Even though we did not see eye-to-eye on politics, religion, and a raft of other subjects, we set aside our differences for the sake of our poetry.

—Harlan Richards

They worried that no one “outside” would care about what they thought, felt, or wrote. They mourned the gap between themselves “inside” and the communities they had left.

—Anne Farrer Scott

Features

A Community of Poets by Harlan Richards

Inside / Out by Anne Farrer Scott
This is it: the official countdown. With the publication of this issue, we have two VW issues left, Spring 2014 and Fall 2014. For the month of October, we’re reading poems around one last call for thematic work: “Midwest Remix”—see our submissions page online for details. We’re no longer reading for the print issue, as we have enough poems to fill the rest of our remaining pages. One of our goals is to finish this project with zero backlog. We will read book reviews through March 1. Books Received will be updated through August 31, 2014, online and in the last issue (Fall 2014), but any books sent after January 1 will most likely not get reviewed.

So as fall comes on in all its glory, we also face a transition. We’ve written at length through the past few years about our role as editors, our goals, our thoughts and how those ideas have changed as we’ve grown and changed with the magazine. You can find all that stuff online in our archives. We’ve talked at length with you at a multitude of events about our vision, our beliefs, and our excitement at the possibilities for poetry in public spaces, poetry of place, poetry around the kitchen table and in the office board room or the Capitol rotunda. As much as possible, we’ve tried to find poetry in each of those places, spread the word, and celebrate with you all.

We’ve put pressure on words like “excellence,” “publishing,” and even “poetry” itself. We’ve stretched ourselves as we’ve stretched the definitions of what we’re looking for. You know this. You’ve been along for the ride. You, more often than not, provided the ride.

The theme of VW 112 is “Parents & Children.” You’ll find more material, poetry and prose and art, online. While working on this issue, we’ve published two collections of poems by Cathryn Cofell and Moisés Villavicencio Barras as Cowfeather Press. An anthology of work by more than 100 authors, Echolocations, Poems Set in Madison, is also close to publication. We’ve worked on an essay or two and various projects and events in collaboration with other groups, including conversations at the South East Wisconsin and Wisconsin Book Festivals and the Wisconsin Historical Society, and partnerships with Poetry Jumps Off the Shelf, the Madison Common Council, the Dane County Water Commission, Forward Theater, Wormfarm Institute, First Wave at UW-Madison, and Madison Metro Bus. If you’re interested in upcoming events this Fall in a variety of Wisconsin locations, you can check the schedule online at versewisconsin.org/events.

By the time you are reading this, we’ll be almost through what turned out to be an incredibly busy season for us. We’re both looking forward to a winter of retreat and reflection. A little more writing time for ourselves. More time to ask “what’s next” and ponder the answers, in the coming season of dark and rest.

Thanks to volunteer intern Marina Oliver. Thanks to Dana Alexander Kaleta and Lynley Shimat Lys for volunteer proofreading help. Lingering errors are, of course, the responsibility of VW’s editors. Contact us: editors@versewisconsin.org.

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Ellen’s

Where all the words hang out
Some straight up
Others shivering in blue ice
Most of them know each other
Been hanging around all their lives
Sitting in familiar corners
Sifting through the jazzman’s blues
Adrift and loose on the barroom floor
Always in search of that perfect partner
Becoming loud, unruly, insisting
On being put in their rightful place
Once in a while new ones show up
And the short ones insist on combining
Ending up lost in the mixing it up
But during intermission, Ellen appears
Takes the mic and yells turn up the heat
And without missing a beat
They take their places on line
Perfect partners, perfect feet
Never forgetting their days unattached
Finding refuge at Ellen’s, alive in her head
The words spill on paper, a life of their own
Becoming her legacy, becoming her poem.

—SUSAN KILEEN, WATERTOWN, WI

I have written in response and gratitude for all Ellen Kort has done for poetry. She has set the bar high for all who love poetry and wish to share it with others. She has enriched the lives of all who have known her.

Editors’ Note: Susan Kileen’s poem was accidentally omitted from the celebration of Ellen Kort in the April Issue of Verse Wisconsin (#111).

Cabbage Rolls

“Stay behind this cabbage truck. Don’t pass,”
my grandmother told my brother. We were hungry,
ready to be home from crossing into Mexico. The Rio Grande Valley is a pregnant mother earth,
pushing forth Ruby Red Grapefruit, plump
with spraying juice, 1015 Sweet
Onions the size of softballs. Out our windshield
cabbage was stacked like a bed full of sleepy heads,
riding the wooden rails of the transport truck.
“Wait for the railroad track.” The truck rattled
over the track. Five cabbages peeked up and over,
fell to the asphalt, rolling into an onion field. “Stop.
You little ones go get those and pull an onion.” We did.

That night we ate boiled cabbage with salt pork fat,
1015 Onion fresh, cabbage squeaking against our teeth.

Grandmother knew cabbage would fill our young
bellies up enough to sleep, even without meat;
we went to bed faux full, content watching my Chickasaw
grandmother exercising her instinct:
The practice and patience to follow the food,
to know where crossroads lie, and to gather
her pack content with action not words.

—R. SCOTT YARBROUGH, PLANO, TX

Rules of the Game

In the rules of croquet, a player may not strike another player’s ball twice without going through a wicket. This is called being “dead” on the other player.

“...deadness does not apply to the rover.”—Croquet, the Complete Guide, James Carlton and William Thompson

In the transforming moment
after clearing the last wicket
and missing the post by a grass blade
the rover, freed of mortal concerns,
rearranges the cosmos of the court:
gathers with a whirlwind of deft strokes
the balls of straggling teammates,
shepherds them to their tutti finale
and gleefully sends opponents’ balls
streaking to the darkest, coldest
corners of the universe.

—NANCY SCHMALZ, OSHKOSH, WI

Young and Old Look at a Garden

I can see my mom in her garden
from the kitchen window.
She is not particularly productive,
and there is so much to do.
She digs a little,
moves some mulch.
Often I see her standing in a sort of reverie,
growing daily more accustomed to the earth.

—MEREDITH MASON, APPLETON, WI
A Necktie and a Hijab

I wondered how far this woman had traveled to stand in this grade school lobby in Plano, Texas: Middle-Eastern, coal-eyed, young mother, Hijab, looking in desperation at her son, her fingers trembling over an untied American tie. He was due onstage in several minutes. Her eyes pleaded, locked with mine—against her culture. I took the tie, stood behind the boy, turned his collar up. He looked up, backward at me, smiled upside down.

Fix the length of the short end and around once, like every time I went to work after school, Piggly Wiggly; up and through and over back like getting ready for college graduation; around and through like I did for my son’s first recital; pull tight, down to snug, square the knot like before my daughter’s funeral.

I turned him around and showed him his reflection in the trophy case’s glass. He gave me a “thumbs up,” the mother’s smile reflected over my shoulder; I moved to hug her. “It’s disrespectful,” she whispered to me, “Instead, I will hug you with my eyes.” I, then, realized how far I had traveled from a West Texas farm town to be hugged by a woman’s eyes in this grade school lobby of Dallas suburbia. A Necktie and Hijab woven together in one dignified embrace.

—R. Scott Yarbrough, Plano, TX

I Picture My Mother’s Hands

Sailing out sandwiches, chopping vegetables, cooking steak till it’s tough as a shoe because that’s the way he likes it, conveying something delicious for which she is not thanked, on a bright tray, to the living room, in front of a TV. A long time after I decided she was a fool, and years after the first time I thought: that will never be me, I remembered my great-great grandmother, Maryann, who raised white children who could grow to own her, whose love sailed out pure like clean sheets on a line, straight on down to me. One of those babies grew up to have a daughter of her own, whom she named Maryann, and I am more careful now of what I throw away. We are descended from mothers and grandmothers who set boats in streams and let them go, because that is all they could do, but also because the inscription that matters most has always been and always will be love.

—Meredith Mason, Appleton, WI
Of Ice And Minn

A mythical governor once declared
“A hockey rink in every park,
A skating rink on every lake.”
Skates are standard issue

Snowbanks glaciate into icebanks
Bus stop sherpas
Navigate with cramp-ons
and ropes

Local lore tells of black ice
Auto-exhausted
Hidden from sight
Motorist killer

Bored and desperate souls
Fish from bucket seats
On desolate ice
Eelpout and chips

Skiing the fifth tee
Down the fairway hill
Into the rough
Winter’s mulligan

Castles of ice
Carnivals of cold
People of warmth
This is Minnesota

—Jim Landwehr, Waukesha, WI

river-bend dreams

draw me out, crook-end by elbow-bend, in color so i know
one-by-one the willow tree’s cares shooting up into the sky
would i too then constellate—another shard too low
to the ground to know any better?

—Elena Botts, Reston, VA

Declined

Yesterday was her 15th birthday.
She had it planned for months,
walking with her girlfriends arm-and-arm
on the barricaded side of the road
in the bright chill air,
snow melting, fur-lined boots crunching
on the crowd
gleaming blacktop,
Garden of Lights
on the other side
of the big gate wrought iron,
spelling occasion
in a million blinking lights.
Standing in line
wearing too-thin gloves
I stepped off the edge
december,
unable to come up with the currency,
my credit card spitting out
one rolled up receipt
after another,
awful word
in asterisks
repeating
repeating
repeating.

—Tori Grant Welhouse, Green Bay, WI

Collars, Blue

waiting in a corner behind a picture
the un-signed work
of mason
of carpenter
within the wall
the nameless electrician
lighting even December
hidden there
the plumber
piping forever in and out
at the end
no credits rolling
for clean towels
or swept floors
the deep-shoveled snow
no signature
on the unleaking roof
yet the artist
initials the painting
my name is on this poem

—Ralph Murre, Baileys Harbor, WI

note: first line (italicized) is by Anna Swir
Great American Dream

Clouds once painted possibilities above a horizon yet to be explored. Probabilities now lurk, of storms and rising insurance rates, contract provisions that exclude floods and other acts of god I am unsure acts in my world anyway. Now I wear rain coats and drive only to places clearly stamped on maps beside route numbers and distances. Now I know where I am and what will happen next. I have arrived in a world much smaller than promised. Now I want to wake up from this great American dream and find that waking up is just the beginning.

—Rick Dinges, Lincoln, NE

Mornings After Thirty-Eight Years

for Bunny

Dear Amy, you begin, then glance my way, Brow lowered, eyes raised, stage-waiting for attention. You give the paper a shake. My sister’s boyfriend Is coming to my wedding. He’s in jail...

Two squirrels out back chase up and down the ash. Lighter late August air bespeaks the fall. He tends to be high maintenance. I don’t want To hurt my sister, but I also don’t...

