpoetry.com/wordpress/).

**Stephen Bett's** latest book of poetry is *Re-Positioning* (Ekstasis Editions, 2011). A thirteenth book is due to come out: *Fits and Starts: New & Selected Poems* (Salmon Poetry, Ireland, 2012). His work has also appeared widely in Canada, the U.S., England, Australia, New Zealand, and Finland, as well as in three anthologies and on radio. These poems are forthcoming in *Sound Off: a book of jazz*, Thisledown Press, 2013. Visit [stephenbett.com](http://stephenbett.com).

**Lorna Knowles Blake's** 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 92nd Street Y and serves on the editorial board of Barrow Street. She lives in Cape Cod, New Orleans, and New York City.

**Caroline Collins** is an assistant professor of English at Quincy University. Her poems have appeared in such places as *Fox Cry Review*, *Wisconsin People and Ideas*, and *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies*. Her chapbook *Presences* is forthcoming from Parallel Press.

**Elizabeth Cook** was born and raised in Madison, WI and cannot contemplate living in any other state. She went to Carroll College in Waukesha, WI, where she discovered her love of poetry. She especially enjoys writing about the beautiful Wisconsin landscape.

**Bruce Dehlfesen** plays bass and sings in the musical (he hopes) duo *Obvious Dog*, the name taken from Wisconsin Poet Laureate Marilyn Taylor's description of a poem "beyond resuscitation." His most recent collection is *Unexpected Shiny Things* (Cowfeather Press, 2011).

**Carol Dorf's** poems have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies. She has taught in a variety of venues, including a science museum, 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 (poorly) and directs (nearly as badly) for his local community theatre.

**Greer DuBois** 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 Mead Public Library Poetry Circle. His series of essays in response to prompts from *Creative Writing Now* appear online at [creative-writing-now.com/language-poetry.html](http://creative-writing-now.com/language-poetry.html).

**R. Virgil (Ron) Ellis** lives near Cambridge, Wisconsin. He is an Emeritus Professor who taught writing, literature, and media at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. For an exploration of his work see [www.poetrvellis.com](http://www.poetrvellis.com).

**Anna M. Evans** is the Editor of the *Raintown Review* and currently teaches poetry at West Windsor Art Center. Her chapbooks *Swimming* and *Selected Sonnets* are available from Maverick Duck Press. She has visited Michigan and Illinois, which she believes are near Wisconsin.

**William Ford** has two books, *The Graveyard Picnic* (Mid-America Press, 2002) and *Past Present Imperfect* (Turning Point, 2006). Two chapbooks, *Allen & Ellen* and *Descending with Miles*, 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 hit the high spots of Soldiers Grove.

**Carol Lynn Stevenson Grellas** is a 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 descendent of Robert Louis Stevenson.

**David Gross** lives in the foothills of the Illinois Ozarks. His work has been included in numerous literary and small-press journals and in four anthologies. He is the author of four chapbooks of poetry. The most recent, *Pilgrimage*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2009.

**Jerry Hauser** has published 17 chapbooks in recent years and has published many more poems in journals of poetry and literature over a 25-year period. Currently he is finishing a book of poems under the title of *A Stir of Seasons*.

**Karla Huston** is the author of six chapbooks of poetry, most recently, *An Inventory of Lost Things* (Centennial Press, 2009). A broadside is forthcoming from *Page 5*. Her poems, reviews, and interviews have been published widely. Her poem "Theory of Lipstick," originally published in *Verse Wisconsin* #101, was awarded a Pushcart Prize.

**Lawrence Kessenich** grew up in Wisconsin and has a large extended family there. His poetry has been published in magazines such as *Poetry Ireland*, *Cream City Review*, and *Atlanta Review*. His poem "Angelus" won the Stokestown International Poetry Prize in Ireland. His essay about his Waunakee-bred father was published in the anthology *This I Believe: On Love*. His play *Ronnie's Charger*, set in Wisconsin, won the People's Choice Award in a national competition.

