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FEATURES

COMMUNITY INCLUSIVE: A POETICS TO MOVE US FORWARD  
BY MARGARET ROZGA

A CONVERSATION WITH FRANK X WALKER  
CX Dillhunt & Drew Dillhunt

AT THE KITCHEN TABLE: SHOSHAUNA SHY TALKS WITH  
MARK KRAUSHAAR
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Editors’ Notes

Maybe most of you know that women's collections of poetry, while they might see the light of day more easily than in the past, get reviewed less frequently when published, and, when reviewed, often by women, appear in less prominent/prestigious venues than men's books. If you haven't heard of Vida, an organization founded to support women's writing, you can learn about it at vidaweb.org. One of the most important contributions Vida has made for the last several years running is “The Count,” which tracks statistics on male and female writers, reviewers, and books reviewed in high end publications. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the cards are stacked overwhelmingly in favor of men at these places—The Atlantic Monthly, The New Yorker, The New York Times Book Review, Poetry, Paris Review, The Nation, etc. To hear some of their editors talk, you’d think women didn’t write much at all, especially not literary criticism.

So here are some facts about VW’s book reviews, which counter the idea that women don’t review or write criticism. For issues 105-109 (April, 2011-July, 2012) we published 122 reviews (that’s a lot of books reviewed, by the way). Of that total, 63—just over 50%—were books by women, which certainly bucks the trends documented by Vida. Maybe it takes women editors to publish reviews of women's books? Also counter to Vida’s trends is the split in VW between male/female among reviewers, who are overwhelmingly women. In a typical issue we publish 17-18 reviewers, only 2 or 3 of whom are men. We’re delighted to publish reviews by women, but we’re concerned about what that imbalance suggests and why it exists. Where are the male reviewers? It’s not because our poetry community is more female. The balance of poets who submit and publish in VW hovers around 50/50. It is because the men who write reviews—and there are plenty among our published poets who do—reach higher to publish them? Is it a compensation issue? At higher end venues, reviewers tend to get paid. At VW (and others like us), they do not. Is it the case that men don't review unless compensated? At Rattle (which, like VW, also pays reviewers one print copy and runs reviews online), there’s a healthy mix of women/men reviewers and books reviewed, but it’s a more prestigious venue than VW and, perhaps not coincidentally, has a male editor.

No one that we know of is keeping a comparable “count” of reviews about and by writers of color. Our own record on representing a wider diversity of authors is not what we would like it to be. Of those 122 reviews, 11 books were written by non-white authors. We’d very much like to include a broader range of reviews about and by African American, Latina/o, Native, and Asian American authors, and we welcome those reviews from all of you. Besides helping to create a more open, welcoming space for all poets, wider knowledge will, we believe, benefit all of us as artists and individuals.

We both review for VW and sometimes elsewhere. Besides providing a service to other poets, reviews help us think about a book and learn from it. Your work becomes a window into my work and into poetry. Books come to VW from poets and publishers around the U.S., not just in Wisconsin. You can review someone whose work you’ve followed for years or never heard of. We welcome reviews of “Books Received,” as well as others. Publishers will often send a review copy if specifically requested. Writing reviews is one of the easiest ways to support other poets, while improving our own poetic craft. Creating a venue that other poets and publishers know as a reliable source of thoughtful criticism is also, we believe, one more way to raise the profile of Wisconsin’s poets. We invite all of our readers and poets to review. We’d especially like to see more of the men we publish writing reviews, and we invite all of you to read and review a greater diversity of authors. We’re happy to suggest a book or author from our list, if you would like to review but don’t know where to start.

Contact us: editors@versewisconsin.org.

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Books Received January-April 2012
Publisher & author links available online

Mark Belair, Walk With Me, Parallel Press, 2012
David Blackey, Odeza, 2011
Jim Chapson, Sobol, Arlen House, 2011
Brendan Constantine, Calamity Joe, Red Hen Press, 2012
Maryann Corbett, Breath Control, David Robert Books, 2012
Fabu, In Our Own Tongues, University of Nairobi Press, 2011
Adam Feli, I am Not a Pioneer, H_NGM_N Books 2011
Barbara Gregorich, Jack and Larry, Philbar Books [available through Amazon], 2012
Lowell Jaeger (ed.), New Poets of the American West, Many Voices Press, 2010
Lowell Jaeger, W. Main Street Rag, 2010
Georgia Jones-Davis, Blue Poodle, Finishing Line Press, 2012
Athena Kildegaard, Bodies of Light, Red Dragonfly, 2011
Athena Kildegaard, Cloves & Honey, Notin Press, 2011
Mark Kraushaar, The Uncertainty Principle

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Charles Portolano, The little, lingering, white, lies we allow ourselves to live with, as Is Arts Press, by Steven C. Levi
Elizabeth Savage, Grammar, Furniture Press, 2012, by Sherry Chidester
Review-Essay by Wendy Vardaman on books by
Robin Chapman, the egret's meadow; Tobet Bach, 2011
Fabu, In Our Own Tongues, University of Nairobi Press, 2011
Nikky Finney, Head Off & Split, Northwestern University Press, 2011
Matthea Harvey, Of Lamps, paintings by Amy Jean Porter, McSweeney's Books, 2011
Karla Huston & Cathryn Cofell, Split Personality, sunnyoutside press, 2011
Amy King, I Want to Make You Safe, Litmus Books, 2011
Julie L. Moore, Slipping Out of Bloom, 2010
Jennifer Tamayo, Red Missed Aches Read Missed Ache Read Mistakes Read Mistakes, Switchback Books, 2011
Lesley Wheeler, Heterotopia, Barrow Street Press, 2010

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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.

Books Received May-August 2012
Publisher & author links available online

Charles Bane, Jr., The Chapbook, Carbside Splendor, 2011
Robert Cooperman, The Lily of the West, Wind Publications, 2012
Robert Cooperman, Little Timothy in Heaven, March Street Press, 2011
Paola Corso, Once I Was Told the Air Was Not For Breathing, Parallel Press, 2012
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Nick Demske, Sheerly Deeply Deer, Strange Cage, 2012
Franki Elliott, Piano Rats, Carbside Splendor, 2011
Chris Emery, The Departure, Salt, 2012
Dana Gioia, Pity the Beautiful, Graywolf Press, 2012
Allert Goldbath, Everyday People, Graywolf Press, 2012
Natalie Handal, Poet in Andalucia, University of Paris, 2012
George Held, After Shakespeare: Selected Sonnets, Cervena Varca Press, 2011
Karla Huston & Cathryn Cofell, Split Personality, sunnyoutside, 2011
David W. Landrum, The Impossibility of Epithalamium, White Violet Press, 2011
Carol Levin, Stunned by the Velocity, Pecan Grove Press, 2012
Micah Ling, Settlement, Sunnyoutside, 2012
Leslie Adrienne Miller, T, Graywolf Press, 2012
Tom Montag, That Woman, Red Rite Press, 2012
James Pollock, Sailing to Babylon, Able Muse Press, 2012
Jo Sarotti, Moth Desert, Graywolf Press, 2012
Chelsea Tadevyches, Headisiagram, Plumbers Press, 2012
Saad Youssef, Nostalgia, My Enemy (trans. Sinan Antoon and Peter Money), Graywolf Press, 2012

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
Community Inclusive: A Poetics to Move Us Forward

by Margaret Rozga

When I visited the Zora Neale Hurston Museum in Eatonville, Florida, several years ago, I could only imagine what Eatonville might have looked like shortly after the Civil War, at the time of its founding as the first African American town in the United States. For Harlem Renaissance writer and anthropologist Hurston, Eatonville was a “city of five lakes, three croquet courts, three hundred brown skins, three hundred good swimmers, plenty guavas, two schools, and no jail-house” (qtd. in Trubek). It was, according to writer Anne Trubek, a place where “black people lived unseen and unexamined by white people.”

Today Eatonville is less isolated. An exit from Interstate 4 put me right into the west central part of town. But I found at the eastern edge of the town what seemed to be a remnant of another era. On the east side of East Street, where Eatonville’s Kennedy Boulevard becomes Maitland, Florida’s Lake Avenue, there is a continuous low wall spanning the edge of the yards of the Maitland homes. You can see this wall on a close-up view in Google maps. It’s not an ugly wall as walls go. It’s not a tall prison wall topped by barbed or razor wire. When the wall was constructed and why, I could not discover. If the people of Eatonville and Maitland mutually concluded like the neighbor does in Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall,” that “good fences make good neighbors,” then my apologies to all. But for me, an outsider and a long-time civil rights activist, the voice of Frost’s narrator rang truer: “Something there is that does not love a wall.”

Since the wall separates an African American town from its largely white neighbor, I had to wonder. It seems to symbolize exclusion and enforced separation.

Let me risk appropriating this symbol and transporting it in a minor key to the subject of this essay: the question of the lingering tendency to wall off “political” poetry from supposedly non-political, ego-centric poetry, and the lingering tendency to assume the latter is necessarily in a superior class to the former. In other words, if it’s political, can it be poetic? If it’s poetic, does it not have to shun the political? Are the two categories mutually exclusive?

First to consider definitions, what do we mean when we talk about the “political” in terms of literary content? And, of course, what is poetry?

Poetry rarely works within the terms of the narrowest definition of “political,” that is, the process of choosing one candidate for public office over another. More applicable is the term’s reference to watershed public events and to policy matters, especially policy matters that affect the well-being of people and of the world generally. Policy gets formulated in abstract and legal terms, often dry, sometimes incomprehensible, generally removing any trace of image from the language so that we do not see. Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell, for example, advocated for the passage of a state law that required women seeking abortions to undergo a “transvaginal probe” without himself knowing what those terms signified. Other examples of political language that hide reality abound: separate but equal; apartheid; incursion; correctional institution; no child left behind; defense of marriage; Senate Bill 10.

Insofar as poets are seers, we observe specifics in our lives, some of them the impact of poorly chosen policy, and we craft word images to express what we see. Of course, political commentary in prose can translate abstractions into concrete language and can give examples of individuals who are affected in particular ways by public policy. Sometimes it does so eloquently. To the extent it is eloquent, it is often called, yes, “poetic.”

Practicing poets work at their craft. Some develop the skill to take a step further the courtship of beautiful language and social concern. They are attuned to the music of language, the power of form, the way words look on a page, and they aim to marry the beauty and emotional power of language to their deepest and most profound concerns, including social, civic, or political concerns. Craft and compassion reinforce each other beautifully in Gwendolyn Brooks’ images of post-World War II segregated Chicago. Both craft and compassion are what make Lois Roma-Deeley’s signature poem “Apologizing for the Rain” a powerful expression of women trained to shoulder all the blame. Both craft and compassion make Yusef Komunyakaa’s “Facing It” with its depiction of reflections in the granite of the Vietnam Memorial so compelling in conveying the impact of the Vietnam War. Images that arise from the poet’s eye and heart attuned to political, social, and community concerns and shaped by the poet’s skillful hand have given us much excellent poetry.

Whether or not we intend our images and word music to affect a change in policy, the words become part of the experience of our audiences who are, we hope, somehow enriched, somehow empowered. At the heart of my poetic practice is the belief that we are with poetry in our lives than we are without it. We are more with each other than we are isolated and alone.

The lonely poet working in isolation is an image ingrained in our culture. And it is true that because writing poetry requires concentration, it may be solitary. Many poets begin writing poems after the isolating experience of a failed romance. But all these factors do not mean that poetry must be focused on the isolated individual. Poets, like other people, have social networks and concerns: jobs, friends, family, civic issues, and histories. Poets can and do write about individual experiences. They can and do write about falling in and out of love, about the role of art, about facing old age and death. But if poetry, defined most simply, is the art of using language most resourcefully, then why limit poetry to a handful of subjects? Writing that taps into a wide array of the resources of language ought to be free, will free itself, to explore a wide array of topics. Poetry can be egocentric, but it need not be exclusively egocentric. The “I” may be neither the center of the poet’s world nor the center of the poetic world. A poet may find inspiration in others and in action, as well as in solitary contemplation.
A poet may find inspiration in others and in action, as well as in solitary contemplation. Rather than be exclusively egocentric, poetry can be community inclusive.

People who share my views struggle to come up with a term that acknowledges a wider array of poetic interests and avoids the controversies set off by pairing the word “political” with the word “poetry.” The organizer at Woodland Pattern Book Center came up with the term “civic poetry” to use in the title of a workshop I led there. Split This Rock, a national poetry organization that sponsors a major poetry festival in Washington DC, identifies itself as an organization focused on “poetry of provocation and witness.” What these terms try to do is to reach beyond the narrow limits of the poetic tradition and practice we inherited from the first half of the twentieth century.

What we’ve inherited is a pervasive sense that the proper subject of poetry is poetry, that at some level and with some variation in the degree of subtlety and metaphorical approach, poetry is what poems should be talking about. George Orwell wrote in 1941 that writers from the 1890s onward focused on technique. T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Virginia Woolf were far more interested in technical innovations than in any moral or meaning or political implication that their work might contain. The best of them all, James Joyce, was a technician and very little else, about as near to being a ‘pure’ artist as a writer can be.” These writers are still among the most frequently taught.

Wallace Stevens is another such twentieth century poet, an important one, cited in 1975 by critic Harold Bloom as “the best and most representative American poet of our time” (qtd. in “Wallace Stevens”). There is much to admire in Stevens’s work, his descriptive skill, for example, and yet as poet Louise Bogan notes, his world is “strangely empty of human beings” (qtd. in “Wallace Stevens”). In fact, Stevens advanced the argument for an abstract, egocentric poetry. He wrote that “Life is not people and scene, but thought and feeling. The world is myself. Life is myself” (qtd. in “Wallace Stevens”).

Such a solipsistic world may be rendered skillfully, perhaps even beautifully, but it is not the world in which I live, and so its artifice fails to engage me. Though I admire Stevens’s precision, I want to apply such precision to a wider range of topics. Mine is a world of students and colleagues, movements for social justice and human beings reading, writing, making plans, making friends and sometimes enemies, making art, planning parties, planning protests, engaging with the natural world and questioning their role both in that world and in the social worlds of which they are a part. Such challenges and excitement deserve being represented with all the resources of the language and all the skill of the poet.

To build a wall around poetry, to build a wall around certain subjects deemed worthy of poetry is to erect an artificial barrier that at best raises questions. At worst constructing walls to protect a supposedly “pure” and exclusive poetry from being debased may be what has led to the marginalization of poetry, to the loss of audiences beyond the select few. Poetry sales leave much to be desired. According to Laura Moriarity of Small Press Distributors, most poetry titles “sell between 50 and 250 copies per year” (qtd. in Nichols). But a fuller depiction of the contemporary world, not the accountant’s bottom line, is my concern here.