It’s our new breakfast ritual. You read—Aloud—Dear Amy’s daily correspondence: Problems, pure trivia to life and death; Each finds an answer (more or less), as if Things could go on like this forever. We Suspend our disbelief with Amy’s help, You reading almost earnestly, me turning From breezy windows toward your voice. Dear Bride...

—Charles Hughes, Park Ridge, IL

visit VW Online for audio by this author

Purgatory Ticktock

Evolution of everything today and over time or at least the opportunity for a double dose of tortured screams. Which scream for thee? Meanwhile you can whisper into the void or vocal-fry your day across a video-conference and an unspontaneous booty call or text me when you can. What gives? We’ve been flippering at the bottom for so long it’s hard to imagine the skimmers overhead but then I think about that snake-blooded shit whose shimmering act of switcheroo at a hundred and two was enough to plop hot tears of pity onto his smoldering tombstone and sizzle his odium.

—Daniel Meltz, New York, NY

A Game of Dice

The passing of time in a small town café, four men at a table, playing dice, splitting the check for coffee and rolls, bitching, in turn, about the Vikings, today’s farmers, politics and the cost of prescription medications. Two are bald; another headed that way, and the fourth has thick hair yet, not even gray. All four did hitches in the service, two in combat in Korea, although it’s never brought up. They’ll look at their watches, and the round-faced clock on the wall behind the register, thinking: another day that is too long. One of them steps outside, lights a cigar, watches grain trucks unloading at the elevator a block to the south, and thinks of his father, the day he busted a stubborn steer across the forehead with a two-by-four. Laughs, snuffs out the cigar. Half his index finger on the right hand is gone, but it’s no big deal. He returns to the table in the café, and says he’ll be gone tomorrow: has to see the doctor because it’s been hurting him to piss. The others nod, and the thick-haired man passes him the dice shaker. His fingers smell like cigar and he shakes the brown cup, dice rattling inside, like picked-over bones in an empty field on a windy day.

—Dana Yost, Forest City, IA

visit VW Online for audio by this author
After Reading “When a Year Goes By After a Mother’s Death and the Daughter No Longer Thinks of the Mother Every Day, She Feels Guilty”

I think how even on the metro past Arlington Cemetery I remember only small pieces: your grin, crutching, you called it, to meet me on a day as the most shrill startling fall. Your eyes that blue. In the morning that rain goes sleet, goes rain again, I don’t want to pull from blue quilts, pull on clothes or sip cold coffee in the kitchen where the old cat just nibbles, walks away, I think of those agony, ecstasy months, how I would have chosen calm, something safe if I had to. Now, when little is, I think of lying under other quilts, it’s as if only my body remembers the feel of when you said after Nam, with a leg missing, you can move closer, deeper. “Don’t touch me while I’m sleeping,” another vet said, “I might leap up with my machete.” That was like going into a war zone. The other’s blue eyes were a drug and he held me sleeping as no one has. The quilt had to be lighter than air so his mangled foot wouldn’t throb. With him, I felt the bed was everywhere but he’d learned to live without planning ahead, cardboard box furniture. He left what had mattered for a freeze frame behind fast: a tape, my long hair, any warning. The snow fell on the outline of his last bed a son told reporters, a ghost I’m losing the scent of already, trying to get thru the winter, the snow that will be icier, colder.

—LYN LIFSHIN, VIENNA, VA

The Daughter I Don’t Have

could counterfeit my face and sighs. She puts on my cashmere from college, my new sheer baby T. She’s clever, wits me as only a good counterfeiter can. She used to leave her hair in the hole I’d never use so I won’t forget her. Her profit comes from watching me squirm, knows if I had just made a reproduction of myself, she wouldn’t have to spy on me, tend to details, perfecting what is not real so well she never may be recognized

—LYN LIFSHIN, VIENNA, VA

She Mothered

She sailed to America from Ireland, earned an education, not ordinary then. After teaching school in Michigan she moved, established herself by dressmaking in Chicago. Wanderlust sent her to Memphis. She married a staunch union man, an immigrant from Wales. She learned that unified workers gave hope and strength to poor laborers. In 1867 yellow fever struck her children and her husband. She nursed them to no avail. Mourning, she stayed in town, helped others until the scourge burned out. Mary returned to Chicago, sewed for the rich, but remembered families who struggled. The cost of her creations could feed a houseful for two weeks. The great fire of 1871 destroyed Mary’s business and her home. She took refuge, found welcome in the Knights Hall, a union formed at the end of the Civil War. To shutter her grief she adopted the hungry and the oppressed as her family. She traveled. When asked, “Where do you live?” She answered, “…wherever there’s a fight against wrong.” Railroad workers, textile workers, miners and millions of others called her Mother. She labored for their behalf. In Arnt, PA she organized the miners’ wives to beat their empty pots. The strike-breakers and mules fled in confusion after a week. In Philadelphia thousands of textile workers left their looms, including ten thousand children. Mary gathered the young, many maimed and under age. They walked, she talked. People listened—they cried while newspaper men wrote the headlines. Mary took the children’s story to New York. Her eyes blazed as she spoke, “Children sold on the installment plan for two dollars a week.” They listened to Mary Harris Jones, “Mother Jones” A magazine by that name keeps her message alive.

—MARYELLEN LETARTE, LUNENBERG, MA

visit VW Online for audio by this author
Daughter, Curator:

You remember the thick, purple lines drawn,

to receive the tread of radiation

saw how they bordered my spine,

(like sunlight machined, on good days).

boxes laid like tile, aligned

Someday I hope you can stray

from that memory. Those marks did not define

me. My cross body did not

embody me. As it rots

now, it wrings new worry from you, leaves you

fewer motes than I’d have you sheave,

like how a tidy room pleased.

The time I spent ironing, cleaning,

didn’t bring me through your teens

nor scour and rinse your genes

of the sequence that might end in your death.

But, breath like steam, I restored

order, pressed the clothes we wore,

released creases and the dust that muddled

and dulled the house. I sang, suds

to the elbows, my flesh blood-

flushed. Such singing colored you too. Recall

it all, from carpet shampooed

then covered in old sheets through

the drying hours, to my favorite swear: Shit.

How it proclaimed—in its bare

carth way—a thought, declared

sentiment. Anger, surprise, even joy.

Coiled in the word, the sweet

history of humans, complete

as any other: the Sullivan farm

starred by dung, the Wisconsin

soil renewed. All things begin

and end to begin. In the letting-go,

the slow return. The setting

tsun yields to the moon, threading

time orb by orb. Yes—the thread is tinsel—
miracle it holds weight, as thin

as it is, miracle that pinned

somewhere along it like a damp bedsheets

is the fleeting day we spent

healing at an amusement park. Remember—we rode in carts on tracks,

our backs strong as cornstalks (strong

enough), our voices nearing song.

—ANDREA O’BRIEN, DENVER, CO

And this is how she enters the living

world, with the energy

of the ocean, cresting and splashing,

or simply lapping at shrunken toes,

but always, always, she arrives

unannounced. It could be when you move

clothes—sleeve by wrung sleeve—
to the dryer where they will tumble

like brave or raving souls who ride

over Niagara in barrels. Or it might be

when a finch lights upon the edge

of a chair, a chair where she could burn

herself with the warmth she never got

enough of. Maybe it is when you stand

before the butcher counter, struggling

with the names of beef cuts—
something she would have taught you,

certainly, had you not been a child

when she died—but instead you turn

the words over in your mouth

like another language: brisket,

eye of round, skirt steak, tenderloin.

Then there are times when she blows in

with the absoluteness of church names:

St. Aloysius, Our Lady of Sorrows,

Immaculate Heart of Mary, the Basilica

of St. Josaphat. Maybe you are tying

red ribbons into bows to hang

from pine branches. Other times

it is when you drive past exit 275

and look to the town where she was a girl,

to the school where Lester—the man before

your father—penciled his name once

over her whole dance card, to the farm

she left behind as soon as she was old

enough, and to the cemetery

where she couldn’t possibly want

to have been buried. No matter—

her visits, though uncommon now, must end

the same, with her questioning

who among you is lost.

—ANDREA O’BRIEN, DENVER, CO
Verse Wisconsin #112 October 2013

One Hundred Percent
You are more than a statistic.
You are blood and bone.
You are purpose and spear.
You are part of a symbiotic whole –
an organism
that moves together,
grows together,
strives together
and thrives together.

You are a person,
not a ruffled piece of paper.
There is no refuting
your truth,
your beauty,
your authentic walk to grace.
You are here
because we are all here –
reaching for
a book on the shelf,
a roast chicken on the table,
the prescription for an ailing heart.
You are part of the 100 percent.
We are not divided.

—Cristina M. R. Norcross,
Oconomowoc, WI

visit VW Online for audio by this author

Uncle Jake Dates the Polish Woman

What can I say?
The meadow drew me in like a drug.
I smoked its deep grasses with my backbone.
I inhaled daisies of all things,
yellow and common as dust.
And meadow-larks, aptly named,
larked about me.
And all the time you were out driving.
And the woman beside you
was speaking half-English, half-Polish.
You weren’t expecting beauty.
That wasn’t where that talkative navigator
was leading you.
But it was the real world
and you expected nothing more
than this mere churning of time,
filling of spaces,
like work did, like hunting did,
or cutting up logs in your back yard.
I could have thrown words out there...
indigo, angel, svelte,
and you would have swatted them
like buzzing flies.
So I didn’t explain the delicacies
of reed rubbing against check,
eyes going back to the blue sky well,
how if I get low and slow enough,
the earth turns without me,
is like a shuttle I can hop back on any time.
The Polish woman was filling you in on
the ordinary details of her life,
like chatter was the fuel that motivated the world.
To me, life was whatever senses
drew from sudden evidence.
To you, it was something called Cracow
twenty years to the day.

—John Grey, Johnston, RI

What They Left
broken dishes mainly,
as if the old house
was the site of some
Greek wedding,

and a beat-up kitchen
chair, seat removed
like it was the only
part worth taking:

newspapers,
the Monroe County Appeal,
scattered about from
the Missouri wind

through glassless windows,
one white sock, one black,
their mates hitching
rides with their owners,

and a woman’s left shoe,
flat heel to negotiate
the cracked floor. a toy
truck with three wheels.

Volume One of a set
of encyclopedias bought
from Hy-Vee Foods,
and a 1982 calendar
dates circled with doctor
written. Along a far wall,
dash lines with heights and dates
penciled in and close-by

a shoe-box of crayons
with a drawing on the lid:
stickfigures of a man, woman
and child all holding hands.