**Don Kimball** is the author of two chapbooks, *Journal of a Flatlander* (Finishing Line Press, 2009) and *Skipping Stones* (Pudding House Publications, 2008). His poetry has appeared in *The Formalist*, *The Lyric*, *The Blue Unicorn*, and various other journals and anthologies, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

**Michael Kriesel's** poems have appeared in *North American Review*, *The Progressive*, and *Rattle*. He's written reviews for *Small Press Review* and *Library Journal*, and he has won both the WFOP Muse Prize and the Lorine Niedecker Award from the Council for Wisconsin Writers. He's been nominated for nine Pushcart Prizes. Books include *Chasing Saturday Night* (Marsh River Editions); *Feeding My Heart To The Wind* and *Moths Mail The House* (sunnyoutside press).

**Barbara Lightner** is a 73-year old shameless agitator, retired. She grew up in rural Tennessee among sharecroppers and cotton magnates, hard scrabble farmers and aristocrats. Writing poetry in law school became her escape from the intolerable burden of injustice by law. Her poetry has appeared in *Verse Wisconsin*, *Poesia*, *The Table Rock Review*, *New Verse News*, *Occupy Poetry*, and the anthologies *Letters to the World* and *So You Want to be a Memoirist*. *The*

*Wisconsin People & Ideas*/Wisconsin Book Festival 2012 Poetry Contest awarded her both a third place and an honorable mention for two of her poems.

**Emilie Lindemann** lives in Manitowoc County with her dairy-farmer husband. Her chapbook, *Dear Minimum Wage Employee*, was recently released from Dancing Girl Press. Emilie holds a PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and teaches at Silver Lake College.

Presently **Sandra Lindow** is intrepid enough to attempt teaching English language learners to use the Unreal Conditional: If she had not been shoveling snow Feb. 29, she would not have broken her ankle.

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

**Charlotte Mandel** is winner of the 2012 New Jersey Poets Prize. She has published seven books of poetry, the most recent, *Rock Vein Sky* from Midmarch Arts Press. Other titles include two poem-novellas of feminist biblical re-vision—*The Life of Mary* and *The Marriages of Jacob*. An independent scholar, she has published essays on the role of cinema in the life and work of poet H.D. She recently retired from teaching poetry writing at Barnard College Center for Research on Women.

**James Scannell McCormick** holds a doctorate in creative writing-poetry from Western Michigan University. His works have appeared in *CutBank*, *The Lucid Stone*, *SLANT*, *Rattapallax*, and most recently in *Unsplendid*. He's been nominated twice for a Pushcart Prize. He currently lives and teaches in Rochester, Minnesota.

**James B. Nicola** has had over two hundred poems appear in a score of publications including *Tar River*, *The Texas Review*, *The Lyric*, and *Nimrod*. A stage director by profession, his book *Playing the Audience* won a CHOICE 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*.

**Angela Alaimo O'Donnell** teaches and is associate director of Fordham University's Curran Center for American Catholic Studies. She wrote and performed *Melvilleiana* at the Metropolitan Theatre in New York's East Village as part of a festival of plays devoted to Herman Melville's novels. Her most recent book, *Saint Sinatra & Other Poems* (2011), has been nominated for the Arlin G. Meyer Prize in Imaginative Writing. A finalist for the Foley Poetry Award and the Mulberry Poets Award, she has been nominated for Pushcart and Best of the Web prizes.

**Monica Raymond** is a playwright and poet, and her work has been recognized by the Massachusetts Cultural Council in both fields. Her play *The Owl Girl*, a parable about Israel/Palestine, won the Peacewriting Award, the Castillo Theater prize in political playwrighting, and a Clauder Competition Gold Medal. *A to Z* won the 2011 Ruby Lloyd Apsay Award for plays about race. She has been a MacDowell Colony Fellow and a Jerome Fellow at the Playwrights' Center, and has taught writing and interdisciplinary arts at Harvard, CUNY, and the Boston Museum School. She works with CASA (Creative Action and Subversive Arts) at Occupy Boston, and is in her twelfth year of trying to live a carbon neutral life in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

**Ron Riecki's** teeth hurt and he can't wait until he gets health insurance again. He's also proud to have been in *Verse Wisconsin* previously. (And more people should listen to *The Mummies!*)

**Jenna Rindo's** work has recently appeared in *Crab Orchard Review* and is forthcoming in *Calyx*, *Crab Creek Review*, and *Blood and Thunder: Musings on the Art of Medicine*. She lives in rural Wisconsin with her family, and small flocks of Shetland sheep and Rhode Island Red hens. She teaches English to Hmong, Kurdish, Vietnamese and Spanish students.