The confessional and the ethereally poetic are scarcely the whole poetic community. If we take down the walls that keep us from seeing, identifying with, and connecting to other poetries, we will realize how extensive, even within the Anglo-American tradition, that wider community is: from the heroic Beowulf, to Chaucer’s fallible nuns, priests, and other pilgrims on their Canterbury trek with all the baggage of their lives, to Shakespeare who made dramatic poetry out of history, to England’s traditions of poets laureate including John Dryden who wrote the political satire “Absalom and Achitophel” and Alfred Lord Tennyson who wrote “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” to the work of Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, Wendell Berry, and Rita Dove, to the surge of public interest in poetry following the September 11th attacks in New York, to the outpouring of poems about the 2011 Wisconsin spring protests, so ably collected in Verse Wisconsin’s “Main Street” issue.

If it’s poetic, does it have to shun the political? If it’s political, can it be poetic? If it is ego-centered, does it get a bump up in poetic rank? These questions are a remnant of an earlier era, an outlived set of values and preferences.

Where in the world is poetry today? I’d like to see it everywhere. It’s already jumped the wall, and gone onto buses, into vending machines, onto the stage and into the streets. I see poetry moving beyond the exclusively ego-centric to become more community inclusive. Where it will go from here is the new question. As poets and as readers, we engage with this question every time we craft a poem and every time we choose one. As we think about and articulate reasons for our choices, we take the next steps towards a poetics in keeping with Wisconsin’s motto. Forward.

Works Cited


Autumn Meditation

Look at fear directly
and pity the little mouse
gnawing in your gut.

Now let him go
running
through your fingertips.

Hold him
on your lap,
like a little Buddha.

Be kind to yourself, he says.
Winter is approaching.

* 

Observe the morning mist
lifting slowly
from the pewter lake
like an organza veil,

an eagle
foraging in the sky,
a frieze of wings
against azure.

In bird-silence,
and mosquito-silence,
watch the forest unfurl
her brilliant autumn dresses.

* 

Where have you been?
says the creaky old poplar
leaning over the road.

It’s been months
since I’ve seen you and your little dog
walking down this long black ribbon.

You used to walk
past me every day, watching
the clouds turn pink at dusk.

The birds are molting,
itchy for winter.
They leave feather gifts
in grassy tufts and brambles.
They grace my branches
less and less these days.

Prepare to shiver—
I will be here with you
all winter long.

Through blizzards
and ice storms,
I will stand strong.

My leaves are waving
in the sun, in the wind,
a thousand golden hands.

The smell of wood smoke
perfumes the air.
Welcome back to autumn,
welcome home.

—Elizabeth Tornes, Lac de Flambeau, WI

A Town Where There Are No People

The path which sang home,
canary yellow in my ear,
spidery thin and opulent.

If I had been shakedown of wind,
the lust of frost
ghosts of the flesh
in the years between–
transform I so when I broke
into the town,
the sounds of wings ahead.

I looked to a sky smooth as ice.
Nobody to greet me. Okay,
the doors were all open, the tables
present and counted.

I counted myself weary
in the town square,
beside a fountain stained with shit.

Bowed my head,
and prayed,
don’t leave.

Don’t leave me
yet.

—Ching-in Chen, Milwaukee, WI
Insensate?

Who are we to say?
A Jesuit priest
du Chardin
was nearly unfrocked
for his belief that
all things, stones, plants, all
have consciousness.

I had an umbrella tree once:
big spreading leaves.
Little when I
got it, it
grew for me like
crazy, became
much taller
than I was.

It committed suicide.
For me.
Instead of me.

I took it with me
to a new place
a new love
a big white
magnificent
abode. Well.
I hated that place.
It was too white.
It was too clean.

The new love wasn’t
working either.

I thought I’d
die
there. And
my umbrella tree
did die.

One by one
its great spreading leaves
turned brown,
dropped
off. I got
the message.
One day I sawed
it off at the dirt-line.
The next day I
moved out.

I still have the stick.
And I’m still
alive.

—MARIE SHEPPARD WILLIAMS, MINNEAPOLIS, MN

Downsizing

Our green factories have closed for the season.
We’ve laid off all the chlorophyll,
let the carotene take over, putting in one last shift
as the days shorten and chill. Supple once,
our walls and stems crinkle at the edges,
turn crisp and brown. We hang on
till November winds strip us from security,
whip us through the frosty air. Unemployed,
we assemble on the ground, a crunchy crowd of castoffs
waiting for the inevitable, for the ones who will
sweep us up, herd us into piles to be bagged,
shredded, vacuumed, or God forbid, even burned.
But we are expendable, and the trees
are already rebuilding, waiting out the winter
for a new generation, a company of greenhorns,
young upstarts who will restart production
and cast their shadows against the necessary sun.

—BRUCE NIEDT, CHERRY HILL, NJ

In the Beaten Rice Factory

Nobody knows we are here.
When you wound down the canary road, I saw
you arise from war.

no oracle but song
no message but fragment

A mother knows a son’s bruised body.

over-ripe peach
dropping to
matted grass
slowly

a place of rest
a wren seeing the

wind

your right eye
after the promised shoulder
behind the door

your elbow
a mother
removing the soul
of the grain
one by one
down
the chute

—CHING-IN CHEN, MILWAUKEE, WI

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The Birth

As it happened, the Lord was not born in a manger in the middle of an empty field covered with a light dusting of the purest whitest snow, surrounded by angels and wise men and a barn full of docile beasts of burden with proud parents looking on, but was actually born in a noisy, overcrowded stable in the middle of a well-traveled desert on the outskirts of town just past the market where hookers tried to con married men out of their grocery money for something they’d get at home anyway, a group of muggers and thieves looking on, chaste for the day.

and so it came that the Lord Jesus Christ was not born in a noisy stable, cattle lowing in His cars, chickens cackling underfoot, drunk father passing out cigars to the assembled mass of poker players he owed money to, mother knocked out on home brew (“Yes I know God said there’d be no pain but it ain’t you lying here, dammit, I really need something now”) but was actually birthed underwater in a clear glass hot tub in Soviet Russia, mother nude save a white cloth draped across her forehead, proud father looking on worriedly, watching Son burst from Mother in a cloud of slow-moving blood, watching Son bob to the water’s surface and take His first breath, His first scream, His first sip of Mother’s sparse colostrum-yellowed milk.

and so it came that the Lord Jesus Christ was not born in the sterile confines of a twentieth-century first world hospital, white-clad attendants looking on and monitoring every breath, every heartbeat, every muscle spasm in and out of place, but instead was brought screaming into the burnt-out remains of a South American battlefield, streamers of blackened Spanish moss clinging to the dying pillars of napalmed cypress and magnolia, Mother stumbling running falling,

Father pulling “Come on, come on, I can hear them they’re still too close” Mother “The baby is being born now I can’t” scarlet and emerald parrots pause cackling to flutter low over Couple huddled in canopying low-hung branches javelins snuffle out of underbrush tusks lowered towards oncoming soldiers jaguar leaves rotting carcass of deer bloating thirty feet above the ground to stand guard over labor pains breath coming too fast soldiers stopping at clearing to stand guns lowered at ease curious offering K-rations and rifle clips to Parents in homage of the Son.

—HOLLY DAY, MINNEAPOLIS, MN

Fukushima

(before)
I spend the winter picking my way over iced surfaces like a geisha navigating cobbled Kyoto streets on eight inch geta clogs making her way to a rendezvous with Spring

(after)
Fingerless Sedna broods below the Arctic ice rolling with the slow slush ocean Fukushima, now, and she has no fingers to give and wouldn’t if she had Nu Kua, who weaves the fabric of the universe has begun, Penelope-like, the slow unraveling As Mother Kali’s red road of a tongue unfurls down her chin On her necklace of skulls there is always room for many more

The Old Women are tired of this

—TESS ROMEIS, CEDARBURG, WI

The Turtles of Doom

The turtles of doom Are slowly crawling towards us. The man with the sandals and robe Keeps shouting and pointing, But the crowd just nods, And says, ”Hell, that’s a turtle, I’ll be long gone when it gets here.”

A youngster points and says “Daddy, can I keep him?”

The pipe smoking business suited scion Of a nineteen fifties Television perfect family Replies, “Yes, son, you can, You sure can.”

—JOE FARLEY, PHILADELPHIA, PA
VerseWISCONSIN.org

The Myth of Sisyphus

I’m a leaf blower and no matter how hard I blow there’s always one more.

—STEVEN D. STARK

random

she’s random
your daughter

if I were you I’d sell her
I saw this ad: we buy your kids

why can’t we love
our kids on purpose?

—ROSE MARY BOEHM, LIMA, PERU

Flash Mob at Christmas

I daydream in this run-down mall—
greasy food court, failing stores,
shoppers—gobbling pizza, guzzling Arizona tea.

Those fragrant trees and little hands setting tinsel on each branch
adrift in years gone by—I drank Santa’s beer,
ate pretzels and the carrots for the red nosed deer.

Listen! Someone’s singing ALLELUIA! And there’s another. ALLELUIA!
and another.
Who am I with tears in my eyes slipping into Christmas Carols.

Quiet—voices gone—singers turn to shopping in the mall.
Spritzed with Alleluia I buy a coffee, a cookie, and a gift for anyone at all.

—MARY ELLEN LETARTE, LUNENBERG, MA

old age
is a place
where you will
go alone
a precursor
to death,
a long
white room
where you sit
on a bench
wearing
a hospital gown.
it is cold
and no one
listens to you
when you say
you are
still alive

—JOE FARLEY,
PHILADELPHIA, PA
**Want**

3:59 am on the day after saying thanks
they shift feet in the rain, faces pressing
the cold pane, desiring what’s just inside:
commodities shimmering with promise,
colored pictures now comfortingly real.

With a glance at watches and cells,
they tongue the donut crumbs, crumple cups,
paw the sacred ground, readying for the rush.
When the shaking clerk looses the door,
they are already moving.

The crowd surges past glass walls toward treasure
never before advertised in this box of boxes,
is shelves heavy with plastic toys and tools.
Sighing, exultant, it hurtles past electronics, home décor, footwear;
past doorbusters, manager’s specials, sale blowouts,
past today’s bargains, tomorrow’s garage sales.

When in unison the wailing, insomniac mob turns its frenzied gaze
on the biggest bargains of any season, hands still cranberry-sticky
flutter almost reverently; eyes dulled by screen glare ignite.
Breath stills
as shoppers halt,
rupt as immigrants surveying their new home.

Heaped before them is universal health care. Social services.
Enough asphalt to fill every pothole in Detroit. Tax relief. Fair wages.
That golden retirement.
An end to war, hunger, fear. The Four Freedoms. It’s all there,
limitless, requiring no rainchecks.

And passing around the goods to one another,
they murmur how strange, how right it feels to share,
how it lightens them,
is enough.

—JUDY LENT, SEATTLE, WA

**On the First Snowfall**

Coming across a snowflake ornament at Fleet Farm delights me. In honor of winter, I choose to put the clear thick plastic snowflake powered by sunlight on a slender aluminum pole to slide down a hole I drilled into the deck railing. I hope the flake, fading from green to blue to red to white, will glimmer for passersby glancing through the black branches along the road.
For all the cold nights ahead, I am going to sit in my rocking chair and look out my patio door, watching for changes in the light.

—JANE-MARIE BAHR, MENOMONIE, WI

**The Law of Diminishing Expectations**

We all want immortality.
But will settle for immorality.
And if we can’t get that,
Well, maybe a new coat and hat.

—JOE FARLEY, PHILADELPHIA, PA

**Half-Life**

The earth swivels her hips
and tilts her head; falling
across it like a lock of hair, serpentine
the course of one river
named for a long-dead king.

This universe is winding down
and our sun is burning up, flaring
intense, short-lived releases of energy.
Radiation and charged particles spike,
solar winds spew out a continuous spray,
red, green and purple in the northern sky
like god’s teenage showoff hiccups.

If there is a god; who knows?
Who knows the things that survive us,
the crack pipes and the bone china cups,
the poisoned seas and satellite junked sky
that will persist without us,
though our own bones might endure
an eon or two and then: pure oblivion.

Is it then pure matter or mirrored anti-matter
transforming all its mass into the perfect fuel,
some hungry and relentless silence,
overwhelmed by absolute blackness
that spreads like mercury across a palm
slipping downward toward new spaces
through fissures and gaps to seek equilibrium.

Facing the long winter with idle hands—
the cells minute planets in the space of me—
their literal slow, purposeful motions:
I shed my skins inside and out;
trace elements gather around, warming.

—AYARA STEIN, CHESTERTON, IN
**Meditation #7 – A Black Book Full of the Horrors**

Whatever way you look at it/it is an ugly bridge/not just a passageway but a link to the other side/foiled in its attempts by pragmatism/ since when does the mind share the enthusiasm of a retail strip hung above the earth

Bookstores and pedestrians/a Ponte Vecchio displaced/give to me instead a black book full of the horrors of this world/Polish professors murdered in a German concentration camp/a requiem mass that cannot account for the facts/I see where you do not/ the cafe, the bookstore, the antique shop, my bones on sale as curiosity/the drop is but a vagueness later/ the metre specific and the acoustic never greater.

—**GERALD BEIRNE, FREDERICTON, NEW BRUNSWICK, CANADA**

**The Grocery Critic**

Swirling around from the cache of freezer packaged food, encountering a man determining the cost of items in a discount bin, growled, “they’re mine.”

Continuing checking the price of cuisine selecting the wrong item for a coupon, returning it back down the aisle, returning to check for the advertised product selecting more packages.

Confronting a woman who asked, “do you know how they taste?”

Coupons not redeemed, not a reduction for sandwich spread, nor two primroses for the price of one. Not one dollar off, no swallow of Greece.

—**RICHARD KRESAL, GREEN LAKE, WI**

**Missing Children**

I smile at the small boy with the large eyes and the dark hair that lives in my refrigerator this week, make sure the cardboard quart is turned so that he’s staring out of the refrigerator when I open the door

and not the plain back wall. His name is Timothy, but I just call him Tab, because he looks like a Tab to me.

“It’s been nice having you here, Tab,” I say as I shake the container. There is just about enough milk left for one more day of coffee. “I hope you’ve enjoyed your stay.”

—**HOLLY DAY, MINNEAPOLIS, MN**

**OBS!**

These I realize are not the beautiful people checking out all around me at OBS!

Nor, logically, am I.

K-Marts were new when I was a kid, and it never crossed my mind not to want molded plastic, the Dacron clothing, almost every Blue-Light Special.

Nobody I knew then read Consumer Report.

In a country without K-Mart, which probably, for a time, truly didn’t want what K-Mart offers, OBS! is the next best thing. Turning bar-codes toward the scanner, I wish we were the beautiful people.