—Richard Luftig, Pomona, CA

After Pisarro
He entered a room
for a view of the oldest
standing bridge in Paris.

Pont Neuf,
a strength of architecture
stands without houses.

Here the bouquinistes
tried selling books, pamphlets,
before being driven away
to the banks of the Seine.
His early canvas
for a new, tragic century,
a glimpse of people,
those anonymous shadows
with hushed umbrellas
on a snowy day,
observed through rented panes.

—Byron Beynon, Swansea, Wales

One Hundred Percent
You are more than a statistic.
You are blood and bone.
You are purpose and spear.
You are part of a symbiotic whole –
an organism
that moves together,
grows together,
strives together
and thrives together.

You are a person,
not a ruffled piece of paper.
There is no refuting
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You are here
because we are all here –
reaching for
a book on the shelf,
a roast chicken on the table,
the prescription for an ailing heart.

You are part of the 100 percent.
We are not divided.

—Cristina M. R. Norcross,
Oconomowoc, WI

visit VW Online for audio by this author
The Sketch

My father once sketched
my mother recovering in bed
from a miscarriage,
the hurt he never revealed
but exorcized in their room,
corners of silence
as she slept unaware;
a hard pencil
working the shadow of moist grief
from his mind,
his hand moving across the page
to capture the crystalline mirror of the moment,
losing himself on the paper's cheekbones
in rhythm with senses which gazed
for so long
as the rain-swept afternoon
continued without respite,
a wasteland of hope
under a patchwork
which neither memory nor heart could erase.

—BYRON BEYNON, SWANSEA, WALES

Checklist

When you’ve smoked several hundred thousand
 cigarettes and
have wizened down to ninety pounds, when
you’ve become permanently oxygen starved and
close your eyes and
see the cosmos and God or no God smiling over
a thousand shades of green,
at this time, ask for your list— sneakers, to head
for the hills; razor,
comb, and nail clippers, to enter eternity well
groomed; toothbrush, though you’ve let most of
your teeth rot out,
still, there will be so many friends and relatives to
kiss hello;
alarm clock, as to not miss these last few sunrises,
which are suddenly become beautiful.

—TIM MCLAFFERTY, BELLEROSE, NY

The Viewing

When I heard the local news guy
announce on the radio
the body of the slain city councilman
would be laid out for the viewing
in the city’s Fine Arts Museum,
I couldn’t help but think
it was a pretty odd choice, even if
the ceremony required an adequate space.

I’ve always found the practice
of viewing a dead body
disturbing, ghoulish,
not that I’ve ever attended one.

“How life-like Philip looks!”
“What a beautiful job
the mortician has done!”
“I don’t remember that wart on his lip.”

How like a reclining figure by Henry Moore!
But so realistic! Like a figure from
Michelangelo’s Tomb of Giuliano de’ Medici.
How does it compare with Rodin’s The Kiss?

How about The Venus de Milo
or a bust of Caesar Augustus?
And will the museum shop
be open for the event?

—CHARLES RAMMELKAMP, BALTIMORE, MD

Like is Because

“Like is because, while “love” is although.
Where bike neighbors share trails, soda, spare tires,
Seemingly haphazard child rearing gets smoothed over by
Casual telegraphs, frenetic barking to the next generation.

Folks who wear pants can ill-afford missed honor
Even upon sighting mummmified squirrel bodies or laundry.
Better to jump in piles of leaves than to ask permission; outside
Newly constructed supermarkets, “fine” ladies’ cars gets dinged.

Researching building materials used to mean tree houses, forts,
Snow palaces. Today, flipping blue prints, stalking viridian wonders,
Brings, usually, some sighing among acanthus-like herbs, hyssop,
Also the specter of studies. Algebra gets put together one way or another.

Given adolescents’ butanol scale, I’ve embraced the molecular level
Of social magnetism veracities, especially types found with pimples and braces.
Grand striding, not superficial longings is called for when you’re fourteen.
Aqua-colored stuffed animals remain optional.

—DR. K. J. (HANNAH) GREENBERG, JERUSALEM, ISRAEL
Angela Wheaton Attends a Wedding

I’m always nervous as a mother in the emergency room with a sick kid when Daniel takes my car to make one of his deals. Last time he wrecked the fender at Wanamaker and Vine hurrying to meet somebody. Of course, “it wasn’t his fault.”

I wish I hadn’t promised his mother when we were kids out in California I’d look out for him. What hold does an aunt have over her niece, anyway? It’s hard enough trying to make it as a freelance journalist without having to wipe up after him, too.

But here we are at Margie’s wedding and Daniel just has to buy or sell something—I don’t want to know what because he has these Jersey City connections.

When he comes back, I don’t bother to ask if my car’s okay. Instead I go along with the line he’s been watching the playoff game.

“Who’s ahead?” the bald guy at our table asks.

“Eagles, twenty to seven,” Daniel shoots back.

“What inning is it?” I ask, acting the dumb blond just in case he made the numbers up.

—CHARLES RAMMELKAMP, BALTIMORE, MD

Ice Maiden

“Married the job,” but at what cost (Mum talk), way back? Dad’s two pints proud: “Inspector in the Force, retired with cataracts, own house.” Like rusty headlamps on her goggled Sprite, tight-lipped, not able to relax, knick-knacks at risk, those frog eyes follow me around. Thick lenses wither, halos of white light, garaged, widescreen, gimlet-gaze magnified.

That photograph of her, at home amidst a band of men, dress uniform, hair in a bun; one bloke has pinned her medal on, stout-chap handshake, “Hold it!” smile like the sun. I ask in vain. No one can tell me what she’s done: “Dark deeds,” nod and a wink, “Hush-hush.”

—PETER BRANSON, STOKE-ON-TRENT, UNITED KINGDOM

Almost Sisters

Bea’s “signature dish” was macaroni and cheese, Heavy on the macaroni, light on the cheese Served with raspberry Jello, watery on the top, gritty on the bottom. Made especially for Edna, who years ago, on first having it, Was polite and said it was her favorite meal.

Bea was a clubwoman, played Bridge during the week. Searched the society page of the Sunday paper, Hoping to find her picture. Edna, a farm wife, tended a big garden, raised chickens, And served up chicken and dumplings, spiced peaches and applesauce cake. Neither of the women had a sister.

Married to brothers, they visited every two weeks. The men went off to smoke and talk, To fiddle around with cars or anything that needed fixing. The women had tea while their children squabbled, Edna’s older girls bored with Nancy’s doll collection, Ten-year-old George teasing Edna’s youngest until she cried. Not much to talk about. Edna had no interest in fashion. Bea had never grown a flower. Yet, Edna named a daughter Beatrice, And Bea, always trying to please, Continued to make her special macaroni dish, which was, After all. Much better than her meatloaf.

—ESTER PRUDLO, FITCHBURG, WI

No Option

“White or wheat?” she asked. “White,” I said choosing The bread of my childhood Thinking how many other Things I would choose From my childhood if I could.

—BYRON HOOT, WEXFORD, PA
Barn Light

Sometimes it feels like I’m living on coffee and wine then I spend an evening at a rural venue with a solid fiddle player, bass, guitar—the singer playing the hits from the listeners’ history. This is Maine and the rain is coming down hard, the amp is turned up and blue light alternates with red on a small stage’s amplified sound with wine and beer on every table, audience getting up and swing dancing, sharing iPhone photos, laughing at what the singer says, laughing with one another between songs. It’s a joyful time in the land of moose and barns and singers who came out of far corners of this very large state and carved a pathway from those lonely coffee house one nighters to a time of amplified sound, blue and red lights and that feeling of love shared by an audience that by-God really cares.

—Marc Swan, Portland, ME

Earshot

In a lucid moment between vodka straight up with a splash of tonic, squeeze of lime, he tells me about a hip hop group he thinks are just about the finest thing since sliced bread. I listen and then he tells me about his trip to Mexico with his girlfriend, how his wife doesn’t have an inkling and he feels kind of guilty, but after all it’s only a weekend and then I tell him about a band I think is the best thing since sliced wheat bread and he sort of listens, glancing at me, at the two young women in shiny halter tops behind me. I say something non-sensical like bubbly water on ice with a dash of bitters and he says yea I know that band, I’m a fan. It goes on like this for another five or ten minutes and then I tell him my mother is calling and he says yea I know that band. I go back to my 6th row seat as he careens off the wall and drops with a dull thud.

—Marc Swan, Portland, ME

A Derelict’s Response

Jalapeño music never drifts
It skips and beats and thumps and jumps
And you’re gonna have to tie me down
‘cause ya know I like dancin’
And ya know I remember shirts off
In the rain
Boppin’ in the fountain
Drinkin’ them cold dark beers and howlin’
At ya all under the canopy
Some of ya’s laughin
And some of ya’s lookin’ real mean
And some ya’s tryin to look away
And some ya’s wonderin’ what it’s like
To be dancing shirts off in the rain –
It feels good

—Rob Harrington, Milwaukee, WI

Fishing With My Dad

I was going to call this poem “Fishing With My Father,” but that sort of formality isn’t appropriate to the situation. We’re just not the kind to use words like “father” or “son.” In fact, when it’s the two of us out fishing we seem to have little use for words at all, waiting as we are for the answers to questions strung with plastic worms, rubber-legged jigs and pork rind trailers.

I suppose there are lots of things I could ask my dad at times like these but, for whatever reason, the relative silence feels sufficient. And maybe that’s a cop-out. Maybe I should take advantage of these opportunities, as few and far between as they’ve become, to drop a line down into his murky depths and I see what I can’t pull out of him.

But I don’t, and I’m okay with that because it’s enough to know we’re both listening for the spaces in between the words and that they speak to us as eloquently as the sound of water lapping gently against the hull.

—Michael Hill, Austin, TX
Something Happened

Something happened, that was your phrase—a moment opened like a fig, and kept you in its spell while your classroom waited, finally leaving early while the day is younger, a dusty box of poets not sure how to be fully alive. They're saying it now, all over the place, but it's hard to believe that something happened to you, that you have felt the heel of the shoe, the seed press, the dream cried out.

For you it could never be over. There must still be time for you to go home, put Charles Ives on the stereo, have a martini, make love with your wife; time for the ringing phone, for the two brass bands, for one of your children; for your hand on the cradle, for a compass of light.

Maybe the world produces fewer wonders when one of its lovers leaves for good. Maybe the wave has less of a curl, or the sunset loses the pink but keeps the rust.

Maybe, when children laugh it's a fraction of a second shorter because everyone else tries to make something happen, and we miss the whole, long, ridiculous and delightful phrase.