**Lou Roach**, former social worker and psychotherapist, lives in Poyette. Her poems have appeared in a number of small press publications, including *Main St. Rag*, *Free Verse* and others. She has written two books of poetry, *A Different Muse* and *For Now*. She continues to do freelance writing, although poetry is her favorite thing to do.

**G. A. Sandon** is 62. His wife, children, and grandchildren are the most important part of his life. He lives with his wife on five acres in northeast WI. Chickens, geese, egrets, orioles, and owls keep him tuned in. He writes when he can.

**Terry Savoie** has been published in more than a hundred and fifty literary journals, anthologies and small press publications, including *Poetry*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The North American Review*.

**Robert Schuler** has been trying to write for fifty years. His fifteenth collection of poems, *The Book of Jeweled Visions*, has recently been published by Tom Montag's MWPH Books, PO Box 8, Fairwater, WI 53931. Price: \$12.50 plus \$1.50 postage.

**Jo Simons** 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 piano teacher and Music Together teacher. She began writing poetry very recently as her vital 94-year-old father began to decline.

**Thomas R. Smith** lives in River Falls, Wisconsin, and is a Master Track instructor in poetry at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis. His most recent collections are *Kinnickinnic* (Parallel Press) and a new book, *The Foot of the Rainbow*, now available from Red Dragonfly Press. He posts blogs and poems on his website at [www.thomasrsmithpoet.com](http://www.thomasrsmithpoet.com).

**Autumn Stephens** is the author of the *Wild Women* series of women's history and humor, and the editor of two anthologies of personal essays, *Roar Softly* and *Carry a Great Lipstick* and *The Secret Lives of Lawfully Wed Wives*. She has written for *The New York Times*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and many other publications. She is co-editor of *The East Bay Monthly* and conducts expressive writing workshops for people living with cancer.

**Jeanine Stevens** was raised in Indiana. Her mother was born and raised in Wisconsin. Her poems have appeared in *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Tipton Poetry Review* and *Pearl*, among others. Her collection, *Sailing on Milkweed*, includes the poem, "Milwaukee," and will be published by Cherry Grove Collections.

**Nancy Takacs** lives in Wellington, Utah, and in Bayfield, Wisconsin. Her third book of poetry, *Juniper*, was recently published by Limberlost Press. She is the recipient of first-place poetry awards in the Utah Arts Council's Original Writing Contest and the WFOP Triad Contest. A former wilderness studies instructor and creative writing professor, she has done poetry workshops in prisons, schools, and senior citizen centers for the past decade.

**Wendy Vardaman**, [wendyvardaman.com](http://wendyvardaman.com), is co-editor of *Verse Wisconsin* and Cowfeather Press, and Poet Laurete (with Sarah Busse) of Madison. She works for The Young Shakespeare Players and likes to watch, and write poetry about, performance.

**Philip Venzke** grew up on a dairy farm near Colby, Wisconsin (where Colby Cheese was invented). A fervent zymurgist, his fermentations take many forms. His most recent poems have appeared in *Echoes*, *Sheephead Review*, *Illumen*, and *Right Hand Pointing*.

**David Yezzi's** latest book of poems is *Azores*, a *Slate* magazine best book of the year. He is editor of *The Swallow Anthology of New American Poets* and executive editor of *The New Criterion*. His verse plays *On the Rocks* and *Dirty Dan and Other Travesties* were produced by Verse Theater Manhattan at the Bowery Poetry Club in New York. He is currently writing a biography of the poet Anthony Hecht for St. Martin's Press.



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