Not necessarily with figures like eastern-bloc gymnasts or Italian loafers, or laser-guided haircuts, but in line at OBS! we have bellies like shot-putter have, our mouths pucker and wrinkle from smoking. Our kids cry a lot and some days look like they eat only doughnuts.

Too many adults limp or slouch, and most of us look at our feet. Every election I vote against this. I vote for eye contact at OBS! against plastic overcoats and brittle housewares.

But little changes: the kids still whine, often, over candy while we pack our shopping bags fast, with heads down, under the weight of commerce and a series, they say, of free trades.

—**TOM LAVELLE, STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN**
**Murciélagos**

Near La Selva,  
orange bats skim low  
to gaff with their hook-feet  
live fish they like to eat.

With very long legs  
and enormous feet  
their pups  
wait in sea caves  
four months  
before new wings  
can hold them up,  
four months  
hanging around  
upside down,  
nothin’ to do.  
Eat it all, bones  
head, tail,  
fins, their parents  
insist.  
They know  
that barking  
with a full mouth  
won’t echo,  
won’t reveal  
ripples barely  
below the surface,  
flash of scales  
whipping fins  
skittery school  
of the colony’s  
next meal.  
All night  
while we read  
promises  
in field guides,  
promises  
in dreams, you  
whir below patios,

skim over hulls,  
enter our waking—

deja vú—don’t  
we know you?

---

**Spirit of the Bat**

Hair rush, low swoop—  
so those of us  
stuck here on earth  
know—you must be gods.

Or friends of gods,  
granted the chance  
to push off into sky,  
granted the chance  
to hear so well  
your own voice bounced  
back to you  
maps the night.

Each hinge  
in your wing’s  
an act of creation.  
Each insect  
you nick out of air  
a witness.

You transform  
obstacles  
into sounds,  
then dodge them.

---

**Blue River**

The Daugava, on which Riga is sited,  
Flows serenely through the singing city.  
Thus that sweet but complicated city  
Is, by that ancient river, bluely lighted.  
The opera house, so grand, so prideful and  
Beloved, presents symphonic masterpieces  
Or otherwise entertains. In bits and pieces  
The history of an often conquered land  
Comes clear, or clearer: the Baltic barons; kings  
Of Sweden; Soviet Russia’s heavy hand.  
They had to shake it off, that grasping hand.  
A country with a cultural tradition of singing  
Breaks free, the city to be itself, the river  
To sail cross country on its one blue wing.

---

**Pitch in the Pines**

Blades switch  
swerve green  
lean left  
sway silver  
grass sweeps  
rolls right  
past pine  
limbs lift  
bump birch  
tilt bisque  
toss yellow  
fall binds  
wind finds  
its pitch  

---

**Peggy Shumaker, Fairbanks AK**

visit VW Online for more by this author
At Louise

My sister found a Cecropia moth as if someone had placed origami in a tree. The town featured a nuclear power plant, a small statue of Blackhawk, corn and soybeans, and therefore Louise Quarry was full of the bodies of local teenagers, bored and drunk, now sunk too deep to fish out. Shade and limestone forbade the land its grass, but there was sand, hauled in by whoever ran the place, and a tin waterslide attached with bolts to the quarry floor. Up above, a line of houses teetered over the beach, backlit, hazy. My grandparents lived in one of them. Because they might be looking, I wore my pink elastic water shoes, I watched out for broken glass. At Louise, the wonder of a giant silkmoth raising and lowering its wings tasted differently than wonder did at home. In photos, the water is gray. Stringy, shivering in our two-piece swimsuits, we are indistinguishable from the poor kids.

—Abby Gambrel, Madison, WI

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Snow Angel Dream

Saw a fox sleeping
   in a snow angel a child made
   in the snow along a frozen river,
A fox sleeping in a child’s snow angel
   seemed like a good idea for a children’s story book
   with affectionate illustrations
Ending with the child inside asleep in her bed
   and outside along the river in the moonlight
   the fox sleeping in the snow angel she made.
O fox! what dreams did you have
   in the snow angel’s arms?
O child! did you dream you were a baby fox sleeping
   curled against your warm mother
   in her underground den in the dark?

—Antler, Milwaukee, WI

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Fishing, fish fries and dead-zones

Over the years, I’ve unintentionally killed arms full of undersized bluegills and bass.

Those dead-zone times I’d wait too long responding to a nibble, the hook sets mortally deep in the moist sponge of throat.

Too small to keep, I lay them down, bleeding from the gills, onto the surface of the lake where they sink, slowly hammocking like falling leaves, out of sight. On the back porch, where I separate the keepers from their heads, I can’t help but stare, amazed at how many minutes their mouths gape open then close, open then close, cursing me, one last time,

one last time,

one last time.

—Mike Lane, Delafield, WI

Lost View

A rusty pole stretched between trees
Holds a sagging tire swing.
A crumbled red stone house
Hides half buried in the earth,
A blackened smoke house leans over.
Weeds and wild flowers fill the yard.
Silent voices ripple across the fallow fields.
The cracked headstone with faded print
A final summary of this natural process
Towards disappearance—
We tread quietly on rich residue.

—Nancy Petulla, Merrill, WI
Making My Apology to the Doe

In Kindergarten, when told to draw the animal you would most like to become, draw a deer. With fat brown crayon on pulpy paper, fashion four legs, a solemn face, innocent eyes.

Stare at the doe feeding twin fawns who startles as you bike the back roads. Her hooves clatter on asphalt as she runs into underbrush.

Snow-shoe the fields and look for the heart shaped hoof prints, the hollow hair, snow coated on her dun brown back. Notice the oval beds, single track trails, scat, dark drips of urine on snow.

One new moon November night, drive home after a double shift. The deer appears, no white flag or graceful dash, just brakes, skidding, the impact of hide with fender, the flight over hood and roof.

Find the doe and kneel next to her, crumpled on the road. Limbs once capable of nine foot leaps now twist beneath as blood drips ditch ice to lace. For months have bad dreams. All shadows take the shape of doe running, or about to run.

—JENNA RINDO, PICKETT, WI

Count me

among the half-lives, freaks, crooked-beaked birds, bushy-tail trees, and my head cheese of mountain boar soused with cesium 137. It’s heaven. Pray, Father Plutonium, like a Zeus snap-crackle-pop overhead the high-voltage lines that run like reason, nowhere to hide. Roll me hog-wild. Whip my meter. Make me lean, mean.

—ADAM HALBUR, LA CROSSE, WI

At the Peace Watch

We dodge Bible quotes parading Main Street. Placards:
It was Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve, January’s dark as the inside of a beer-can, cold taste of metal. We come inside and leave the door ajar as welcome to our world. How many chairs does it take to form a circle? We came in with the others; does that make all of us guilty? Moral Majority waits outside.
Anti-War=Pro-Terror. Who cares about Polar Bears? I wish to believe there is not one word that can’t transform to song.
Peace I ask of thee o river flows through a boy’s eyes as he sings. Late January. Only the nearer shoreline is ice.

—TAYLOR GRAHAM, PLACERVILLE, CA

Like Deer

after Jean Nordhaus

One winter I photographed a family of five deer who were so starved they came straight to our deck for bird seed.

I’d see them moving slowly through the trees, so I’d remove my shoes, find the camera, step quietly to the window where the light was right that day, turn off the flash and wait—not for great photos through two panes of smudged glass, but to pay enough attention, to know the one who limped was healing, to see the coyote looking on and scare him away.

I wish we could see our own poor as families whose lives are interrupted by bad weather, whose bodies must survive with pride. I want to say, be gentle so their beauty thrives comes out like deer to food or a woman to love.

—ESTELLA LAUTER, FISH CREEK, WI
Occupied Town

This evening, rumors. Or is it the wind? Below your window, heavy footfall in the dark. Latch of door, click of safety, or shutter-release. Snapshots with a flash.
In the distance drumbeat or simply thunder. Someone shuts a shutter fast.
Rumors of moon-shot but the moon is black. Not a formal, synchronized step of shod feet, more like storm coming, a single drip magnified. A thousand drops will muffle dust. On the TV, All this for a crown. A dollar.
Millions. On the commons, sparks into black sky. Fireworks?
The people have none but words, their tongues. Lined up covering their eyes. At least five languages spoken here, only one declared legitimate.
Pepper-spray as a food product.
Each language conceals a word for brother. Rumors on the wind.

—TAYLOR GRAHAM, PLACERVILLE, CA
visit VW Online for audio by this author

Heeding Signs

He stands beneath the sign that crosses U out, another pole with blank face. Between two hands he holds cardboard I do not read, only his face, eyes focused straight ahead to what lies behind me. He needs a shave and I imagine a bath. He neither smiles nor frowns. While the light is red, I look at his eyes.
He does not recognize me. When the light turns green, I start forward again.
I heed the sign. I do not turn back.

—RICK DINGES, LINCOLN, NE

O Say

A lot of the policies that he’s [Barack Obama] talking about necessitate Americans taking personal responsibility, and that’s not something Americans are used to doing. —Annie Kislewicz, undecided voter

For days now, I’ve been haunted by a photo in our newspaper: a polar bear, swimming north, looking for solid ice. She can swim 100 miles, tops, before she tires and drowns, but the ice pack has receded 350 miles. We pop into our SUVs to get a Slushie at the 7-11 a mile or so away. We forget to recycle, want to drill in the Arctic, think wind and solar power are expensive fantasies. Give us more oil! Give us fast food soaked in grease, and plenty of it! Let’s not think about future generations. Let’s build bigger houses and crank up the AC. Wave the flag if someone thinks we should change. And, while we’re at it, let’s make the seagull our new national bird; its call is just perfect:
mine mine mine mine mine

—BARBARA CROOKER, FOGELSVILLE, PA
visit VW Online for audio by this author

Displacement

Perspective vanishes in a quandary of house that pretends to be a neighborhood, some huddled at hill’s crest, others a diminished slack in cul-de-sacs, all something more than walls to those inside who pull back drapes just far enough to peek out and see an undiminished concrete plateau merged with mud puddles from over-watered sod, no one standing out in the open to provide insight to the size of what we see.

—RICK DINGES, LINCOLN, NE
Training Day

Every month, like a broken clock
Is correct twice a day,
It’s time for training day at Stanley.
Laudable goal, progressive managing,
Making sure staff are
Up-to-the-minute in
Techniques, tactics, tradition.

I don’t see it that way.
Bi-monthly, we all get locked down,
Confined to a concrete bunker
Sitting on round steel plates
At cold steel tables
In austere, sterile discomfort
While the staff have a paid day
Of virtual vacation.

Nevermind paying them less,
Just put them to work,
Every day,
Doing their jobs.

—Harlan Richards, Stanley, WI

Cold March

Winter has had its heyday. Its long succession
of snows.
Its drop-dead blues and whites. Its nights.
Now, cracks emerge. It crumbles
and will fall.
Still iced-in
in the basement, we are bulbs:
Within us, some sad node turns
toward the light. Listen
to our skins: the thin, dry husks
rustle in their boxes, seem
to move. Half sheath and half
defeated animal, they grasp the vaguest notion,
something
green. Wherein a thought begins
to beat, almost
inaudibly: not
yet, not yet.

—Anne Shaw, Chicago, IL

Scrambled Yolks

If Puss In Boots had played the fiddle, would
the cow have jumped over the hey, diddle diddle?

How the tongues will cackle, the tongues will
wag. As the great man falls, the small man brags.

Once again, says the little red hen, I’m on
my own with no one to help I must plant alone.

Jack will never be nimble or never be quick since
he lost his head in that tumble-down trick.

When the cupboard is bare no one will care
if the drunk on the street has no bone or no meat.

When three fine sisters came to town, one wore yellow,
one wore brown, one ate an apple and wore a blue gown.

—Peggy Aylsworth, Santa Monica, CA

As You Read on a Beach in Greece

the swamp, furred green with algae, opens and closes
its mouth spits up white lotus flowers overstuffed
with flies from muck black-sticky as thought or philosophy perhaps
and a log packed tight with bullfrogs slick at the water’s edge
above me the lisp of insects small things move in trees devour
and are devoured this is a kind of devotion
quite unlike our own and what kind of blindness is it
taking a rusty stumble through the undergrowth
how to make things go again with legs and body heat
my breath attracts mosquitoes and this unsettles me
you tell me there will still be opportunities for joy
in the aftermath the naught for which I have been asked to ask

—Anne Shaw, Chicago IL
Tree Shadows
(A reaction to Antler’s poem, “Winter River Sundown”)

Tree shadows reach across the frozen river
like a father reaches for his prodigal son, like a mother
reaches for her daughter after a quarrel,
like a Jewish widow reaches to comfort Palestinian
parents who hold their injured child, a Samaritan
helps a Jew by the side of the road, a person
comforts a person, race unknown.

Once I noticed a goose wait by the side of his injured mate
from sunrise when I first passed them until sunset
when I passed them again. Tree shadows reach across
like a bird reaches for his mate.

Birds cross over rivers and trees. They see no borders. Birds cross over
oceans and land suturing a scarred and hurting world. On a bird map,
there is no South, Central or North America,
no North or South Ireland,
no Congo, no Serbia, no Timor, no kingdoms, no states,
just rivers and trees and shadows reaching across
to where borders are unknown.

—CAROLYN VARGO, MILWAUKEE, WI
visit VW Online for more by this author

Veteran’s Day

In the blaze orange of autumn
tall marsh grasses lie flattened.

Close here where deer will bed
I bend, sniff, search for other sign.

This safety where I too have sheltered
cast in the hollow of other lives.

Burst milkweed pods spill white
and burrs cling like unrecited prayers.

Hunter’s air taunt now with expectation,
and cardinal, too, wearing Christmas red
for protection, as some crisp fear lingers
ever at the edge of boot steps and finite vision.

This earth will always vibrate with absent names
called in autumn and scented with gun shot.

In glacial kettles old grasses reseed each season:
where deer bed, some like wolves will wait.

—KIMBERLY BLAESER, BURLINGTON, WI

No need for trees

How we, as Americans,
have now grown
to hate the tree-huggers,
let’s pull their arms
out of their sockets
for reaching deep
into our pockets;
who are they to get
in the way
of our growing greed.
“Go green,” they chant.
“No, go away,” we say;
Go take a long hike;
get some vitamin D,
go see a Fellini flick,
for nature is a nuisance,
standing in our way
of any real progress.
Need to do some good?
Go pick up all
the big gulp cups
along our highways,
and while you are at it
scrape up all those
dead critters that
litter our roads
making us go bump
in the dark night,
but don’t you dare
stand in our way
of developing all
the God given land
we have on hand;
let us cut down to
the ground all the trees
that get in our way
of making money,
we can build machines
to clean our air and
make us our oxygen.