—DANIEL BACHHUBER, ST. PAUL, MN

Cousin Vinnie

He loved a fight almost more Than a tousle with his Saigon girlfriend: like when he was on leave stateside, and saw you picked on by a kid old enough to be drafted, who'd terrorized the neighborhood like Jack Palance in Shane.

Sal was poking his index finger into your chest, laughing, daring you to do something, when Vinnie grabbed him by his collar—the guy's smoke, tucked behind his ear like something out of West Side Story, flying away like a spent arrow—Vinnie pounding him with a left-right, left-right that landed like a pistol whipping.

The cops had to drag Vinnie off the guy, but let him walk away with you, after shaking his hand, for his uniform and they knew that one day Sal would walk with a priest by his side:

It was not so much—Vinnie confided years later—to protect his adoring younger cousin, but more the pleasure of beating on someone: his wife leaving after he'd brought her home to the States.

—ROBERT COOPERMAN, DENVER, CO

Good Honest Dirt

My father taught me never to be afraid of a North Dakota farmer’s heavy paw, a shy-downed Amish kid’s grimy neck, an apprentice plumber’s P-trap hand. They may wipe their palms down the side of their pants and give you the option of declining, but don’t, my father showed me. They do for us what we do not do for us and the least we can do for them is to give the courtesy of an honest hand. One on one. Fingers touching, rough to smooth, tooled and not. Split nail, cracked thumb, two joints missing; their calluses hot against our paper whites. Loam, chaff, or the grey of that pipe, whatever they offer, don’t back down. They don’t.

—YVETTE VIETS FLATEN, EAU CLAIRE, WI
Soft Spot

For the woman with sleek knees,
The man with muscled forearms,
The favored child, the Benjamin,
Billie Holliday, Gary Cooper, Casablanca,
The lakeside cottage, Tolstoy, Tosca,
Golden Retrievers, Appaloosas, grilled cheese,
Chocolate milk, old quilts, peonies,
Autumn leaves, pocket watches, honeybees,
Garrison Keillor, Grey’s Elegy, Chopin,
The planet Venus, Virginia Woolf, pearls,
Walk-in closets, Monopoly, little sisters,
Porch swings, open windows, new moons,
Charlie Chaplin, Grapes of Wrath, lonely roads,
Hummingbirds, birch trees, first day of school,
Mayan temples, Hershey bars, pinot noir,
Apricots, Isadora Duncan, well-worn jeans,
Flannel pajamas, good sex, luggage with wheels,
First class, first frost, first love,
Crossword puzzles, making lists
Like this, a delicate chasm, the
Fontanel of preferences
That gradually closes, hardens.

—JOAN COLBY, ELGIN, IL

Sunday, My Father

Making a peace sign behind my mother’s head, in his white shirt, he hands her a birthday card that says “For My Darling Wife,” watches as I chop broccoli, carrots, “Oh, so you want to do that for the rest of your life. What’s wrong with patting a hamburger?”

He squints at my arrangement — a blue bowl with marigolds.

The gray day feels happy as he heads for “church,” posing in his navy suit, tucking a hand in the breast of his jacket, being Dean Martin.

His umbrella is so broken it will make him look humble.

He tap-dances a few stairs, shoots out in the downpour to his gold Pontiac, that will boat him four streets over to Campbell’s Tavern, where Mike and Gene wait to furrow the day with beer and chasers.

Sometimes he weaves back home on foot.

When our roast chicken is long out of the oven, our pie just done, my father’s heavy steps sparkle on our skin. At the back door he calls me – “Apple, I fell. I’m bloody. Come clean me up.”

—NANCY TAKACS, WELLINGTON, UT

Vacation from Myself

My house burns down. No casualties but habit and grandma’s iridescent plates, their rainbows a puddle of eels. Sea-foam motel room these days.

Weekly rates and raisin pie at Sam’s Café.

Taking smaller bites. Taking my sweet time deciding whether to rebuild.

Wary of a second marriage to the world.

—MICHAEL KRIESEL, ANIWA, WI

Making Tomorrow

My bed and pants are soaked. I am groggy, the bathroom’s dark. I search for deep water.

Both bathroom and kitchen need remodeling, but the loan officer will not return my calls.

She has no respect for me as an artist.

In the absence of light I try to find my voice but keep biting the edge of my tongue; nick, nick, nick.

There may be no more excitement ever.

I’ve spoken face-to-face to Bob Dylan and there simply isn’t any place to go from there, so I am sick instead.

I’ve actually been ill for two years but avoid the confession of it, ’cause I can make tomorrow anything.

—MIKE LANE, DELAFIELD, WI
Hurt

Skipping rope at seven, I hurt my knee. No one took me to the doctor. Instead, I was told to walk with a crutch. I thought goblins were trying to crawl in my windows. I feared my dreams each night of swirling trees, threw up the pizza they kept giving me. I had my knee wrapped for weeks, my grandmother rubbing it with her coriander poultice.

I sat in the backyard with my leg up acting as the teacher my friends said I could be. We practiced writing, picking words up around us like "garage," "sparrow," "tulip." We were careful with the empty spaces in a's and o's.

Back then writing was penmanship, and we were in love with letters as if they were tears, and we were the ones who had cried them, believing each word should be slanted like a ship trying to cross the Atlantic. Then we threaded our pages through the peach tree.

Meanwhile my knee was rebuilding its cartilage, and all I could feel was the poultice working, my house of relatives going to work, coming home to check on me, my grandmother always there, sweeping the porch or throwing bread for the birds. My own summer opening like poetry and fireworks, when the world seemed like it could always heal itself.

—Nancy Takacs, Wellington, UT

Bamboo

Bamboo has an eerie sound late at night when the wind knocks stalks together

I still remember the way I latched on to the rustle and echo, grasping something outside those moments when his body pressed mine—even the pillow he shoved over my face could not stifle the steady drumbeat of hollow shoots colliding together outside his window.

Decades later I remember the way I woke the morning after, grabbed my Swiss Army knife, carved a flute.

—Sarah Hayes, St. Paul, MN

Catholic High

I don’t know why our wet cement was fragrant with rainbow puddles riddled with cigarettes. Or why the sure way we breathed silence at Holy Family’s retreat always translated into excursion. I don’t know why the sound of a foghorn still reminds me of Roy leaving Kathy drunk in the 5th street gutter all night in the rain, and how my best friend then, knew. I don’t know why the nights seemed to lead somewhere beyond greasy pizza parlors and phone booths, cherry bombs over bulkhead, cold back seats.

I don’t know why Tony caught me in the dark to force a kiss near the rectory garden after Stations of the Cross. I shoved an elbow in his ribs. I recall the scent of win. I don’t know why for a field trip our English class was bussed to the Mystic Seaport, where we learned how witches got burned, or why we were surprised that some were men. We were all confused on how a wicked town council decided who was guilty. I don’t know why we were reading the devoted-wife poems of Anne Bradstreet. It seems like we were also reading The Scarlet Letter.

—Nancy Takacs, Wellington, UT

Yellow Sand

we load up our post-apocalyptic fortunes of flower bulbs and bright-colored beads take to the road, tilted blue street signs of dead civilizations mark the path streets built wide enough for ox-carts crumble under our feet.

sunlight glints through the hollowed-out eyes of battered skyscrapers that loom like mausoleums for headless mannequins wearing scant threads of fashions forgotten long before the end of the world.

—Holly Day, Minneapolis, MN
Professor Stein Reports to Lord Palm Storm

Herpember Sixteenth

Dear Lord Palm Storm, Our Kind Heir in Fur,

The cock interrupts the hen air. Broccoli brothels inundate mouths. Deer prick bean signs. Gulls eye detours. Declines in hopscotch, urn bombers.

If a chicken, say it aloud:
It belongs to him. It belongs to him.
The Hen.

I’m morgue and shoe. Toss war. Mind your deer mittens! And sprinkle some muck tea.

Spleenfully yours,
Professor Stein

—Lisa Grove, Los Angeles, CA
visit VW Online for audio by this author

Welcome Under, Under

Cough air held warm in the Polish Sigh Bureau.
Get harnessed. The air sighs under.

Welcome words buzz another war,
welcome under over-hopped,
under boring tag, under jar.

We will gild air—
hats, hares under zeppelins.
Welcome words buzz another war.

A man falls in warm flecks,
arrested for fur and murder under the borrowed sky. Heck,
we cough air with dirt.
Welcome under, under.

II

“Hold hens on stilts! Lick them!
Untick all nicked existence! Imagine sin—

only a burger lickers’ convention.”
Hares cough bigger feathers:
“Die, berserk bee herders!”

Welcome words buzz another war.
Dare and be better off? Nay, Chief, nay, I cough nay.

—Lisa Grove, Los Angeles, CA

Missing x,v,c

When Ann’s computer keyboard gave up three letters,
the usual le el of e ellen e
gave rise to opaque theories.

Rather like Helen of Troy, who apparently, ne er was in Troy, but in Ale andria.

But now things are fixed:
the computer, gives
a new level of complex excellence—
after on a e caved in,
and convex filled in its on e.

If you have to lose three letters,
v is definitely hard to part with—
no love, but then again, no violence;
violet would reduce to purple, etc.

and without e? et cetera for you,
and so forth rendered
to apple rumble.

As for the X,
theatre would need to invent
a new term for Deus e machina—
and we’d be stuck
like Trojans
with no exit.

—Kitty Jospe, Rochester, NY
visit VW Online for audio by this author

Hello, Hacker

Do you come here often?
you skive through
the edit distance
flipping out words I’m not

convinced I used:
love and lust got lost forthwith
dove and dust went dovetailed,
distanced, moving more to mire
and mist. But that rope won’t swing:
you swirl, you swing
trailing your scythe
skiting of schoolyard swives

swell from the dreaded ether
pixelated again
sweet as

—Mary Cresswell, Paraparaumu, Kapiti, New Zealand
Sunset

we watch the bombs bloom through the windows
pass the potatoes, turkey, corn
say grace over tightly-clenched hands

here is our peace.

through the windows, the sky grows dark, then red
we turn up the gas on the propane lamps
clear the dinner table, light a fire

spread blankets over the children, falling asleep.

the sky grows dark, then red, then black
the window glass glistens against the heat
I lie next to my husband, put my head on his chest

close my eyes and make one last little wish.

—HOLLY DAY, MINNEAPOLIS, MN

Dinner

When Jesus came to dinner
He was perfect. He complimented me
on my silverware pattern
although He didn’t seem to notice
I’d put the good china out.

Later, over coffee and cake
He’d admitted that He hadn’t been following
politics too much
had been absorbed in tracking weather patterns
bird migrations
global things.

“If it’s on television, I probably
haven’t seen it,” He explained.