—CHARLES PORTOLANO, FOUNTAIN HILLS, AZ
At Wounded Knee

The bumblebee at wounded knee
Decants his nectar lazily
Yellow lines dance into black
And when we dream we hear the crack
And when we dream we see the flash
We shake from cold, we smell the ash
Our houses like the honeycomb
Dissolve when wintering creatures roam
Our houses like the buried bones
Rattle as the blizzard groans
In creature dreams our houses settle
Underground and lie quiet
The whip-poor-will heard at the hill
Calls to the friends and dancers still
The bull who rests at wounded knee
Tips nectar to the bumblebee
Menagerie at wounded knee
Sits shivered from the landed free.

—UCHE OGBUJI, BOULDER, CO
visit VW Online for audio by this author

On Fahaheel

It stands alone
Intersecting Fourth Ring Road
and Fahaheel Highway.

White, bones crawling up blue walls
whose shadows bow, ghosts of those
who were tortured there.

Three passengers and I
screech and buckle
in my hand-me-down Volvo
whose brakes sometimes work.

Wind, a sick madrigal, taunts,
schoolchildren have
for ten years.

Touch fence, touch fence
you die when you do.

She reaches
fingers to metal
a thousand oysters gasp at us
their mouths wide open, hoping for a thrill
the girl shrieks an aria.

—SUMMER QABAZARD, NORMAL, IL

Concealed Carry

concealed carry
schnapps
on the bus

stops
and loads
and cocks

off again
I’ll cap
his ass

and rubs his Glock
he pats the pistol
in his pants

—MICHAEL KRIESEL, ANIWA, WI

Bruce Dethlefsen, West Bend, WI
A Constitutional Right to Emote

Surely melodrama’s
deeper than mere tragedy,
for the latter dries up tears,
the former welcomes them with relish—
like bouffant frosting on a chocolate cake,
or bubblebath in hard water.
So, a despairing love affair
becomes a wet nurse,
a fond indulgence—
does that make us mere mortals unredeemable,
this changing of the elements of sanctification
into a dessert, like Cherries Jubilee?
Does holiness, a diabetic, hate sugar that much,
or are the holy ascetic aestheticians
dead wrong?
What’s wrong with garden gnomes, Barry Manilow,
plastic pink flamingoes, and Elvis-on-Velvet?
O, Lady, your husband has died,
the old sod,
don’t be afraid to keen, keen, keen.
Weep and wail like Niobe, all tears!
Mind not the frowns and knitted eyebrows,
condemning your performance. Chew the scenery!
No matter that a dried up mouse inside the wall
says it all. Go ahead and howl.
Howl! Howl!

—Michael Biehl, San Francisco, CA

The Poetess Balances

She’s a carnivorous poet, a kind
Of dragonfly, but I don’t mind. I mind
Mosquitoes and flies; am glad she eats
Those pests. I find her perfection complete,

Her eyes, and above all the sublime skill
By which out of nowhere she makes a kill,

Then like a burning blue helicopter,
More dazzling than any lepidopter-

A, she rests on a twig over water—
purling water. Former nymph she’s its daughter.

The water plummets, but she is tranquil:
four glassine wings held out straight & still.

—Michael Biehl, San Francisco, CA

ode to pie a la mode

for jack kerouac

15 ounces 9” pie crust
6 cups sliced apples
2/3 cup granulated sugar
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 1/2 tablespoons corn starch
a scoop of ice cream

the american night a blanket
jazz leaping off pages
buddha found under a tree
san francisco america reborn
a holy hiking pack
boots mingling mud
drunk again
allergic to cans of tuna

—Ivo, San Francisco, CA

Counting Calories

I finally ate my heart.
I ran too thin on a diet
of the clear juices of pulling inward.

I hoarded me and snacked
on the air of silence. I filled my belly
with empty calories on holidays,

when taking
seemed more appropriate
than giving. Taking is a form of giving.

Loneliness and abandonment
are great gifts.
They fatten the mind

with lit candles and processions, then cleanse
the palate as they shoulder roll across tongues
of prayer—little stuntmen, all aflame.

—Mike Lane, Delafield, WI
Frank X Walker is the author of six poetry collections, including *Turn Me Loose: The Unghosting of Medgar Evers* (University of Georgia, forthcoming May 2013); *When Winter Come: the Ascension of York* (University Press of Kentucky, 2008); *Black Box* (Old Cove Press, 2005); *Buffalo Dance: the Journey of York* (University Press of Kentucky, 2003), which won the Lillian Smith Book Award in 2004; and *Affrilachia* (Old Cove Press, 2000). A 2005 recipient of the Lannan Literary Fellowship in Poetry, Walker is Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Kentucky and Director of African American & Africana Studies, and the editor of *PLUCK!, the new Journal of Affrilachian Art & Culture.*

DD: You’ve described poetry as an act of “conjuring.” Reading your work, it’s also clear that giving voice to historical figures—especially those who haven’t been fully or fairly represented in official histories—requires the painstaking work of a historian.

How do you think about the interplay between your work as an objective historian and a visionary poet? Is there a place where research ends and conjuring begins?

FXW: I’m always honored when schools and colleges use my Historical Poetry as supplemental textbooks when studying history or when looking for texts that can be used across multiple disciplines, but I have no illusions about the fictitious nature of my work. No matter how effective the speaking voice or individual poem may come across it is its roots and references to actual history that give these kind of poems legitimacy. And at the same time, it is the poetry that gives it its emotional strength. In my opinion it is only successful if together they provide for the reader a sense of authenticity. Once the historical poem hits the page its history and poetry must live in the same place at the same time and communicate in a credible way.

There is absolutely a place where the research ends and the conjuring begins. The research always comes first. The poet/researcher must first exhaust himself with the details. They must become an expert on their subject before sitting down to write the poem. They must discover and know more about their subject than they ever plan to share in the overall narrative.

CXD: You add a choir of supporting voices to the existing historical record—York’s hunting shirt and knife, the waters of the Columbia, and the bullet that ended Medgar Evers’ life. This seems to be an essential part of what you’ve described as “reaffirming the power of literacy and the role of mythology and storytelling in the exploration of the truth.”

Where do these voices come from? How do they work to help fill gaps in accepted historical narratives?

FXW: The idea of using multiple points of view to relate the story is old hat in fiction. When I began reading from the first York book and opened the floor for Q&A, I found that readers were already very interested in the voices that weren’t included. They wanted to know what his wife thought and they wanted a closer look at Sacagawea. When I sat down to write the York sequel I sat down looking for all the missing voices I could imagine. Voices I believed I wanted to hear from and that I believed would enhance the narrative.

Readers seem to enjoy the human voices but they really love the personification of...
objects that were already present in the story, i.e., York's hatchet and his knife. It's a slight deviation from the proverbial fly on the wall. Now I simply apply my mother's saying that there are two sides to every story and then there's the truth. I am finding that if I increase the sides to the story in a credible way, readers feel like it's even closer to the truth.

**Historical conjuring takes longer than writing from personal experience. Given that there is no requirement that the next poem have a relationship with the previous one, I have a lot more freedom when writing from personal experience.**

DD: What is it that draws you to the particular historical figures you've chosen to conjure? How do experiences in your own life inform these choices? How important is it for a voice to come to you at a particular point in your life?

FXW: Now we're getting deeper into conjuring, because I really feel like it's a lot like dating in as much as the historical figures have to also choose. One of us could choose the other, but if we both choose each other you get something really special. I also think the poet has to be truly invested in the subject at an emotional level to really do it justice. I developed a personal stake in telling the York story because I was embarrassed that I had multiple degrees, considered myself well versed in Kentucky's African American history, found out York had lived in the same city I lived in and yet I had never heard of him. Part of my personal motivation was to eliminate my own ignorance and deal with that embarrassment.

I believe that because I was raised by women, have been blessed with six sisters, and survived multiple failed relationships, I actually lived the research material I needed to create most of the authentic sounding female voices in my historical poetry. I know that spending time outdoors in the northwest and along the Lewis and Clark trail allowed me to finish the book when it was clear something was still missing. That missing element was the landscape. I say all of this to say that the journey that is the combination of the research and teasing out the poems and building them into a whole narrative is not something that only exist on the page.

A poet's real life will intersect with her work somewhere on the page and off the page in both unexpected and expected ways. The inner journey from the York narrative resulted in a buffalo tattoo and a chance to share the Nez Perce world with my teenage son and organized opportunities to ride the local bike trail. I don't know what Medgar Evers has in store for me, but given that 2013 is the 50th anniversary of his assassination and JFK's as well as the March on Washington, I've got a feeling the activist in me is going to need an extra pair of shoes.

FXW: In the twelve years since Affrilachia I would say more people recognize, claim and use the word. I've lost count of how many colleges now consistently use the book in their Appalachian Studies courses, but because so many places and scholars are still discovering the word and slowly recognizing the need to speak about the region's true diversity it is still the best seller of all my books. What hasn't changed is the need to continue working against the pervasive negative stereotypes and caricatures associated with the region or the need to educate people about important Affrilachians like Nina Simone, August Wilson, Bill Withers, Angela Davis, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, James Brown and many others.

DD: You've described Byron de la Beckwith—Medgar Evers' assassin—as the hardest voice you've ever tried on. How was it possible for you to inhabit de la Beckwith? What can you tell us about that process?

FXW: It was the hardest for me, because I'd like to believe we were really far apart especially when you consider our values. I really wanted to get inside his head and understand what fueled his passion, why he hated who he hated as well as why he loved what he loved. Unfortunately and fortunately there is no limit of research material on hate speech, the KKK, white supremacy, and so many images and so much material available that provided his own words. One of the devices I used to get into that space was to type in hate speech on YouTube and listen to as much of it as I could stand.

CXD: You coined the term Affrilachia, now an official entry in the OED. At the end of your poem “Affrilachia,” in the book of the same title, you write, “if you think / makin’ shine from corn / is as hard as kentucky coal / imagine being / an Affrilachian / poet.”

Here it is more than a decade since your collection Affrilachia was published. What’s changed? What hasn’t?

FXW: Historical conjuring takes longer than writing from personal experience. Given that there is no requirement that the next poem have a relationship with the previous one, I have a lot more freedom when writing from personal experience. The personal poems are often born out of inspiration and contact with other people and the real world, I don't have to stop writing one to work on the other. When I finished the Medgar Collection, I also had completed another manuscript of poems that will continue the Black Box and Affrilachia experience.

Sorority Meeting

**Myrlie Evers speaks to Willie and Thelma de la Beckwith**

My faith urges me to love you. My stomach begs me to not. All I know is that day made us sisters, somehow. After long nervous nights and trials on end we are bound together in this unholy sorority of misery. I think about you every time I run my hands across the echoes in the hollows of my sheets. They seem loudest just before I wake. I open my eyes every morning half expecting Medgar to be there, then I think about you and your eyes always snatch me back. Your eyes won’t let me forget.

We are sorority sisters now with a gut wrenching country ballad for a sweetheart song, tired funeral and courtroom clothes for colors and secrets we will take to our graves.

I was forced to sleep night after night after night with a ghost. You chose to sleep with a killer.

We all pledged our love, crossed our hearts and swallowed oaths before being initiated with a bullet.

© Frank X Walker, *Turn Me Loose: The Unghosting of Medgar Evers* (University of Georgia Press, forthcoming May 2013)
Food For The Fox

the seed left for the birds
spilled on the snow brings
the night rabbits
which leads to a spill of blood
thus food for the fox
my hand to fox mouth
yet still I believe
I live in a snow-white world

—Tess Romeis, Cedarburg, WI

Orchard Retrospect

I wandered my orchard
sampling unnamed autumn windfalls
biting carefully in my knowledge of worms,
and each taste brought a surprise:
Snow? Golden Russet? Winesap?

But no aging Eve clung to my side
urging me to eat,
only my black lab Baird behind me
sniffing fruit suspiciously,
frowning as I chewed,
a disapproving priest,
but I no longer had anything to confess.

—Gary Jones, Sister Bay, WI

Ghosts

We are what exists
between thoughts.

We are what didn’t happen
because you missed the bus that day.

We are what you thought you saw
before you looked again.

We are what makes you turn around
when you think you’re not alone.

We are what shifts behind the eyelids
between dreaming and waking.

We are what lies
just beyond the fog.

We are the sound not heard
the light not seen,
the thing not touched.

We are the whisper
behind the noise.

We are the creak in the wall,
but only when you think we’re not.

We are the whistle in the graveyard.

We are not the wind
but the silence when it stops.

We move between glances,
just beyond the corner of the eye.

We move like smoke,
carried by currents of what you believe.

We try very hard
to stay out of your way.

And we are tired,
so very tired.

—Bruce Niedt, Cherry Hill, NJ

Time Passes All Understanding

How does one feel
when the ex-husband dies.
Does the past dissolve
with all the recriminations
that the divorce brought?
When he phoned that day
and called you sweetheart
did he mean it and if so
does this change the past?
What about all the crap
brought up by the lawyers,
the drinking, craziness,
even the adultery?
The phone conversations
of the past forty-five years
were polite segues to talk to
the son, who is now
over fifty. We have all aged,
and the past is withered
like stored angel hair
left in the Christmas box
and forgotten for years, then
brought out to be rejuvenated.
It’s the new century plus twelve
and a new year; let’s
let go of old angels and only count
the ones helping today. They
are saccharine enough for any
holiday and beyond. If sweetheart
calls again, it will be a miracle
and we’ve about run out of them
for this season.

—Jackie Langetieg, Verona, WI
Partly Hidden

I wore a Lone Ranger mask, which only covered the space around my eyes. Everyone knew it was me. And when I spoke the listener was doubly sure it was me. because I had a distinctive voice, slurring the harsh consonants, masking my desires.

—HAL SIROWITZ, PHILADELPHIA, PA

These are the days

These are the days of lack, the days of the question mark and run-on sentences, of thirst within the gentle rain, of hunger in the full grown field.

These are the days where the noose stops the swallow, of financial disasters and trillion dollar deficits, purchase by plastic and picked up pennies --- heads up for good luck and enough to pay a sales tax...

the angry days, the days of tantrums, tears and runaways...of cars that break down, feet that blister, legs that ache and backs that break.

These are the days of tears wept but not wiped, nor stroked, nor gently kissed away, of x-ray vision and the magnifying glass with the magic glare to scorch your mate, yes, your mate, her faults, your pain....

the days of unreturned phone calls, trolls at your window in the middle of the night — the bitter candy for the fallen child — the invisible ones whose persistence will breathe beneath blankets and stars on the park bench blind to season.

These are the days I see the world through your eyes, feel the pain through your heart and I remember that breath, that ultimate star...and you arched away like a firefly, love. The rose starts to blossom, love, but I’m so very cold.

—CHRISTA GAHLMAN, MADISON, WI

The Extreme Double Cheeseburger

Saturday in early January calls for one with fried onions and a smart slab of mesquite mustard to be crushed into your mouth and you sip on a thick chocolate shake, ice cream like whipped clouds of ice in front of the afternoon play-off game.

Your date sits next to you nibbling at the goodness, his bright white teeth raking through the lettuce and cheese like pitchforks. It’s the season, remember when your ex-husband would sit with the phone on his lap, call his friend Rocky every time there was a good play, screaming into the receiver, DID YOU SEE THAT JACKASS, THAT’S WHAT DALLAS GETS, HA! Take a bite, suck the juices in at the sides stare into the TV and remember when passion hung in the air like smoke.

—JACKIE LANGETIEG, VERONA, WI

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Some Things I’ve Plucked

right out of thin air and other places, too, I can tell you, like the make and model of that car that sped by; I know there’s no Ford Faberge, but maybe you didn’t, and what mortal can resist the luscious fruits of fabrication; I didn’t mean to say that I made artisanal cheese in my bathtub but when I consider the genuine curds of scum, well, who wouldn’t turn from the dried up raisin of reality to the gorgeous grapes in the vineyards of the unverifiable; and that bit about collecting shrimp forks from every country on the planet, all I can say is truth is a hard nut, a no-frills filbert sort of thing. Some things are just so succulent to say.

—PAM LEWIS, MADISON, WI
Reliquary

Under the midnight aurora
in a northern flannel-sheeted bed,
beneath the weight and wild color
of a yarn-tied crazy quilt,
amid the whispers, tickles, and shushing
of brown-eyed, pony-tailed girl cousins,
I have slept with suicide.

With my bare feet swinging in time
to baking-powder-biscuit stories,
and men spitting watermelon seeds
the shape of my dime-store mood ring,
while truck-driving nomads lift amber bottles
in an everyday larger than Dick and Jane,
I have held danger’s bruised moist hand.

On the spinning stools of small town diners
where hopeful adolescents
wear school colors like a cattle brand,
after February basketball chants
where platters of gold or just-cut french fries
pass among friends and Friday night foes,
I have eaten manna with military killers.

In a crowded copper four-door
wearing swimsuit under cut-offs and cover-up,
singing radio oldies along Indiana’s highways
on a pilgrimage to any infinity of sand,
driving desires aimless and older than the continent
under the water mirage of the ancient August sun,
I have flirted with the murdered.

Along the simmering sidewalks of Chicago nights
in close jealous crowds that jostle lovers,
weaving between street sleepers and dark-eyed panders
amid the retractable leashes of urban dogs,
where jazz songs rise against honking traffic
and pencil-thin girls spill like light from doorways,
I have kissed smoke spent from mafia mouths.

Amid the photographic relics of gone bodies
on the darkening veneer of a beside stand,
in a digital world of light emitting diodes,
as age clocks its way toward another transformation
where barely remembered voices count iambic heroic death
and students twitter meaning in 144 characters or less,
I clutch delicate stories—old, never told.

—KIMBERLY BLAESER, BURLINGTON, WI

Boy in Pajamas

Boy in pajamas
hand on the mouse
jumps to the action
of the online world.

The collector of badges
powers up with coins and weapons
each level up provides more armor.

The believer in magic
wants you to conjure
and dispel everything,
just to experience the charm.
But your parental spells
are the only misdirection.

Like the Superman
on his top,
you try to be a hero
because he believes.
He believes so much so
that you try to collect powers
for a figmentary cache
to protect him.

But you are not superman
you are not an avatar.
Your weapons are
only what you already failed with.

—THOMAS CANNON, OSHKOSH, WI
visit VW online for video by this author

More Juice

If she was a chair,
she would be on fire

& the people of the town
would marvel

at the flamed colors
of her face

& hide their cars
from the violent crackle

of her demands
to never be put out.

Juice, apple
enough to give sin

to the collapsing world,
Isabelle is not a chair

& with her palms
she rips the cup

out of my fingers.
The world

is put back together,
with the slightest singe.

—DARREN C. DEMAREE, COLUMBUS, OH
Advantages of Autism

Insists on zippers zipped, pant legs down
mittens on, hat over ears.
No “I want that” during toy commercials.
Peanut butter sandwich lunches are easy to make.
You get to learn sign language.
The cats get their exercise.
Darting brown eyes suddenly meeting yours.
every sound mimicked,
every correct flashcard given,
Every moment of imaginative play fills you with hope.
You learn that a hug is worth a thousand I love yous.
Gained patience from a screaming child
insisting on being held.
Peanut butter sandwich suppers are easy to make.
You may not get adored like other parents,
you may not hear the words “I love you,”
but you are the only safe haven when needed.
No cries when you leave.
A gradual sliding over to you when you get home.
Home therapy visits require you to clean the house.
He makes you take one day at a time
and enjoy the hell out of it.
Motivation to get involved in politics,
education laws, medical advancements.
Learning not to care what others think at the grocery store.
Compassion for others getting judged at grocery stores.
Aversions to slimy stuff.
Peanut butter sandwich snacks are easy to make.
Older siblings and cousins become a link
for they don’t know what is normal,
they only know family is for spending time together.

With my eyes always on him to watch for danger, for a sign,
I get to experience the moment, every moment,
the gift of not missing, of not forgetting,
beauty in the small.

—THOMAS CANNON, OSHKOSH, WI
visit VW Online for video by this author

A Beautiful Stranger

Today, looking out the back of our house,
I see a cat with the exact markings as Sylvia,
the fluffy, mostly white, ball who lives in our bedroom. The stranger is somewhat thinner.

Later, from the window, Sylvia hisses at him,
the brother who was never there for her, or
the ghost of a feral cat she could have been.

—JOHN LEHMAN, CAMBRIDGE, WI
visit VW Online for video by this author

Reality Rides a Yellow School Bus

and as students move toward the back
they learn more, the flashing blue LED on the roof
a lodestar guiding wise guys
who offer exposés of Santa and Easter Bunny and Tooth Fairy
who provide vocabulary lessons in vulgarity
who introduce Gray’s intimate Anatomy
who explicate intricate reproductive rituals
who entertain with risqué jokes and bawdy ballads.

Hopeful mothers wave good-bye to innocence
blowing kisses in the wake of childhood
sending babies to the warm embrace of Miss Teach
with her American flag and happy-ever-after storybooks
her posters of kittens and puppies and springtime bloom
a cupboard of graham crackers and cartons of milk
mothers unaware that learning most profound occurs
not in the heart of a classroom
but in the bowels of Jonah’s bus
the laboratory of raw democracy
guppies swallowed one by one,
and spit out created equal.

—GARY JONES, SISTER BAY, WI

Food Court

Just a bunch of high school boys
well-behaved, talking about
noisy music, sports and girls
I suppose. It doesn’t seem to bother
them that they are all hyphenated -
Mexican- African- Asian- or Euro-Americans
There are no gated minds here, just some
dudes zeroing in on lunch.

Restless, not quite knowing
where their feet are, they wear
baggy pants and shirts, and baseball
caps on backwards, or sideways.

But somebody screwed their heads
on straight. Unaware of their place
in a new America, they clear
their plates. If they noticed me at all,

they probably think I am history -
an old Albino-Rhinoceros-American
the kind they learned about in biology class
that’s on the endangered species list.

—LEN TEWS, OSHKOSH, WI
visit VW Online for video by this author
Monday Morning in Kindergarten

Like reporters delivering the news, they arrive bursting with stories. We start with journals, a holding place for week-end adventures. Cedric is quiet today, makes a picture of a man and a small boy. The man looks sad, the boy is crying.

Who’s in your picture? I ask
my daddy. Cedric answers
he’s sad cause he’s in prison
see the bars around him

And the boy . . .
that’s me. Cedric says
we went to see my daddy yesterday
I took my library book, he read to me
I want him to come home.

—JANET LEAHY, NEW BERLIN, WI

The Nature of Man

Pelicans meet in parliament on the rocks. A bird leaves the flock to plane the surface-water’s sky, wing-spread firmament, double bird to watching eyes.

Men arrive, heave the advancing earth back into the Pleistocene lake stone by stone by stone, until a rock is lifted and thrown at the pelicans, just to see.

—CHUCK RYBAK, ONEIDA, WI

The Winter of Two Hundred Turkeys

From my home-office window, I watch my wild yet amiable neighbors scratch and gobble in the depleted soybean field.

Not cuddly like kittens or colorful like goldfish, wild turkeys offer a no-cost, no-maintenance, free-range escape from computerized news.

These turkeys do not blow one another up or mow one another down. They do not plunder pension plans or lie to constituents.

If they absent-mindedly wander up my drive, a tap on my garage door opener sends them trotting back to their safer side of the street.

They settle their own territorial disputes with a back-off flutter and ten-second chase. Like the lilies of the field, they neither sow nor reap, yet each spring, they strut and puff in primitive seduction, requiring no pop-ups or flashing sidebar icons to meet a mate.

Once nested, hatched and fledged, they resume their familiar scratch and gobble, gobble and scratch.

—SUE DEKELVER, BRUSSELS, WI

Small Change

The silent cross-shaped mouth receives my coins, the communion wafers of the Salvation Army. Do this in remembrance of me.

My daughter’s milk money becomes another’s food and shelter. Do not be anxious for tomorrow, for tomorrow will care for itself.

The kettle is chained, unattended, easily ignored. When you give alms, give in secret.

My pocket is empty; I have nothing left for communion with the blood-red abyss of the other army. Do not kill.

Ten million dollars an hour, to destroy another’s food and shelter. As much as possible, live in peace with one another.

—NAOMI COCHRAN, HAYWARD, WI
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Who’s in your picture I ask.

My daddy, Cedric answers.

He’s sad cause he’s in prison, see the bars around him.

And the boy... that’s me. Cedric says.

We went to see my daddy yesterday. I took my library book, he read to me. I want him to come home.

—JanEt Leahy, New Berlin, WI

Do It

Leander did not love Hero and brave the roiling Hellespont because he preferred his own space.

Because Paris stole Helen, Menelaus launched the ships of Greece, sacked Troy, laid all to waste.

Marvel did not urge his coy mistress be coyer still: he fathomed that love runs a fiery race.

Plunge into the water, rush the rugged fortress jump into the fire — lift love to first place.

—BARBARA GREGORICH, CHICAGO, IL

In Which My Lover and I Win a Seat on the First Space Shuttle to Greet Life

The constellations outside swirled an oil spill of color, and we came bearing the signs of our race—a camera, our faces: aged boats drifting on strings from their docks. Those days and nights we spent roped to the wall, and tried to imagine an other with no quality we’d ever known. We carried with us the inheritance of every way to say hello—each language, the sounds of all animals, plates of carved image in rock. Even chimpanzees greet each other with hugs, but the question was whether we’d left behind touch. We said perhaps they smell like sound. When you look at them, they taste the color of a bubble being blown. We wanted the approval of a being who could not have conceived of us. A show of fingers, you say? A hand? Ask us to dance, and we’ll do it again. Please believe we have done incredible things, and sometimes we even believe it ourselves. The threads in our lungs stretch thousands of miles, and in six months one man could repopulate the earth. We have gauged goodness and worth, and we have decided we could not want to find those who did not want to find us. In the ship, our bodies were carried apart until we pushed from the walls toward each other again. Years passed, but still we believed in magnets. Still we had memories of kneeling, scabbed with childhood, in piles of leaf litter and searching for crickets. Of lying moistened in the backs of cars and making splinters of our bodies. There is a reason, we realized, that lovers were chosen to see something that has nothing of our world. We knew the glow that came before ash, and ground. Many times we had not recognized ourselves. Many times we had returned to earth after having seen elsewhere.

—CHLOE BENJAMIN, MADISON, WI

When

Yesterday I was walking through fields but today won’t let me in though I disciple and I can’t smell and tonight’s potatoes with butter, salt, and pepper only aroma, let’s dance to “I Just Can’t Get Enough,” “That’s Why I Love You So,” “Bring It On Home to Me,” teach me to play the saw and I’ll instruct you on time management. Morning ducks into her shell. Let’s lie on the beach and share headphones, let’s get two slices of pizza and two beers apiece after your shift, shopping carts rattling in the parking lot while the moon dreams a hot, hot tangent of noon, breezy, can’t control it.

—GREG WEISS, CLEVELAND HEIGHTS, OH

visit VerseWisconsin.org for more by this author
Goodbye Mister Bop

When Chips left the Old School he wore its tie
and was carried out with his Wellingtons on.
But no way Mister Bop, the Burnt-Out Prof.
Things definitely ain’t what they used to be.
Bop gets to retire on something like a 401(k);
but not yet, as St. Augustine put it, not quite yet;
I’m not ready for retired sainthood yet!
The syllogisms from which Aristotle deduced the valid
are not complete. In American institutions
we fail upward to glory, and I expect
to be the mad head of the English Department before
I wallop my last tennis ball to cardiac arrest,
or do my last imitation of Johnny Weissmuller.
“Thanotopsis” is not my favorite poem.

—E. M. SCHORB, MOORESVILLE, NC

At Schoolhouse Beach

Limestone layers carried far by glaciers,
tumbled, tossed, and broken up,
knocking together like geologic billiard balls,
polished for centuries by a surging inland sea
until steadfastly smooth and hand-perfect.

This is where you come in, love.

Wobble-stumbling to the water’s edge,
our two-year-old daughter attempts to toss
one substantial stone after the other back into
that icy blue bay—the echoing clack and clack
of rock on rock, the occasional kerplunk.

Worrying she will crush a foot or her
brother’s head, as he stands obliviously close,
absorbed in his own stony obsessions,
we yell our cautions into the weightless wind,
weighing something hefty
in our minds a moment
before letting it go.

—JEF LEISGANG, FORT ATKINSON, WI

Midlife in Mexico

(“Quintana Roo”)

I was in a state.
A state I called
kin tahn a ru, kint anna rooh, kintana rue.
Akin in sound and spirit to
tan kangaroo, Winnie the Pooh,
an ocean view, antenna too.
My name for what I saw there
on license plates of Mexican “Bugs”
and other cars.
But then of Spanish, I didn’t know much.

Years after Yucatan, Webster’s wisdom pronounces
I wasn’t in that state at all.
He tells me I was closer to: keen tah nahr oh-oh
“keen,” not “kin” — no family? — and
not cute, like “ooh”, but “Oh-Oh”.