—HOLLY DAY, MINNEAPOLIS, MN

Visiting Marie

The smell penetrated.
Even the flies banged against the windows.
But it was nothing.
She was just making cabbage
‘boiling it with old socks’, I thought to myself.
Everywhere I looked,
Jesus was watching me
with concerned eyes.
She rolled to her bed and sat down
with no help.
Her eye was black.
She fell again.
She said, “They don’t care if I fall.”
She always gets up.
She knows no other way.
I had so many questions
but I never asked.
Everything was loud:
our voices,
the bubbling water,
the tv set,
the wind against the glass,
the flies against the window
the questions in my head.
I’d heard the stories.
She was kidnapped by gypsies.
She was in a labor camp in World War 2.
When the war was over she met her oldest child
Raised by someone else.

“They nurses gave me bad medicine Lisa” Marie declared.
“They want me to die.”
She was still sick from the error.
The books were all bibles
The newspapers were Ukrainian.
The pictures were family.
My wife kept smiling, as her grandmother talked about
newer immigrants.

“No-one helped us when we came to the country,” she said.
The backs of my leg began to sweat.
My hands lay still, on my thighs.
I could taste bile in my mouth.
Jesus wouldn’t let me off the hook.

Marie was happy,
But she never smiled.
She was cooking
and
time was passing.
And in that moment
no-one
was trying to kill her.

—ROB HARRINGTON, MILWAUKEE, WI
The Surf

The shrug of
The gods shoulder
Seemed to heave against the
Shore, unremitting to
protean innocence
Haloed by the green
Sickly wet leaves of
Sea crisp weeds,
The mollusk heaved
And collapsed with the tide
In rhythm to worlds turning.
We walked out among the rocks
Surf surging
And it’s a damned shame
You said
A damned shame to have to die.
I thought it strange
and could not muster more than
A comment on the weather for the
Torrent I knew was deeper
And ready to flow
The rocks were warm and
damp.

—April Nerison, Viroqua, WI

Beach Construction with Lighthouse

An abstract, after-the-storm
arrangement: clusters of
weathered wood, tree limbs and
random debris.
Dead center, a bare pole,
almost as solid as the real
one in the lighthouse
courtyard.

—Alan Catlin, Schenectady, NY

Newtown Square

My wife does not believe
in Newtown Square,
we drive through it on
a wide highway due west
but it does not impress her.
At the exact moment
I exclaim, “We’re here,
we’re right in the middle
of Newtown Square!”
She scoffs observing
there is nothing here,
she looks left and right
and through as if it’s all
prairie and desolation.
Weeks go by of driving
through Newtown Square
on various errands,
I scheme and scheme again
to make my point but
she is adamant.
Until one afternoon
I swerve down a side street
to point at the post office,
the town hall, the fire station
which all say in some way
“Newtown Square.”
“It’s a nice little town” she states,
so we stop at the Fishbone Grille
to take a real bite out of the town.

—Ray Greenblatt, Charlestown, MD

Boyhood Lust #37

David Aasen showed me the centerfold
Naked, a woman looked up from the page, longingly
Saying, “let me show you something.”
Dave chewed his nails, “I climbed a tree to get
that.”
I handed it back to him, “Why
Wouldja do that?”
I was so pretentious.

—The Skrauss, Milwaukee, WI

Vote Fire.

The painting is taut and raging
On the antiseptic wall in
This photograph
Clipped from a magazine and pasted
Into the margin of this notebook that I rescued
From that estate-sale dumpster
Out of that box of moldy Horizons and
National Geographics.
I can smell the decades on it.
The painting can’t wait to burn the world down.

—The Skrauss, Milwaukee, WI
(c)the(real)

1.

on deck being
whitewashed
on winter's
side;
streaked on
spring's
thorny approach.
he was not so
fit as to
say "hello,"
yet he let
the flock go.

—Guy Beining, Great
Barrington, MA

(c)the(real)

4.

coatings on
a caption,
on a night
of fighting
with loose
ends, looking
at a trampled
morning diagrammed
on the blackboard.
a statement
was set within
harsh brackets,
now jarred
beyond the point
of speaking while
wheels for eyes
traveled far off.

—Guy Beining, Great
Barrington, MA

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Denial Drone Chronicles

A rooster crows
disturbing Miss America's
decades long siesta slumber nap

America the Beautiful

glutgrabs a fistful of Red White & Blue pills

slams em dwn wid a 40 rolls over
& crushes the babe

send in the drones
drones

Is it always this foggy here?

DR i have these urges
have these urges
urges
flye
Here

have a pill smoke a pill a caterpillar a drones

ryde drones

No (just sayin)
really have a pill it's OK
trust me I have a white coat & my
opic is cool watch the pretty TV assistants

variates the psychotropic variable

Guilty your Honorness! With the proviso that my sentence be stoning!

this is your brain on denial
ditorted

Duude maaaaaan Do you feel

i believe i'd like a cocktail

molotov

shaken & stirred

sound?

a sprig of loathing

Candyland® is a fun game

Sippy cups & cellphones send in the drones
drones

credit cards & cash carry trade traitors

PurchaseTradeSellDebt =PTSD = IOU = IED

Yessir! Helluva deal on debt today! Step right up!

methmatics

naked (What a wonderful
credit suit Mr.
default Emperor Sir!)
swap

Duuuuude maaaaaan check out that BUBBLE

What's that smell?

please sir may i have some more cooler

unusually uncertain future of lexicon market rape liquidity

a village was eaten by quantitative easing shat out & spun off

freddie may mac my fanny i gots da bottom boy bailout blues
EVERYthing’s fine kids
( )pink(y swear)

it’s just a

synthetic derivative sheeple shearing machine

lipstick it needs lipstick

The possibility of recriticality is....

LOOK! A coliseum—burning like a house of cards aflame in a stiff wind!

htam this is your brain on denial

Please speak with a Care Representative about our new line of exploding debtvests

your purchase will require a contract you fucking liar

spoons spoons we need more spoons

Monopoly® is a fun game

Don’t be silly, we’re not killing anyone, this is merely kinetic military action

WE the People don’t kill people—Drones do

(Besides, they’re poor, brown, ugly, oily and VERY, VERY SCARY!)

Nary a shepherd, mother,

Jesus loves war or CHILD dies

this i know for the TV tells me so

this is your brain on denial

Duuuude maaaaaan this is just like the video game

send in the drones drones don’t bother they’re here they’re right here

a cat bit a dog for no apparent reason Here

a missile skims the surface of the sea for no apparent reason Hear

a cat bit a dog

Play Ball! Play War! Play War Ball! Ball War! War Porn! War Torn! torn

cchaep fo yeveys cht morf raw eerf torment torture terrorize terrorism

bloody cock up

specify istisim

Big Brother can & knows it when He sees it

He never looks in a mirror but rather relies on rulings of robed jesters of court
to testify to the efficacy of his beauty

Gory Gory Halleluiah!!!

We will freakin put it to ya!!!

Risk® is a fun game

—JUSTIN ROGERS

—GUY R. BEINING,
GREAT BARRINGTON, MA

incubus (alert)

unhatched in disabling moon shot over moor, eying the frightening white egg, dark water becomes the alarm, the years like worn ropes hang about one, & on the isle of one’s verse songs spring apart; each knuckle of a word scraps the harrowing front.

—GUY R. BEINING,
GREAT BARRINGTON, MA
Atheist Blows Up Baby Jesus

Walking through sleepy Christmas-Eve Milwaukee,
go by house where no one’s home but
Outdoor life-size inflatable Nativity Scene is illuminated,
Inflated Mary & Joseph, inflated Wise Men and inflated gifts,
inflated shepherds, farm animals and stable,
inflated angels with inflated wings and halos,
inflated Star of Bethlehem, inflated manger
but baby Jesus is deflated!
So I spoke to the deflated baby Jesus
I might be an atheist agnostic nature worshipper not a Christian
yet I would kneel and blow up and re-inflate you
and patch the leak or re-plug the air spigot
for doesn’t baby Jesus say as much about love
without speaking
than all the words Christ said?
Kneeling down discovering spigot open
I gently blow air inside Jesus—
cold winter Wisconsin fresh air
inhaled into my lungs and exhaled into Jesus—
Hoping no neighbor calls police or shoots me!
I’m not a terrorist who explodes Nativity Scenes
but an atheist who blows up deflated Christ-child.
Now you look like a baby again, Jesus—
your eyes of wonder and wisdom gaze up at me.
Here, let me tuck you in, little one.
It’s okay your mother and father and the rest
don’t acknowledge me or thank me.
Even you remain silent looking up at me.
I understand, little one.
We’re all looking down at you
with love.

—ANTLER, MILWAUKEE, WI

1962 Valiant Station Wagon

Aunt Lidie, you handled that thing
like Mr. Magoo and believe me when I say
that the patron saint of close calls was peeking
though her fingers when you made your famous
U-turn on the Falls Bridge at rush hour.

Who could bother with signals and brakes
when from the rear view, between maples lit
by fireflies and arched over the East River Drive
there were Morgan horses from Valley Green
keeping pace along a split rail fence

with the cartoon of your sensible car,
tank half full of City Service regular,
cruising in its cushion of good fortune,
decency and the pure dumb luck of a protected
pilot whale. Grey with fins, red inside.

—SARA CLANCY, TUCSON, AZ

Against Economy

I know my sin is profusion,
an offense against the polished
geometry that dictates elegance
at the expense of plenty,

though even I agree that blackberry
vines are a nuisance, an empty
beach and single orchid are always
beautiful, squalor rarely is.

But when your engineer’s aesthetic
wants only the necessary and elevates
parsimony to some kind of moral
imperative, I will offer you
walls stacked with books,
40 years of top 100s,
the spice rack, the studio,
the wood-box and pantry,
guests in the spare room.

—SARA CLANCY, TUCSON, AZ

Snow-Angel Deathbed

Old men and old women in nursing homes dream
escaping alone late at night in winter
Wandering off dressed in warmest clothes
through sleeping snowy neighborhoods
Seeking snow-angels children made
to lie in to die in.

They lie down in snow-angels
gracefully, graciously, gratefully
As if they were the most comfortable
beds in the world.

They spread their arms and legs to feel
the shape of the angel’s wings and robe.

They no longer know who they are,
or do they?

They look up at the winter stars
so silent.

Not a soul in sight, yet in a way
every soul that ever was is present.

Time seems to stand
still.

Their Mother greets them as children
with a hot cup of cocoa with marshmallows in it
As they come inside from outside
after making snow-angels in the new-fallen snow.