“kin tahn a rue,” “keen-tahn-a-row-o”
Well, what does he know? So
maybe I was in a childish fantasy,
escaping from the recent reality
of becoming the oldest generation,
no longer having a parent.
It was Christmas — my first Christmas
without a mother — the mother
whose birthday was also on Christmas Day.
The first Christmas I had no family presence.

If I wanted a tan toy kangaroo
and my stuffed grey panda bear, a sandy beach,
some playful tunes, and tales of Winnie the Pooh,
at midlife in Mexico, why not?
Who would wish to stop me
if saying the sing-song makes me happy?

Kin Tanna Ru!
Kin Tanna Ru!
Kin Tanna Ru!

—ANN PENTON, GREEN VALLEY, AZ

Checking in at the Lost Baggage Counter

I find the young girl’s battered suitcases,
all matching, in a Black Watch plaid,
still packed with purple angora sweaters
and pleated wool skirts and the travel-weight
Olivetti typewriter and the paperback
History of Math and the art folios from Italy
and inchoate hopes: everything she owned
once. Last night’s dream tutors the truth
of the writer’s lot: we’re reading our words
in an amphitheatre made of fallen logs
in a backwoods forest, at play among
the leaves and moss, full of happiness,
and the artists are painting backdrops.

—ROBIN CHAPMAN, MADISON, WI

visit VW Online for more by this author

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and was carried out with his Wellingtons on.
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Wobble-stumbling to the water’s edge,
our two-year-old daughter attempts to toss
one substantial stone after the other back into
that icy blue bay—the echoing clock and clack
of rock on rock, the occasional kerplunk.
Worrying she will crush a foot or her
brother’s head, as he stands obliviously close,
absorbed in his own stony obsessions,
we yell our cautions into the weightless wind,
weighing something hefty
in our minds a moment
before letting it go.
—JEFF LEISGANG, FORT ATKINSON, WI

Christmas songs
The older children are still singing
in the piny choir loft, so we younger
ones wait shivering beside the heavy
doors for the final deo gratias
in the smooth church foyer,
snow boots puddling on speckled
marble, our new snoods from Grandma
covering our little ears, one of the only
non-sock or underwear gifts under
the tree this year, and grade seven begins “when blossoms flowered
‘neath the snow” as we hear another
amen but this time accompanied by
the whoosh of a thousand elephants
exhaling and the far aisle door creaks
open for the first Christmas Catholic
already tapping the bottom of a Lucky
Strike package and just as Sister Modesta
is heading back to our class from where
she was pecking through the little glass
window at the finish of the mass, Mary
Ellen Pickens snickers and points
her skinny little finger at my twin and me
and then it seems that all the girls are
tittering about our new scarf-hats
from Grandma but grade seven is now
thumping down the choir stairs and Sister
Modesta is shushing us and lining us up
two-by-two like soldiers to climb the choir
stairs and sing our own Christmas songs.
—JAN BALL, CHICAGO, IL

History is important
The Liberty Grove Town Board
is finally thinking about cleaning up
the trash at the Val-A Motel.
Seems the local business community
fear contamination by Mr. Olsen’s
collection of rare junk.
Every spring they leave encouraging notes
on his door, even offer him a dumpster
in which to keep his treasures.
But Mr. Olsen contends that his stuff has
historic value just like the rusty old truck
across the road by Gus Klenke’s garage
placed there by the ladies of the Ellison Bay
Historical Society and decorated
each season with appropriate adornments
and with winter and snow coming,
Mr. Olsen says that his collection
will look almost as picturesque.
The ladies of the Historical Society are not amused.
—HANNE GAULT, ELLISON BAY, WI

my father’s boxy girl
My father draws the buttons down the front
of the boxy jacket, then sketches the straight
skirt, his face puckered in concentration as if
he were threading a needle in poor light not
clutching a pencil at the fluorescent kitchen table.
Below the skirt he draws vertical lines for the calf
to ankle and shoes that look like horse’s hooves
with a little strap over the instep. At five, I titter,
whether with the excitement of having my dad’s
complete attention or derision at his boxy girl, so
he, always mercurial anyway, erupts like a faucet
with a broken washer, spraying saliva on me as he
shouts, “I’ll never draw anything for you again since
you don’t appreciate it,” turning me into a blender
with the electricity of his anger, but that was long
ago. Today, I appraise myself before the beveled
mirror in the mahogany French armoire, my sturdy
shape twisting to and fro in the pencil-thin light
of early morning, opening and closing the metal
buttons of my blazer, smoothing my skirt before I
walk into another day, my father’s boxy girl.
—JAN BALL, CHICAGO, IL

Love Has To Do With Babies
She said xo and the old man
didn’t know what that meant.
So, he ate the idea and did
not say a word. Later, he
kissed her and admitted it.
She left him. The old man
thought. This’s what I get
for being honest? But deep
down he knew it had more to
do with how ugly he was. &
a lack of money and honesty.
Later that yr. she wrote to
him, Larry, thanks for being
so sweet and honest. I am
with a teen who lives in Auk-
land and he lies to me all
the time. We will speak our
vows before you receive this.
—DANIEL GALLIK, CHAGRIN FALLS, OH
Two Poems in the Voice of Jo Hopper

Office at Night

Two checks
beside a black typewriter
wait for the manager
to sign. My hands stuck
in the drawer,
I’m filing papers,
turned from the green cabinet
to look across the room
at him. Concentrating
on an invoice,
he doesn’t notice me.

I want to go his desk,
where he is adding up
black numbers,
and let him
touch my breasts.

I want to pull down
the window shade,
so inside that room
we’ll be a couple.

Four Lane Road

I’m really sick
of being out in the sticks
with this guy, a face
like carved granite,
his sleeves rolled up,
white undershirt, vest.
He only wears a tie
for church. All day long,
he sits in his deck chair
holding that mushy cigar
he never puts in his mouth,
while he waits for a Ford
pickup to pull in for gas.
Here on this county road,
the way it would be
with any man,
he demands I feed him.
I look out of the station window,
my apron on,
to call him to lunch.
I could yell all day.

—Carole Stone, Verona, NJ

Two Portraits of Adams County

Chet

Hands blacked by printer’s ink
in white porcelain
like salamanders on sand,
white pumice soap
a bleached rock between them,
he whistled flexing the apples
of his arms, the crown of his head
shiny as any star.
Afraid to breathe,
afraid the rising, falling beat
of my heart might stir him,
I hid in the corner, watched the vocables
he had scraped together taken
by water and towel, the hard black
magic of the trade taken swiftly,
the hour of setting the alphabet
backwards lost in the easy
scan of the eye
over the dry
thick paper.

Pete

Today I step from a foggy stoop
and through the phantom walls
of grist mills gone twenty years,
the ghosts of farm boys shooting
hoops on the red storage shed,
peg-leg O’Brien and his Boston Braves
pillaging the piers of Milwaukee
for two pennants before heading south.

Wild ferns dampen my pants.
Morning glories obscure the stumps
of elders and oaks.
Feeling is not heartfelt, but sensual,
vision like unnoticed breathing,
sustaining and pure.
Rural life passes, a life the historians
now write did not exist but did not
because like spirit it is more
than existence, not the American dream
but the soil and river of our mythos,
a passing plain and painful.

Once, a significant man,
peg-legged O’Brien,
stood on his porch and swung
the ash of his limb at an errant ball,
his cars in the summer light,
like large questions on the sides of his face.
When the sun was behind them they’d turn
magenta like a boy’s ears after
frostbite, or the petals of a rose.

—Jeff Burt, Mount Hermon, CA
Eating a Danish Bagel

1

This is your world, but I love being with you on gaagaden in Vejle, the European windows winding behind us as we share a Danish bagel filled with shrimp and eggs at Cafe Egestrand. With sunshine for a week, the street is full of people. Carved faces peer from cornices with ancient Viking eyes. A Muslim woman looks for summer dresses on an outdoor rack; two Swedes sit behind us, speaking English, and a reggae singer, probably American, plays for change, and lets a young Dane try out his guitar.

Politics should help us shape the spaces where we come together. Now, with the meaning gone, the endless empty theater goes on. We feel locked out, fear each other, while the actors play their sad and callous games. I cannot watch my own country anymore.

2

At night, I rub your back, glad you’re here to touch and be with. Sleep comes slowly; I dream of helplessness. Awake, I see the gold and purple light, so new and hopeful, the colors with a muted clarity I need to make myself remember.

—Norman Leer, Madison, WI

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Dear Diary

There are no freedoms no other viewpoints allowed within the compound; these blank pages quickly filled with barbed scrawl, a hard covered sketchbook stalag. No guard towers or concertina wire required. If you’re lucky enough to slip in, read, then under the fence, undetected and escape, unscathed by the brush against this smudged and stained despot, her fingers blackened from all the reputations she’s strafed, count yourself among the few, not quite proud survivors.

—G. A. Scheinoha, Eden, WI

Once in a while

Let the unlikely happen.

Let my neighbor become content to feed the birds and that squirrel.

Let the chips fall where they usually don’t perhaps on my numbers for a change.

Let all the home team’s hits fall fair and all foul balls be caught by surprised children.

Let the moon rise full each night for a month and sunsets linger for hours.

Let Christians be required to speak their deeds aloud before receiving communion. Let the leftover bread feed the hungry.

Let all soldiers return to hometowns unchanged.

—Ed Werstein, Milwaukee, WI

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Lunch Guest, 1939

Mom, who’s that man on the steps? Just somebody passing through. Why is he here? Because he was hungry. What is he eating? A fried egg sandwich. And coffee? Yes, and coffee. Why is he eating out there? He said he liked it outdoors. How did he know where we lived? I guess they tell each other. Where is he going? Back to the train, I think. Is he ever coming back? Probably not. Why did he call you “Ma’am”? I think he was just being polite.

—Peggy Trojan, Brule, WI

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—Peggy Trojan, Brule, WI

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Nose-Me-Downs

We had three of them:
all plaid but different colors,
different lengths.
They were scratchy, fringed, well-worn.
Proper technique: tie around your neck,
and pull up over your nose
before going outside.

Where did these three winter wool
scarves come from?
Were they ever new?
Were they ever washed?
Did they nose-warm four families
of cousins before they became ours?
Did we ever think of buying new scarves?
Never! Not once!

We wore those three scarves winter
after winter, from age one to eighteen.
They were as much a part of our winters
as snowbanks, snowmen, frosted windows,
and runny noses.

—LINDA ASCHRENNER, MARSHFIELD, WI

Night Barking

Village dogs bark, bully, bluster,
in the hot summer dark.
I know a huge muscular dog
will climb our TV antenna,
knock out the screen, leap
in our second floor bedroom.
I already see the dog’s teeth and cry.
My older sisters can’t sleep. Judy asks what’s wrong.

I tell her about the dogs, the TV antenna.
She bravely gets out of bed,
pulls aside the curtain, and raises the shade.
From my bed I see her in baby-doll pajamas
scrutinizing faraway Rib Mountain,
then, our driveway under the window.

Judy turns to me.
It’s okay. No dogs are loose.
I believe her. She is ten.
I close my eyes. We are safe.
We will not be murdered by dogs.
At least, not tonight.

—LINDA ASCHRENNER, MARSHFIELD, WI

Coffee Time

3:30 on a rainy afternoon.
The smell of coffee perking.
The table set with cinnamon rolls,
sugar cubes, real cream.
Dad coming home from work,
all the kids from school.
Time to talk and unwind.
Memories from the coffeepot.

—MAVIS J. FLEGLE, ROTHSCILD, WI

Windmill on the Farm

The farm where dad grew up
in Michigan’s UP had no power lines
coming to the house.
Back in the 30s and 40s
the farm had a windmill.
It clanged and banged,
chirped and whirled,
as it pumped water
for the sauna.

The windmill also generated
electricity for the little radio.
When the windmill started turning,
we would run to the sauna
to watch cold, sparkly water
flow into vats. It was like
music playing—magic.

—MAVIS J. FLEGLE, ROTHSCILD, WI

Maryland, NY

How did this hamlet get the same name
As a state? It’s confusing: whenever I say
I’m going up to Maryland, people squint
And say “Up?” After all, Maryland is south
Or “down” from New York City, so I have to say
It’s a hamlet upstate, near Oneonta,
And most New Yorkers have a vague idea
Where Oneonta is, somewhere in the middle
Of the state, somewhere around Cooperstown,
Somewhere the green hills roll and summer fields
Wave corn and milk cows graze and barns
Sag and cave in the broiling sun
And the withering economy, and now
Maryland, pop. 200, might lose
its post office, the heart of a hamlet
with no business district, no main street,
no traffic light, but with the name of a state.

—GEORGE HELD, NEW YORK, NY
Change Finds My Hometown

Not that I mind them being here, that’s not it. Just wanna know why they drive better cars than mine. Somebody give ’em them cars, why don’t they give me one? I worked hard all my life and nobody give me shit. Why these Chinese get all the favors? Not Chinese, Dad, my sister says, they’re Hmong. Mom chimes in from the kitchen: So much crime we got now. Just read the papers. Can’t feel safe nowhere. Maybe these Hmong that come over here aren’t so bad, but their kids are mean. They got gangs beatin’ up on kids who been born here. I’m listening from the easy chair, pretending to watch TV. My first visit home in years and I’m stumbling to navigate the family. It’s changed, I say loud, can’t deny it. What did you expect, my sister says, the world is shifting and won’t stop. She’s right. She’s up close with Hmong enrollees in her classroom and their families after school.

She’s big-hearted to a fault. Wants us all to get along. It’s Mom and Pop I can’t figure; they used to walk evenings up and down the block visiting neighbors till past dark. Now they’re locked in their own home. It’s hard, my sister says. You bet it’s hard, Mom says and bites her lip. Yeah, Dad says with a sigh. It’s never been easy, he says, never been easy for nobody.

—LOWELL JAEGER, BIGFORK, MT

Drought Breaks

Cattle stand, staring at the water, willing it to rise and slake their thirst. Wagtails flick their skirts, skimming from bush to water and back again. God’s in his heaven and, the farmer hopes, working out fair water allocations.

—JOE MASSINGHAM, CHISHOLM, ACT, AUSTRALIA

Raising Windmills

She counts the timed red flickers against a calculated swing in the parsed-out fields where rolling hills have ceased their rolling.

He watches the steel shadows like spinning armies march and pulse; the cattle hunch, the chicken scatter in the hum-hum drumming.

So, they made a few extra bucks; who can blame them in this hard-clay world, a little extra help for the tired old farmer with un-tillable land.

The company came unannounced to do the deals. No one loses, they said; they all shook hands. It was in the winter months, no one saw them leaving.

Smart guys who tipped their chairs back at the yellow kitchen tables, loosened their ties, pencil marked the land here and there down the road. It was an easy calculation.

It’ll make clean, cheap power for the folks far away as Chicago, some left over for the locals. Good for you good for the country, no one loses.