—ANTLER, MILWAUKEE, WI
Crossing

I see you in the crosswalk with our daughter limp on your shoulder, whose bare foot is bobbing in the surrender of sleep, who grew tired on your lunch date—the smaller, wilder version of you.

The two of you appear and disappear, your hand firm on her back, as you wind toward me along the crowded street.

We meet to make arrangements, sign documents with a witness. I can’t look at this friendly man who is testifying to our demise pretending to ignore my wet face, and our daughter, who, having woken, is now a puppet bouncing awkwardly from one side of the desk to the other.

We don’t even shake hands at the end.

Later, on the swing set in the late slant of light, as we swing side by side, she sings:

Mama and a baby
Mama and a baby
We’re all shadow when the house blowed down
We’re all shadow when the house blowed down

—HEATHER SWAN, MADISON, WI

Safety First

Poecile montanus: the Willow Tit
(Recent steep decline, now Red List)

They’re drawn to feed, give sway to Blue Tit, Coal and Great. Brown back, buff under-parts, black cap; Willow or Marsh? No notion till you find the nest, in hole so rotten woodpeckers have upped and left. While clearing leaves you hear the snarling chainsaw. Council’s pruning dead wood out, so flailing boughs don’t injure folk. Their homes demolished, birds have flown, perhaps for good, but does this matter in the scheme of things, when others neither know nor care? It’s now a country park, access for car and wheelchair, orange gravel pathways, bins habitually jam-packed with doggy doos, by seats, where you can pause and contemplate.

—PETER BRANSON, STOKE-ON-TRENT, UNITED KINGDOM

All That Keeps Us From

Aware of all the ways we separate ourselves: the insulated mug, the mittens, the screen doors—I was well-equipped; I was safe and sound.

And then there you were sitting on my couch. You were crying, saying, “Look how beautiful. This light. This sleeping child.”

And still I wouldn’t let anything through.

Still I was thinking: rubber boots, picnic blankets, all that keeps us from—

But now, see? So many years later, I am putting my hands into the earth. I have dirt under my nails, my hands sore with digging.

—HEATHER SWAN, MADISON, WI
Survivance

We enter the wheat-colored limestone building from the east, walk past a misplaced tobacco plant and a man-made wetland to arrive here:
The National Museum of the American Indian.
A black man in the lobby is tapping an acoustic drum-set;
we are told that we have missed the afternoon story-tellers and there will be no Indians dancing today.
A security guard pokes the inside of my purse with a wand. There are no Indians here.

We take an elevator upstairs,
to watch a thirteen-minute film,
A good intro to the history and culture of the American Indians
It is a fragment. Too many Indians. Too little time. Completely lost,
we are guided by fake celestial references to an exhibit, more like a swap-meet, a trade-show of sorts;
each tribe, allotted a small showcase:
In this booth we have the Seminole tribe of Florida, here, lies the Kiowa Tribe of Oklahoma, and in this corner the Eastern Band of The Cherokee Nation.
Whose ceremonial clothing do you like best?

There are over 825,000 items here from 1,200 indigenous cultures:
Arrowheads, blankets, beads and corn;
pottery, weaved baskets, photographs, thousands of archives.
Yet, this place is a motel, with too many vacancies.
I do not hear the whispers of lost languages.

This museum is not enough. But at least it’s something after starvation and small pox, lies and murder.
After false histories taught in school a mid-western white woman can find some sad truths in a massive glass display cage filled with guns and bibles. The bibles are translated into numerous languages some of the covers are made from animal hides decorated with intricate beaded designs.

If I had been an Indian,
If I had been sent to praying camp
In my dreams would I still be Indian?
I would pray to the earth... remember me.

Even a rock has a soul

If I were an Indian today, what would I believe?
Would I be converted too?
Maybe just in time,
for the Anti-Christ is here to stay:

In a glass table, sits an oval-shaped, flattened rock;
there is twine wrapped in a web around a piece of paper
and the handwritten,

Rev 6:2 And I saw, and behold a white horse:
and he that sat on him had a bow;
and a crown was given unto him:
and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.

—Kristen Laurel, Waconia, MN

Haywire

Any field is Adam’s garden
where keep-out translates to welcome in the mind of sheep.
It smells of mud and trespass,
with morning air pale as wool caught in wire.
It tingles.
The solar charger blinks, saluting a sun bright as brass washers.
Sheep are in the hayfield again. Mother-ewes eye us from behind their lashes; murmuring soft, guttural lullabies to grass, the tang of wild mustard. Lambs cavorting like the young who already have inherited the earth.
Why does our fence not work?
Mended with tie-wire and baling twine, trips to the farmers’ co-op, telephone-calls (your sheep are out again).
This morning, a fox dead in the road, right on centerline where he didn’t belong.
Why must life always leap out of bounds?

—Taylor Graham, Placerville, CA
a farthing in the fountain
for you if a person with gold rings and fine clothes
comes into your assembly?
have a seat here, please.

my terry–he 55 years would be–subject, object, verb.
nine/nine/two thousand twelve.
seven/six/nineteen forty.
sit in walker–swallowing mike.
kitty, coloring kids.
podia, lecterns, facebooks.
out of the black forest.

our stories rest in the silence between the notes.
hetero may be–maybe–obstructionist.

pero–sino–la familia es la familia.

she looked in the mirror–bustles & farthingales.
sauce robertand camel hoof.
a dry reuben with fries.

if i were a truck, i’d drive home and tip myself 5 buckaroos.
is it because we are now afraid that we carry cell phones?
worthy is the new rosebush at olbrich–dubbed the fran.

the group consists of a bored
madman–malicious goat!
don we now our gay apparel – born all shiny and sweet.

josette: are you doing pipi caca?
papa: I am shaving my beard.

neither a borrower nor a lender be–c. marlowe.

—LEWIS BOSWORTH, MADISON, WI

Wish You Were Here

I would like to tell you
that we pass the time on the bus
discussing Tibetan sky funerals
and the one-child policy,
but the truth is we talk a lot
about what does or does not
come out of our butts.
On any given day,
most of us have diarrhea,
some are constipated, and one
(who must have bribed the Buddha)
feels fine.

We commiserate
about squatting over troughs
and porcelain holes in floors,
clutching the bottoms of doors
(when there are doors).
When I had heat stroke,
I didn’t know if I should throw up
before or after squatting.
I don’t wear a belt anymore
(takes too much time).
Not splashing is everything.

We are running out of toilet paper
and sanitizer,
pay to use facilities
you couldn’t pay us to use back home,
and have developed an odd intimacy;
one guy admitted
to having the runs in his sleep!
(Panti-liners – not just for ladies anymore,
and how much do you tip the maid?).

We eat rice porridge for breakfast,
rice soup for lunch,
rice for dinner;
and a celestial burial
sounds like Heaven right now.
After the monk cuts me into pieces,
vultures will carry me skyward.
These vultures are gigantic
and not as ugly as ours.
I am impressed.

—JOAN WIESE JOHANNES,
PORT EDWARDS, WI

Sunset

Not by my wisdom:
the hawk’s cry snags in the pines
as evening comes on.

—CAROLINE COLLINS, QUINCY, IL

The Museum of Natural History

This afternoon the sky is a wide river
so transparent
I can see its sandy bottom
where light reveals in great detail
the fossil of a primitive fish,
fins spread out to fly,
a bird’s skeleton,
complete with teeth and shriveled wings,
and prehistoric lizards
with filigree scales.

Light washes
the thin bones, claws, and wrinkles,
and the fossils expand with every second,
and hang lower
so I can have a closer look.
The fish takes flight,
and the bird merges with the lizard,
and I wonder what sort of shapes
will float overhead
10,000 years from now?
Will there be mammoths,
monkeys, humans?
No answer.
It’s so quiet,
I can almost hear the sound
of the archaeologist’s brush.

—CLAUDIA SEREA, RUTHERFORD, NJ
The Cows
(with all due apologies to Edgar Allen Poe)

I.

Hear the lowing of the cows—
Guernsey cows!
What a deluge of dairy their bellowing avows!
How they chaw, chaw, chaw
In the early morning light
While the farmer fits the claw
To the teat cups that will draw
From their udders pure delight;
A steady suck, suck, suction
In persistent fluctuation,
Brings bovine delectation that voluminously flows
From the cows, cows, cows, cows
Cows, cows, cows,
From the milking and the suckling of the cows.

II.

Hear the snorting of the bulls—
Brahma bulls!
What a mix of mad emotions compel their stamping hooves!
From one end of the field
To the other they won’t yield,
They charge and fight
Like mindless goons,
To the delight
Of the crowds that chortle at the sight
Under the pale-faced moon!
Oh, from out those flaring nostrils
What a gushing chuff of austral
Temper swells!
How it smells
Of the bullring!—how it dwells
In the swirling capes and countless spectacles—
The running and the fighting
Of the bulls, bulls, bulls,
Of the bulls, bulls, bulls, bulls,
Bulls, bulls, bulls—
In the barter and the slaughter of the bulls.

III.

Hear the sizzling of the beef—
Packaged beef!
What would fast food be without this mystery meat?
In the hissing of the grill
How we marvel at the skill
Of teenaged cooks,
For every burger flipped
Is another perfect patty stripped
From some bovine,
And the patrons—ah, the patrons—
They without the grease-stained aprons,
Stand in line,
While the grilling, grilling, grilling,

Takes no time,
Nor does the art of filling
A jumbo cup with coke and lime—
They are neither man nor woman—
They are simply modern humans
Bought and sold:
And their king is a Burger with golden arches
And he sells, sells, sells
Sells—
The registers ring!
And his quarterly profits swell
Even fatter than the burgers
And the fries and onion rings!
And he dances and he yells
As he sells, sells, sells,
Even more, more, more—
See them queuing at the door?
Eating more, more, more
Jumbo Whoppers by the score!
Order more, more, more,
We need beef, sizzling beef,
From the cows, cows, cows, cows
Cows, cows, cows—
From those overfed and quickly-dead poor cows!

—MIKE ORLOCK, STURGEON BAY, WI

A thought

People say,
“I think best in the shower.”
It can be nothing but best
if it is only.
Maybe people
don’t take time
to think
removed from running water.
Maybe
people don’t take time to think.

—DUSTIN RENWICK, MONMOUTH, IL
visit VW Online for audio by this author

The Other

The Barbara who is not me
loves cats, is wise, temperate,
slender, beautiful and young.
Mother of ten, homemaker
of the year and blue-ribbon cook,
she volunteers at the food pantry
and sings in the Baptist choir.
Her three calicoes and two Siamese
love their indolent life.
Sometimes as a favor they bring
to that other Barbara a dead mouse
or permit her to stroke their fur.