Now the farmers don’t talk cows, their wives don’t share recipes. They mostly lie awake nights counting the once close neighbor’s sky-blade rotations.

—MARY WEHNER, FOND DU LAC, WI

visit VW Online for audio by this author

On My Way to Slinger, Wisconsin

I see a white swan, up ahead, nestled in green grass along the road, watching each car drive by with a quick turn of its neck. Closer, I see it is an empty plastic bag for a kitchen wastepaper basket. I will never forget that swan.

—JOHN LEHMAN, CAMBRIDGE, WI

visit VW Online for video by this author
The Sessions of Sweet Silent Thought

Of course you can go home again, only when you get there it’s not home anymore. A crushed paper cup in the gutter, old woman in an upstairs window looking you over. It even smells alien, like someone else’s closet or a friend’s dog. Grandmother is gone, gone so long they’ve named a street for her and thus entirely erased her breath from this greening earth.

But my brother still swears it was he tossed the trike, and I was just told about it. Could be, could be, but I suppose to be awake and alive on a chill December morning listening to doors opening and closing, hearing car engines cough to life and neighbors leaving for work—to be awake still and notice, yes, that is lucky enough.

—David Graham, Ripon, WI

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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 back seat of a Jeep whose plates read “Ever After,” hands commandeering clouds, seeding their silver linings, precipitating summer and home.

—Sandra J. Lindow, Menomonee, WI

The Phrase

for Fay

As I’m once again, in the spirit of “naked we come, naked we go,” jettisoning something from my life—old photos, a troublesome friend, movies even—my daughter accuses me of another “minimalist living frenzy,” and I’m so happy to have the phrase I proudly start telling my friends about it, although, of course, without intending to do so she has given me a gravestone epitaph—“Here he lies enjoying his final and best minimalist living frenzy”—and I know I’ll never jettison her phrase, will be holding tightly onto only it at the very end since language is always light, sometimes even lighter than air, like her phrase, which, as it rises, I grip, frenzied and minimal, in order to rise with it.

—Philip Dacey, Minneapolis, MN

visit VW Online for more by this author
Drift

Every six months,
I have to be biopsied for Thyroid cancer.
The doctors stick needles in my throat,
and so far, the results
have been borderline.

This winter there has been little snow.
The deer come into my yard,
and food is free and easy to have.
I know they are being shot,
but they seem weighty and lanky,
take up the frame of the photograph,
so that I cannot dispute their reality.

Many deer come; many muscles moving.
My dog gets excited.
I wonder how can I go on living,
the winter earth turning over
in its mind snow and rain,
when, like these deer, I seem bent
backward and forwards into nothing.
Yet I watch them turn hooves
like tapdancers,
take gently the sap and bark of trees,
loving the little green left on the February earth,
raising tails in joy.

—LINDA BENNINGHOFF, LLOYD HARBOR, NY

Eating Rice With Thich Nhat Hanh

A sunny morning in mid-March.
I read Fragrant Palm Leaves
by Thich Nhat Hanh.

He describes how, as a young man,
he helped build a Buddhist monastery
while living in a Vietnamese forest,
loving the sounds of nature there, including a
monstrous rain storm, which heaved
trees to the ground and blasted the window
where he stood and watched with awe.

Later, he and I make eggs with rice
and soy sauce. We absorb the
peaceful quiet after the storm’s
conflagration.

—MARY CUNNINGHAM, MADISON, WI

A Bad Path

After we caught and arrested him for slashing tires
in the basement parking lot of a famous luxury hotel
we hauled him to the police station, slammed him
in a tiny cell to think about what he had been doing
then yanked him for an interview under glaring lights
where he told us he had not the slightest bit of remorse
that his actions were deliberate and fully explainable
since he was in the middle of trying to defile his soul
do something nasty so that in his next reincarnation
his imperfection would insure he got another chance
to reappear rather than being swept nirvana-like into
the fold of some eternal being, he taken with making
as many stops as he could wrench from the grand wheel
before he got swept into the center, we doing our best
to warn him that he could return as a termite, a raccoon
blind fish, whale, beetle, limping horse, mad dog, skunk
a terrifying range of eccentric options that pleased him
more than he ever imagined, then lowering his voice
he confessed that his greatest fear was to return as us
as people bent on doing good in the world, a bad path
since it would hurl him into the hub of bright oblivion.

—GLENN KLETKE, KANATA, ONTARIO, CANADA

Guided Tour

Step gingerly.
The streets wear coats of glass.
Jagged pieces like ice. Powder like snow.
We speak here of the city of broken windows.
Build of wood decades ago in order to float away in a flood.
But when the flood never came, the frustrated citizens
opened their doors, broke their windows, deserted their houses.
New residents began to move in.
First sunlight, moonlight, starlight.

Then wind, rain and snow, eager to shelter themselves somewhere.
Next mosquitoes, houseflies, butterflies, dragonflies, anything that flies
including birds delighted to have food and shelter combined.
Mice came too, rats, raccoons, skunks and squirrels
happy to dwell in rooms that predators had vacated
dogs and cats running off with their owners.
Step gingerly.
You are the first human equivalent to return.
Notice collapsing walls, holes in roofs, crumbling foundations.
Time will soon disassemble and level the city, call up
beetles, worms, ants, centipedes and earwigs
underground citizens to witness
the spectacular heaven soon to fall upon them.

—GLENN KLETKE, KANATA, ONTARIO, CANADA
Home

A feast of breasts:  
the moon-ripe fruit of breast  
upon breast  
upon breast.

The fruited feast  
of breast upon breast:  
this fruitful time,  
this happy season.

These fruited fields  
of home.

—P. C. MOOREHEAD, NORTH LAKE, WI

Almost

When the car stumbled  
onto that patch of ice, all I could think  
to do was say I'm so sorry. And I said his name.

And I listened to what  
he told me to do: turn into it, don't hold the brake—  
we were both so calm, how could that be?

The dogs' heads sprung forward  
and our baby whirred in her straps.  
I saw the drop. I knew what was coming,  
that inertia, the way the wheels paused  
before denouement,  
that long, terrible cartwheel.

—MOLLY SUTTON KIEFER, RED WING, MN

visit VW Online for more by this author

Words

Realistic hardly stretches  
any edges  
standing far too close  
to status quo.

That's not to say compromise  
isn't called for  
but cede only ground that  
you can live without.

Hope for an adversary that respects  
strength and purpose.

Then grandiose whittled down  
to size  
becomes a plan  
for action,

a starting point  
for peace.

—KAREN HALEY, WAUWATOSA, WI

Gardener in Japan

When the black wave  
clawed away our village,  
I was in Tokyo, finishing some work  
I thought would pay the bills.

To return took many days,  
and even then  
I could never go home.

I confess I have ceased to look for you,  
but not to watch for you.  
Somehow spring wedges up  
between bits of waste and sand,  
rolling bitter green over the tortured land.

I see, but cannot bear to watch it.  
I watch for you.

And for the first time,  
what plants I have salvaged  
I don't know how to root, or where.

—JUDY LENT, SEATTLE, WA

Filling

I carved a piece of pumpkin pie.  
It was so lustrous and gold—  
I thought it was silence.  
My knife cut  
through the pie  
so dense.  
It held together,  
as I placed a piece on my plate.

O silence,  
you are that pie—  
so dense,  
so quiet,  
so held together,  
filling my plate  
and leaving room  
for no other.

—P. C. MOOREHEAD, NORTH LAKE, WI
Lester and Helen

Maybe that’s what God is: It just happens.
- Overheard in a hospital elevator

A man steps out to buy bread and arrives at the store
to find he’s left his keys and his wallet
locked away in his room.
Maybe later he’ll say, It just happens,
but for now he walks around downtown
and gets lost and spends the day
in a park where a young woman’s chasing
her best friend’s collie. Since Lester has a way
with animals he and Helen round up the collie
and talk dogs a little.
The leash broke, Helen says.
It’s chilly, so Lester offers his coat.
They laugh and have coffee, and Lester
asks can he see her again. They go to the show,
hold hands, marry and have two sons, Bill and Jack.
And this is not magic.
Or no more than how we picture both
boys in knickers and place them in school.
Imagine the ’30s.
Black, wide-fendered cars line the streets and the boys
wear caps and Jack carries his books in a green canvas bag.
Bill carries his with a strap.
In a few years Bill’s
off to college where someone says,
One day I’ll introduce you to Margaret.
Bill’s shy — first he will, and then he won’t.
And then he will.
So they meet and they order the cold plate, talk,
talk, talk: Bill loves science, Margaret loves books,
and they marry and forty years later they finally divorce.
Still, whatever they say and however events
come together and dates add up, this
is where my own life starts.
The truth is it couldn’t have happened otherwise.
And that it just happened.


Mark Kraushaar of Lake Mills, Wisconsin
joined Shoshauna Shy for a conversation about
his poem “Lester and Helen.” Fix yourself a cup
of tea, pull up a chair, and listen in.

MARK: I’ve worked briefly as a high school
English teacher, a cab driver, a welder on the
coal and grain barges of the Mississippi,
and a pipe welder at Ingalls Shipbuilding. I am
now an RN and work in Madison, which I’ve
done since the mid-80s.

SHOSHAUNA: And I’d say that your
current occupation feeds into “Lester and Helen” from your new book *
The Uncertainty Principle* which won the Anthony Hecht
Poetry Prize in 2010 and was published by
The Waywiser Press in 2011. The poem
seems to be constructed on
what I think of as a family
tale savored and passed down from holiday
table to table. Could you
say what planted the seed
of inspiration for this poem?

MARK: The truth is, I never
met Lester and Helen. They
were my father’s parents, as
I say in the poem, and were
killed in a train wreck shortly
after my parents were married.
Actually, what inspired the
poem was just how wildly
unlikely, and yet strangely
inevitable one’s arrival on
Earth seems to be. The phrase
for God, “It just happens,”
seemed wonderfully plain,
mysterious and apt all at
once, and I did overhear this
one day on an elevator in the
hospital where I worked.

SHOSHAUNA: Yes, I believe
your epigraph—something
overheard—contributes nicely
to this poem, presents another
dimension to it, and the way
you echo the epigraph in the
final line clicks everything
into place. The fact that the
words overheard were in an
elevator—and not just any
elevator but a hospital elevator—
really works well. That said,
do you remember when you
selected this epigraph—in
other words, did you have
the poem written already, or
did the epigraph precede the
writing?

MARK: “Lester and Helen”
had been marinating for
awhile when I heard this;
it wasn’t a poem that came
very quickly, I remember. That phrase was
a help in getting the poem moving again,
and seemed the sort of mystical (but not very
helpful) definition of God provided in the
Old Testament — you know, “I am that I am.”
So, I thought wow, great!

And that the conversation with this bit of
speculation in it took place in a hospital
elevator gave it a lot of resonance—the three
or four family members all looked a bit
stricken, and were apparently trying to make
some kind of sense of a health care mystery
that was beyond understanding.

SHOSHAUNA: Well, the implication here is
that you wouldn’t have been born—and be
who you are—if that collie’s leash had stayed
intact or your grandfather didn’t forget his
wallet that morning. Both of these seemingly
insignificant things contributed to your
birth, and that’s where “Lester and Helen”
has universal appeal. In my case, my dad’s
former fiancée saw this blonde jitterbugging
at a camp picnic, and told him, “There’s the
woman for you!” My father agreed, broke up
with his fiancée, and dated the dancer instead
who subsequently became my mom.

MARK: I bet there’d be a good poem to make
out of the ex-fiancée’s conversation with
herself after that!

SHOSHAUNA: Well, please write it because
I want to read that poem! But getting back
to “Lester and Helen,” I am wondering
what more you might know about that “cold plate,”
which comprised the first meal your parents
ever shared, at least in the poem. If it is
factual, when and how did you learn about it?
Then again, if it wasn’t really a cold plate that
they shared, perhaps you might explain why
you chose to use it in this instance. I have to
say it gives me a chill, especially when I get
to that line “…forty years later they finally
divorce.”

MARK: I thought I wanted to create
something, some image having to do with
this scene that seemed as specific as it did
mundane. What could be duller than the
cold plate, maybe egg salad?

SHOSHAUNA: No, bologna on rye!
Seriously, what strikes me about the last two
lines is the juxtaposition of two separate
concepts: one references an absolute
precision; the other serendipity. Together,
they make for an inexplicable magic that I
didn’t in any way anticipate. Is that the effect
you were after?

MARK: I think they’re both true, these
separate concepts, I mean, that this and this
and the other happened…but how we each
arrive here beyond anything understood is
what I was after. I mean, that we’re kind of
beached by the same wave as our family and
friends seems simultaneously impossible and
inevitable. I like that.

SHOSHAUNA: What a terrific image, Mark
—getting beached! Maybe save that for your
next poem, OK?