—BARB CRANFORD, HANCOCK, WI
Maynard’s Love

meant life jackets for his milk cow
during the flood
and howling like tire chains in the wind
when she died.

He sported neon lime coveralls
and one
slightly irregular eye
so farm kids made fun of him

but his capacity to care
awed the rest of us into believing
being human is still possible.

—Scott T. Starbuck, Freeland, WA

When I got home from school

When I got home from school,
my mother was a tree,
a fallen maple
on the bathroom floor,
blood foliage blooming
between her knees.

—Claudia Serea, Rutherford, NJ

Cancer, a Squirrel, My Niece in Love

“I never thought raising a teenage daughter
would be more difficult than cancer treatment.”
The text was from my sister-in-law. Don’t text
and drive. I looked up, tried to veer. The squirrel,
start-stopped in that comic book pose. He went
under the back right tire. I stopped with a steering-wheel,
two-palmed, “Dammit.” His tail shook
like a surrender flag; the girl squirrel
sat behind the Oak tree, pecking out: mating season.

My, you finished that fast, you can have the rest
of the bottle. And she refilled my glass.

—James Bettendorf, Brooklyn Park, MN

Drinking Sour Milk at Aunt Pauline’s

A thick, earthy odor from my uncle’s cigars
lingered heavily in my Aunt Pauline’s house
for years after his death, even after fresh paint
the wood still issued the heavy pungent scent.

My brother and I went to her house for Red
Skelton night on their new TV from her husband’s
appliance store. My dad wouldn’t allow one
in our home, they cut into his theater business.

Sometimes, when invited early for dinner
our mouths watered in anticipation,
she had Grandma’s molasses cookie recipe
the brown moist meat soft to chew, the ginger

bit into my cheek, the hard vanilla frosting melted
on my tongue. Once she served a meal
with an ice cold glass of milk, the sweat
dripping down the side of the glass, a bit of froth

on top, but well past the expiration date sour,
making us gag. Taught to be polite and not wanting
to offend, we said nothing and drank the milk
hoping to score a sweet thick biscuit.

Outsmarting the fates, I drank my glass empty
the bitter liquid almost boiling back up,
exchanging knowing glances with my brother.
He smiled gleefully as she said,

My, you finished that fast, you can have the rest
of the bottle. And she refilled my glass.

—James Bettendorf, Brooklyn Park, MN

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a fallen maple
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two-palmed, “Dammit.” His tail shook
like a surrender flag; the girl squirrel
sat behind the Oak tree, pecking out: mating season.

I got out, picked the squirrel up by his tail.
My mother’s voice called, “Touching dead
animals will give you a disease.” That made
me hold him to my heart harder, blood
on my shirt trying to reunite him with himself.
Cancer, squirrel, my niece in love.

He’s not dirty; he’s my mother’s fear of the unknown.

Blaine, sixteen, my niece, her grades have dropped
in spite of being brilliant and talented. Like a squirrel
in heat, she’s a growl and a puff around Spencer, her boyfriend.
Her mother knows that sound; that sound made her child.

Her father knows that sound. It’s the same one that made
his child; Blaine had only purred until this point. They’ve
never heard the guttural longing of their daughter
who understands them now, except in the embers
of their coal fire brains and red hearts they’ve hung
loosely in the licorice closet on bended hangers.

We fear what we have survived.
Youth consumes a product all at once.

Lori’s cancer is playing hide-and-seek in its infancy, being a
reclusive, entitled bitch, and I don’t want it to find puberty. I want it to die a comet flying into the sun,
so I can have her lecture me about tomatoes and soccer and
how hard her grandchildren are to worry about while holding
hands with her stoic husband who made it across the street.

—R. Scott Yarbrough, Plano, TX
Pandora

Swarmed, a flash to the heart, she wants to grab it back, wants to fan out with the forms: be winged. And understands why she’d been warned. Nothing would ever fit again. Straight scattered into zigzag and myriad – a fluvial harmony she’s only, in dreams. Her mother’s wishes, Father’s protection, even her hiking boots and down vest, she’ll have to beg for them now. Oh honey honey, blending skin to dazzle. Fecundity a fragmented architecture, her body filled with fluff and too much laughter. Sky, earth, animal legs, cars, total voice, how can she hear them all, now she’s dedicated to float and flow into every interstice, all the wrinkles in the elephant’s hide, dedicated for the rest of her life to find, to find.

—Grace Marie Grafton, Oakland, CA
to Mary Frances Judge’s painting “Pandora”

Musician and Mother

Forgetting the date, the musician steps into the purple, hard-lined morning. He longs for the yellow gate, wants to remember the way his mother laughed at rain, and their trip to the puddle land. Before the war. His dreams, his timpani, crash into the red uniform landscape, lightning that skew all plans. White towers, clean towels, running water in every garret. He imagines, even feels, the garrote slip tighter around his gullet. Mother didn’t last long, he blames the rain, her unstaunched love for wet grass. The tip-tap tappeta continues in his mind, all the steps they stepped together, her violeta dress, the way she swung her beaded bag to the campanile’s chimes. Percussion of the streetcar. The escape route requires the ladder-climb his mind relies on, absent angel ascending, her click-clack, tip-tap shoes drip on his fontanelle as he follows her into clouds.

—Grace Marie Grafton, Oakland, CA
to Paul Klee’s painting The Musician

The Wet Motorcycle

1.

of the wives and of the son are sane, are vest and savage.

of the movements, and repose are riot, and Samaritan

2.

to follow kit and medal, laying by.
the eye, in evidence

is making prayer
is counting money

a giving thanks or self congratulation
a giving thanks or self congratulation

a person, a principle, who bind and loose the parallel legs

the parallel arms
the body of straight lines

3.

the ways are few but roses
and there are caterpillars everywhere

and everything is real and everything is illusion, my love.

4.

at fortune, or pasture, a summons
or

roster. a melody or loot
The stilted boot and recollection, charged, delayed

A landscape of one’s own. A caper, in recruit. And darling, openly.

—Gregory Vincent St. Thomasino, New York, NY
Vocabulary

“remote as the glittering trash of heaven”
—John Ashbery

In the bar room of adjectives sit the shaven languages inquiring solemnly about their barracks. Where to rest their syllables in safety and benevolence? Alas, they sip the poisonous cup, delude themselves into believing the spectacle of omniscience. License to practice meaning. Clearly they have failed to study history, or even everyday humanity’s blizzard of incomunicado. To learn meaning’s permeability. The story of leaves’ disintegration, assisted by microbial mouths and incessant weather, the jukebox of eternity. Nevertheless, they help us ruminate on possibility and potential, so long as we remain aware that their shoes get scuffed and their hair ascends into a place past communication’s comb.

—GRACE MARIE GRAFTON, OAKLAND, CA

Brise-Soleil

light drifts through you happening constant as the fall
a frame for the takeoff alight, alight when landing
wasn’t happening not to you, to me false recovery
these my louvers lift let sun lake imagining
stretch out fall water waking when a lifting
presents itself wide in sun like a water light pales
to position falling off these the breakers
a condition of solace imagining lifts speak in shiver
wide water a presence enough wide sunshone drifting
collapse into nightstream you become a wind knowing
louver alight

—JAY DESHPANDE, BROOKLYN, NY
visit VW Online for audio by this author

if the night is long, remember your unimportance

Everyone gathers for the rehearsal.
He is forced to wonder what his part is,
anxious now about his dribbling verbosity,
his dedicated need to peacock.
Equanimity has not been his hazard.
He loves costume, buckles in too-obvious places,
elocution pinned like a badge to his cravat.
How his longings mock him, how the sunset truncates his would-be’s. His best friends won’t allay his fears of anonymity, they too vie for the mermaid role, no one wants to be the bramble. “Oh me,” he thinks, “how can I bear to be the wraith,” who never makes it past sunrise, who hasn’t even a speaking role, cannot put a dent in the action. How to make the best of it, quell his fears: the loss of Mother’s esteem?
The wraith’s one strength is abundant time to ruminate on self-improvement courses.

—GRACE MARIE GRAFTON, OAKLAND, CA
visit VW Online for audio by this author

Brise-Soleil

you shoulder something I made you louvers: they shiver
in moonlight, close to shorelines rebuilt and feathery each flap
of springtime stand for me now still in ice and rock
they pock and mark like barnacles quiet, sunbird wind and light
gone restive and waiting for years I kept putting things into you
baseballs, fallen hairs, pebbles caught and songs forgot them
swear I heard you say easy I’ve seen you salvage
a great shadow on shoreline quiet against you pocket
and hum what was it you say a tune and I knew it
could have sworn against your will, that I will wouldn’t
remember me mostly that you can rest here
shoulder, shoulder I’ve seen it anchor to my
pocket and hum

—JAY DESHPANDE, BROOKLYN, NY
visit VW Online for audio by this author
After a Photo from Minnesota

For Judi, who asks “Why are the canoists facing each other?”

The lake’s weight is palpable as distrust, as two people betrayed,
those who have given their love to each other,
and, now,
they stop paddling.

Mists spread—like the sun, that dying star, so much
is missing.
Another stiff shot of cognac, books
carried off,
or misplaced.

The far shore’s lonely stones hold their breath
like pure theater.
The two face each other—does he long for dry land,
its lack of complications?
Does she realize all it takes
to make a journey? A benign place to begin
from—someone to leave
behind?

—Gayle Elen Harvey, Utica, NY

It’s How The Moon Is Cupped By The Sky

Standing in The Anvil parking lot,
we are speaking of death
when I look up to see a heron
a silent silhouette of midnight blue
angling south-southeast against the cobalt evening sky

and I slip into the universe
as easily as my pelvis angles, slips
and locks into rightness
with yours

—Tess Romeis, Cedarburg, WI

Bardo: Flight from Orlando to Milwaukee

Heads nestle like cobblestones
or eggs in a tray
vestmented threshold guardians
manage, hydrate the embryos
as they journey
from one state to the next

—Tess Romeis, Cedarburg, WI

In Memoriam

There will be a celebration of life and lunch.
Will be served for family and friends at noon.

In me more I am
alive in you now,
in old tales endearing,
in good deeds enduring,
in humor out of sight,
a slice of life,
a dollop of death,
a doleful a la mode,
on a plate so clean,
with cherries still warm,
so cool through the crust
ice cream.

—Dion Kempthorne, Richland Center, WI

turista

why are we here
dwelling in the romance
of an old slave plantation
a high brick gated wall behind us
shaded under the flowering magnolias
the handsome black-barked walnuts
the eccentric dangling drooping branches of the tall pines
goldfinches scoot out of the heat-bent haze-green hills on the opposite bank
the slow flow of the gray-blue James
turned twisted bent wrenched
towards Richmond

—Robert Schuler, Menomonie, WI
**49 Dead on a Mexican Highway**

49 dead on a Mexican highway
Nameless victims in a brutal drug war
Mangled and mutilated, found in a by-way
A drug cartel trying to even the score.