If you’d like to contact Mark Kraushaar to
continue the conversation about this poem, you
can reach him here: mkjklakemills@frontier.com.
Drew Dillhunt is author of the chapbook, 3,068,518 (Mudlark, No. 39, 2010). His writing has appeared in Eclectic, Jacob2, Tarpaulin Sky and Volt. His manuscript, Material Science, was selected as a finalist for the National Poetry Series. He’s released two albums of songs, including one with the band Fighting Shy, and is a member of the Seattle art-music collaborative The Blank Department. pp. 20-21

Richard Dinges, Jr. has an MA in literary studies from University of Iowa and he manages business systems at an institutional investment company. Comco River Review, California Quarterly, Soundwaves, and Miller’s Brook have most recently accepted his poems for their publications. p. 15

Joseph Farley edited Asa Factory for 24 years. His books/chapbooks include Sackers, For the Birds, Longing for the Mother Tongue, and Witze of the Marshall. pp. 8, 9, 10

Mavis J. Flege enjoys gardening, Antique Club, writing, and jaunts around the Midwest with longtime friends. Her first chapbook, Just Another Day, came out in 2010. pp. 32

Christa Gahlman was born and raised in rural Wisconsin with a great appreciation for the intimacy of the woods, wide landscapes, and textured fields. She is the mother of two incredible daughters and one amazing son. She now resides in the city of Madison, and writes...and writes. p. 23

Daniel Gallick has had poetry and short stories published by Hawaii Review, Nimrod, Literature (University of Kentucky). The Hirum Poetry Review, Aurora (Univ. of Alabama), Whiskey Island (Cleveland State Univ), and various online journals. A novel, A Story Of Danish Fate, is available at amazon.com. p. 29

Abby Gamberdi’s poems have appeared in Cream City Review, Onion-Magazine, Crab Creek Review, Georgetown Review and elsewhere. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and received an MFA from University of California Irvine 2008. pp. 13

Hanne Gauth was published in Wisconsin Calendar, The Poet and, Fire Vine. She won third prize in the Joanne Hirdklef poetry contest. p. 29

David Graham has taught writing and literature at Ripon College in Ripon, WI, since 1987. He is the author of six collections of poems, most recently Stutter Monk (Flame Press), and an essay anthology edited with Kate Sonntag: After Confession: Poetry as Autoethnography (Graywolf Press). p. 34

Taylor Graham’s ties to Wisconsin include a cousin in Wisconsin, helping instruct at a search-and-rescue dog school in Oshkosh, and appearances in Verse Wisconsin. Otherwise, she lives in the California Sierra with a husband, a dog trained for SAR, an unruntable cat, and four sheep. pp. 14, 15

Barbara Gregorich’s most recent titles are Sound Proof, an adult mystery set at a Midwest music festival, Jack and Larry, the free verse nonfiction story of Jack Graney and his bull terrier, Larry. She is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin and resides in Wisconsin part of every month. p. 27

For his first book of poems, Poet Mennes (Ahahada Books, 2009), Adam Halbur was chosen the 2010 resident poet of The Frost Place, the Robert Frost homestead in Franconia, New Hampshire. His work has also appeared in the anthology Never Before: Poems about First Experiences (Four Way Books, 2005) as well as in various journals. p. 14

Karen Haley has lived in Wisconsin most of her adult life, and raised five children here. p. 36

William Wright Harris’s poetry has appeared in six countries in such literary journals as The Cannon’s Mouth, Ascend Appetite, and, Write On! He’s a student at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, where he’s been lucky enough to study poetry in workshop settings with such poets as Jesse Janeshik, Mallory Kallet, Arthur Smith, and Marcel Bournes. p. 19

George Held, a seven-time Pushcart nominee, publishes widely online and in print, and Garrison Keillor has featured his work on NPR. Held’s most recent books, both 2011, are After Shakespeare: Selected Sonnets (www.cervenabarvapress.com) and a children’s book, Neighbor (www.thisingly.com), illustrated by Joung Un Kim. p. 32

As founding editor of Many Voices Press, Lowell Jaeger compiled Poems Across the Big Sky, an anthology of Montana poets, and New Poets of the American West, an anthology of poets from 11 Western states. His most recent poetry collections are Suddenly Out of a Long Sleep (Arctos Press, 2009) and IPE. (Main Street Rag Press, 2010). He is the recipient of fellowships from the NEA and the Montana Arts Council and winner of the Golfer Poetry Prize. Most recently, Jaeger was awarded the Montana Governor’s Humanities Award for his work in promoting thoughtful civic discourse. p. 33

Port Gary Jones lives with his wife of many years on Wisconsin’s Door Peninsula where he enjoys reading, gardening, and silent sports. His verse has appeared most recently in Readcook, Purl, Verse Wisconsin, Knock, Peninsular Pulse, and Chaocater at Stuas. Jones, who is an award-winning poet, teaches poetry writing workshops for both high school students and adults. p. 22, 23

Glenne Kleiber’s poems appear in the recent edition of ACR (Poet v.s. Poet) and In Fine Form, a guide to structured free verse (2006). Her poems have appeared in a number of poetry journals and have been selected for inclusion in several anthologies. She’s a member of the Field of Stone, a poetry group, and a part of that work is the compilation of The Poet’s Voice Without Borders 2; Best Gay Poetry 2008; Comeback Wolves: Welcoming the Wolf Home and Wilderness Antler. p. 13

Mike Lane has lived in Delafield, Wisconsin, for almost 40 years, with his wife Kathy. Mike’s poems have appeared in various journals, including the eelgrass meadow, Waltz of the Meatballs, The Medulla Review. His first chapbook of poetry, They Can Keep the Colder Block, was launched by Exot Books in March 2012. p. 13, 19

Jackie Langetieg has three books, White Shoulders (Cross-Roads Press), Just What in Hell is a Stage of Grief, and Confetti in a Silent City (Ghosh Horse Press). A fourth book, A Terrible Tenderness awakens sales. She lives in Verona, WI with two black cats and her son, Eric. p. 22


Tom Lavelle, a native of Pittsburgh, lived in Milwaukee between 1951 and 83. Since then he’s visited sporadically. He lives today in Stockholm, where he teaches and writes as he has done since 1992. It’s not colder than Wisconsin, but dearer. p. 11
Janet Leahy grants some of her poems from her experience as a teacher in Milwaukee. She is on the board of the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets. Her poems appear in various journals and on Your Daily Poem. p. 26

Norman Leer is Professor Emeritus of English at Roosevelt University, Chicago. He has published a critical study of Ford Madox Ford, a chapbook and two books of his own poems (I Dream My Father in a Song, and Second Living, Mellon Poetry Press, 1992 and 1997), as well as poems and articles in several journals. In 1990, he received the Illinois Significant Poet's Award from State Laureate Gwendolyn Brooks. He and his wife Grethe live in Madison. p. 31

John Lehman is the founder of Roshud magazine and the poetry editor of Wisconsin People & Ideas. p. 25, 55

Jef Leigang’s poems have previously appeared in Wris Wisconsin, Free Lunch, Plaingoung, Flint Hills Review, Sestoanoc, Verse Wisconsin, and elsewhere. In addition to the poems featured here, he hopes to publish a children’s book he has written, and perhaps about thousand words about the negotiation of a beach on Washington Island in Door County, one of his family’s favorite destinations for many years now. p. 28

A visit to a cousin in Madison, though pleasant, wasn’t enough to connect Jody Lente, a Seattle editor and writer, to the land. The Wisconsin Uprising, however, a hope sign of a reeding tide of complacency, has permanently imbedded Wisconsin’s people in her heart. p. 10, 36

MaryEllen Letarte’s father was born in Pepin, WI. He matriculated at the University of Wisconsin until WWII. Her sister Christine graduated from Marquette University and lived most of her adult life in Wisconsin. MaryEllen lives and writes in Lurinburg, ME, where she developed, and now directs, the Louise Bogan Chapter of the Massachusetts State Poetry Society. p. 9

Pam Lewis is a psychologist, recently retired from UW-Madison, where she worked for 13 years. She lives in Madison, and likes to compare and contrast things like crossword puzzles and poetry. p. 23

Recently Sandra J. Lindow fell down a woodchuck hole (only one foot thanks to yoga) while trying to murder box elder bugs with insecticidal soap. She lives in Menomonie, Wisconsin, where she writes, edits, and teaches part-time at University of Wisconsin-Stout. p. 34

K.R. (Joe) Massingha was born in the UK but has lived the second half of his life in Australia. Major employment has been as a Navy officer, university student from first degree to PhD, tutor, lecturer and Master of Wright College, University of New England, NSW. He retired early because of cancer and heart problems and now spends time waiting to see medical practitioners, writing poetry and prose and smellding the roses. He has had work published in Australia, India, Nepal, NZ, UK, and USA. p. 3

P. C. Moorehead moved to Wisconsin from California in November. She appreciates the beauty and quiet of the woods and the environmental inspiration which they provide for her writing and reflection. p. 36

Bruce W. Nieh is a “beneficent bureaucrat” from southern NJ whose poetry has appeared in Wris Wris, Writer Writer, The Lyric, Maine Review, and many others. His awards include the ByLine Short Fiction and Poetry Award, first prize for poetry at the Philadelphia Writers Conference, and a Pushcart Prize nomination. His latest book is a collection responding to her Army Reservist son’s military service. “A visit to a cousin in Madison, though pleasant, wasn’t enough to connect Jody Lente, a Seattle editor and writer, to the land. The Wisconsin Uprising, however, a hope sign of a reeding tide of complacency, has permanently imbedded Wisconsin’s people in her heart. p. 10, 36

Amber Rees is a Wisconsin native who tends to hover over, and feter about, the Lake Michigan shoreline. She is a proud member of the Stone Kettle Poets. p. 8, 22

Margaret (Peggy) Roosa has published two books of poetry, the award-winning volume about Milwaukee’s fair housing marches, Two Hundred Nights and One Day and a collection responding to her Army Reserve son’s deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, Though I Haven’t Been to Baghdad. Inspired by her small garden, she is currently completing work on a new manuscript, Justice Freedom Heros. pp. 4-5

Chuck Rybak lives in Wisconsin and is currently an Assistant Professor of English and Humanistic Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Stout Flambeau Bay. He is the author of two chapbooks, Niel and Drink My Way Through the Likensun. His full-length collection, Tongue and Groove, was released in 2007 by Main Street Rag. Poems of his have appeared in The Cincinnati Review; Pebble Lake Review; War, Literature & the Arts; The Ledge; Southern Poetry Review; Verse Wisconsin; and elsewhere. A lifelong visual artist, she is also the author and illustrator of Let’s Make Face!, a children’s book (www.RhyimeTheRootBook.com). p. 12

Anne Shaw’s collections of poetry include Underworn, winner of the Leni Rudinsky Poetry Prize, and Shatter & Thrust, forthcoming from Persea Books in 2013. Work of hers has also appeared or is forthcoming in Harvard Review; New American Writing, Black Warrior Review, Indiana Review; and Hotel Amerique. Her website is www.anneashow.com. p. 16

Peggy Shumaker is Alaska State Writer Laureate for 2010-2012. These poems are from Tucson Red (Red Hen Press, 2013). Her lyrical memoir is fact Breathe Normally (U. of Nebraska Press). Shumaker is Professor Emerita at University of Alaska Fairbanks, where she teaches in the Writer Writing Workshop at PLU. She edits Boreal Books, publishing literature and fine art from Alaska, and the Alaska Literary Series at University of Alaska Press. Please visit her website at www.peggyshumaker.com. p. 12

Shoshanaa Shy is a member of the Prairie Fire Poetry Quartet. In May 2004, she founded Poetry Jumps Off The Shelf. Her poems have been published in numerous journals and magazines including The Santa Fe Review; Confrontus; The Brain Cliff Review; Rattle; Rosebud; The Ledge; The Sage; Memories of Lac de Flambeau Elders; Turn Me Loose: The Unghosting of Medgar Evers; Modern Poetry; Review; Poetry Review. She is a recipient of fellowships from The NJ State Council on the Arts and residencies at Hawthornes Castle International Retreat for Writers in Scotland and Chateau de Laviing in Switzerland. p. 30

Molly Sutton Kieffer’s chapbook, The Recent History of Middle Sand Lake won the 2010 Astonishing Beauty Ruffian Poetry Award. Her work has appeared in Harpur Palate, Berkeley Poetry Review; you are here, Gulf Stream, Green Valley AZ (& recently WI) is connecting with the AZ writing community including the The Nervous Breakdown; Rosebud; and other journals. She has been as a Navy officer, university student from first degree to PhD, tutor, lecturer and Master of Wright College, University of New England, NSW. He retired early because of cancer and heart problems and now spends time waiting to see medical practitioners, writing poetry and prose and smelling the roses. He has had work published in Australia, India, Nepal, NZ, UK, and USA. p. 3

Carolee Stone, Professor of English Emerita, Montclair State University, has published seven chapbooks and three books of poetry, Lime and Salt; Carriage House Press, Traveling with the Dead, Backwaters Press, and American Romance, Carveth Press. Her books include: Check! N混ore, The Robert Poetry Journals includes; Choclate, Nixed, Choclate, Nixed, Memories of Lac de Flambeau Elders, Turn Me Loose: The Unghosting of Medgar Evers; Modern Poetry; Review; Poetry Review. She is a recipient of fellowships from The NJ State Council on the Arts and residencies at Hawthornes Castle International Retreat for Writers in Scotland and Chateau de Laviing in Switzerland. p. 30

Steven D. Stark is the author of four books and has written frequently for a variety of publications including the NY Times and Atlantic Monthly. He recently moved to the Clubhouse House short story contest. p. 9

N. A’Yara Stein is a finalisn in the 2011 National Poetry Series for her manuscript, Saudade. She is a grant recipient of the Michigan Art Council and the Arkanas Arts Council, among other honors. She’s recently published in The MaryEllen Letarte, Bruce W. Nieh, and others. Her collection titled Turn Me Loose: The Unghosting of Medgar Evers (U. of Nebraska Press). A 2005 recipient of the Lannan Literary Fellowship in Poetry, Walker is Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Kentucky. She is the Director of Kentucky’s American & African Studies, and the editor of PULC the new Journal of African-American Art & Culture. pp. 20-21

Carolyn Vargo is a Regional Vice President for WPS. She’s mentor for poetry is Thomas R. Smith, a WI poet and essayist. She has had poems published in Out Out Fire, Wilda Montchallie, WPS calendars, Talking Stick, Echoes, Finnish American Reporters, and most recently, in Migrations, Poetry and Prose for Life Transitions. p. 31


T. W. West, retired from Milwaukee Public Schools, is editor of The Green Valley Review. His work has appeared in The Cincinnati Review; Pebble Lake Review; War, Literature & the Arts; The Ledge; Southern Poetry Review; Memories of Lac de Flambeau Elders (UW Press, 2004). p. 6

Peggy Trojan, retired to the north Wisconsin woods with her husband. She published her first poem at seventy-seven. She has a collection of poems, Dust and Fire, published in Out Out Fire. Her chapbook, Buffalo Dance: the Journey of York (Old Cove Press, 2000). A 2005 recipient of the Lannan Literary Fellowship in Poetry, Walker is Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Kentucky. She is the Director of Kentucky’s American & African Studies, and the editor of PULC the new Journal of African-American Art & Culture. pp. 20-21

Mary Wehner is the author of... or so the opposite, a letterpress chapbook by Red Hyde Press, which also published her book Daybreak: “The Chinese Painting” and Broken Shells at Dusk. Her work has appeared in Red River Review, The Writer Magazine, Verse Wisconsin, Southern Indiana Review, Wisconsin Trails, qarrtsiluni and other publications. She is a founding member of Foot of the Lake Poetry Collective and is a board member of the Council for Wisconsin Writers. p. 33

Greg Weiss is the founding editor of Intentional Walk, the only literary journal devoted to sports poetry (www.intentionalwalkview.com). His work has recently appeared in Boston Review and Southeast Review. p. 27

Ed Werstein spent 22 years in manufacturing and union activity before he museswoked and dragged himself out of bed. His sympathies lie with poor and working people. He advocates for peace and against corporate power. His poetry has appeared in Verse Wisconsin, Blue Collar Review, Mobus Magazine and a few other publications. p. 31

Marie Sheppard Williams’s mentor for poetry is Thomas R. Smith, a WI poet and essayist. She has had poems published in The Sun, Poetry East, Ted Kooser’s newspaper column, and another issue of Verse Wisconsin. She has published seven story collections, and has won the Pemushare Prize twice. p. 7
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