Nameless victims in a brutal drug war
Fueled by America’s thirst for euphoria
A drug cartel trying to even the score
Protecting turf in illegal pharmacopeia.

Fueled by America’s thirst for euphoria
Can’t tell if body parts are women or men
Protecting turf in illegal pharmacopeia
Drug gang massacre happens again.

Can’t tell if body parts are women or men
49 dead on a Mexican highway
Drug gang massacre happens again
Mangled and mutilated, found on a by-way.

—Harlan Richards, Stanley, WI

**Infinitude**

Sometime between
late last night and early this
morning a hundred years ago

this afternoon the radio
grammarian declared
there’s no need not
to split infinitives anymore.

The rule never had anything
but some Latin reason for it.

It was just the way it was
a rule for such a long time.
So consider it a good deal
not to have to keep certain

words or whatnot together
anymore, not to have always
to worry about whether it is

To be, or not to be, or
To be, or to not be, or
To see a difference, or
To care to care, or not.

—Dion Kempthorne, Richland Center, WI

**Do I Have To?**

There’s really no reason why
I should let myself be
Annoyed by standing up to be
Counted four times a day,
Because the bullies in charge of
The prison system must have taken
A course in criminal justice
Where they learned that compelling
Us to submit with blind obedience
More likely to obey every order
Instinctively, in a Pavlovian manner
That would have us salivating on cue
If only we were given something
Appetizing enough to make it all
Worthwhile.

—Harlan Richards, Stanley, WI

**Going on a Trip**

In a place where eyes are starved
For a view of humanity, the way
A shipwreck survivor wants to
See the shore,
It’s considered a treat to get
Shackled up and bundled off in a
Van to see a judge or a doctor.
And I was the envy of the pod
When I had to make yet another
Trip to the shoe place, to
Fix up a special pair for me, the
Way a hot dog eater wishes he could
Afford the steak dinner at the
Next table over.
Yet it angers me, the chains,
Condescension, getting trussed up,
Forced into playing the game
That says I’m dangerous
When everyone knows I’m not.

—Harlan Richards, Stanley, WI

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Us to submit with blind obedience
More likely to obey every order
Instinctively, in a Pavlovian manner
That would have us salivating on cue
If only we were given something
Appetizing enough to make it all
Worthwhile.

—Harlan Richards, Stanley, WI
Inside / Out

by Anne Farrer Scott

The cliché—go into prison and the door slams shut behind you. True enough, but once inside, the clichés and stereotypes go all wobblly.

I was part of a writing workshop at a medium security prison for men. We called ourselves the Inside/Out Writing Collective, and we met in the library of the Newton (Iowa) Correctional Facility.

I was there to help these guys put words on paper. I tried to give them the simple, basic, hard writing stuff. The big question was always what to put in and what to leave out. Following Anne LaMott, we wrote shitty first drafts, and certainly we agreed with her that “grim and horrible is Okay if it is done well.” We read Rilke: “There is only one single way. Go into yourself.” To borrow from Natalie Goldberg, we fought a lot of tofu.

We wrestled words to the bare, blank page. We tried, in the words of Eudora Welty, to make feeling felt and reality real. We wrote about the kitchens of our childhood (a pitcher of Kool-Aid in every fridge.) We wrote about what we believed as children (white folks don’t have to go to the bathroom). One of the guys described our process as blooms sprouting from soggy, rotten waste.

According to Richard Hugo, “A creative writing class may be one of the last places you can go where your life still matters.” For this moment, this hour, these guys were not statistics. We found that we were, after all, each of us, simply human and trying the best we knew how. We worked with what we had—the bits, the fragments, the shards of our lives. In this hard, gray, rough, harshly lit world, we wrote, we revised, we laughed, we cried, we mattered to one another. “Something birthed in me,” said one of our well-fought tofu.

We launched a literary journal, Concrete Perspectives, which the administration thought not necessary to edit. The irony was not lost—the correctional official not wanting corrections in our publication. We edited anyway.

They wanted poetry. I am not a poet.

What to do? The administration seemed to expect the worst of the guys. I hoped for the best. So I invited Iowa’s first Poet Laureate, Marvin Bell, to the Newton Correctional Facility.

This is the poet who wrote, “The world is full of broken wings…” and:

I am the big ears and the wide eyes
to whom time happened. I lived in stormy weather
writing songs of love because, tell me
if you know, who can help it?

This is a poet who wants to hear poems

After the fashion of scat singing, the blues, after the manner of symphonies.

And to each the form of its becoming as it becomes.

Ad-lib but knowingly, seat-of-the-pants with long cockpit experience.

Without the looking back of the classroom.

Without stopping short or running over.

Without prescriptions or diagnoses, with no compass, no north.

In the spirit of a circle.

Marvin Bell came to us.

“There is no one way, no right way to write,” he declared. “Give yourself permission to be a writer, to fall on your face. There is no good stuff without the bad stuff.” Marvin chanted his poems. He pulled words from the air.

This was what they had longed for, but as one guy pointed out, “Poetry is not cool in the joint.”

“So write in paragraphs,” Marvin replied.

He called, and the guys responded.

“Art comes out of a life and where that life is lived,” Marvin said. “Poetry transcends borders and boundaries.” These guys knew boundaries—concrete and razor wire boundaries. They worried that no one “outside” would care about what they thought, felt, or wrote. They mourned the gap between themselves “inside” and the communities they had left.

Marvin helped bridge that gap. “He inspired and gave validation to prisoners who would have not gotten any recognition other than where we were, as opposed to who we were,” says one of the guys. Marvin let them know they had something to offer.

“A poem is dead if it won’t breathe or boogie,” Marvin told us.

An inmate who came into the Iowa Department of Corrections (what he terms “a warehouse for perishable goods”) as a fifteen-year-old with an eighth grade education realized that Marvin “was talking not just of writing, but of life, and not just any life, but my life. I realized that I hadn’t really breathed or boogied in a long time, but I boogied that day.”

Marvin came year after year. “Why wouldn’t I come back?” he says. “Each visit meant a conversation that touched on matters important to anyone. The men always wrote bravely from their hearts.”

One of Marvin’s workshops at NCF was broadcast on Iowa Public Radio—the poems, the voices of these men carried over the razor wire into the wider world.

Our writing together and Marvin’s visits came to an end. The librarian who had made a safe space for our work was laid off because of budget cuts. The rec department took over the library. We were done.

Looking back, I see that I was simply the warm up act for Marvin Bell. I hadn’t really breathed or boogied in a long time, but I boogied that day.

As one of this group, now on the “outside,” says of his work with Marvin Bell, “As much as it meant then, it means even more now.”

Editors’ note: The poems on the next three pages were written for a poetry workshop with Marvin Bell at the Newton Correctional Facility.

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

WFOP offers Wisconsin poets opportunities for fellowship and growth.

See wfop.org for further information.
Dirt Angel

Blade of grass
Draws tobacco blood
Dripping from chap-leather chin

Weathered skin

Bullet-hole clouds
Bring tears of Lazarus
To tread-dimpled soil

Tender soil

Dirt angel halo
Illuminating grace
Fills man with mirth
Invigorated earth

...and one less family goes hungry.

—JASON DARRAH

Dayroom

The voices blend into a hum
with a jazz beat
as my thoughts try to take form.

The slapping of the playing cards,
one too discreet
while each man, in hand, plays his part.

An idea comes fleeting, then goes
such is defeat.
We all must do that which we know.

Then feeling sorry for myself
this thought repeats
to the paper my pencil tells.

Last but not in the least
the discreet beat repeats defeat.
We all must do that which we know.

—BRIAN BUSTER

Monster

Silver wax illumines
Your greedy fingers
as you pull me stillborn
from an earthen womb.

And pain betrays the
promise of hope
with words that fall
harder than any blow

I’m the concrete dream of
an American nightmare.

A shriveled muscle pushes
 crimson stuff through my veins,
but can this be called life;
this amalgam of blood and bone?

Self loathing conflagration
becomes Creator vengeance.

(The veil tears and a voice is heard)

Daddy?

Dad?

Father

Life is triumphantly declared and I manifesto
in the illusion of a broken mirror.

Tattooed.

Pierced.

—JASON DARRAH

Ode to a Butterfly

Oh! sweet wisps of gossamer—
Silken on the wind—
Freedom’s perfect victory crest
You alone can comprehend.

Inside a spun-web tomb you lived,
A hidden, budding flower.
And life, you thought, had passed you by,
Had whiled away your hours.

But through it all, an artist’s hand
Did paint with all known splendor
An intricate design of beauty—
Woven rainbow color.

So that, at last, when you emerged
To waft up in the sky,
The world was greeted by your grace—
A lovely butterfly!

—MICHAEL RINEHART
Prayer

Slowly my fingers slide over
well-worn beads,
the smooth grain alive in a luster
that never leaves.
Calm like a summer’s eve,
warm and easy,
I become one with the breath
the wind of life.
Silence like silk,
velvety and soft,
cases my spirit into
quietude.
Unspoken mantras whispered
in joyful awe.
The subtle depth of
solitude
intimates a hope of peace,
of nirvana.

—Randy Ekstrom

You Are

I

You are—
The orchard of my vision;
my niece.
The light that comes through my window when
I can’t go outside (when I’m stuck inside).
A signpost—telling me to turn off
this road to nowhere.
An island—after my ship went down.
You are the promise of tomorrow
at sunset, the reason the sun
comes back, around, and you
hung the moon.

II

I am away, still I see you
as a newborn. At 3, 5, and 7.
I miss playing peek-a-boo, lifting you
so you could touch the ceiling, hearing you
speak to your dolls, answering your
innocent questions, holding you when you
cried—breaking my heart with each tear.
To this day, seeing a picture of you
pouting waters my eyes,
so I have to laugh to keep from crying.
I miss those days. I miss you.

III

You are a young lady now, a woman.
With dreams, goals, ambitions, doubts,
fears, and so much potential. I am ill equipped to help.
I will do all I am able.
You are the orchard I see, in majestic bloom.
Bear good fruit.
You are...my niece.

—Brian Buster

Poet

Hear the mournful howl of the
lonely, grey wolf, searching
for a kindred spirit.
His steamy breath fills the
brisk night air as he leaves
the shadows, coming into light.
Velvet paws pad softly along
the steep mountain trail,
feeling for every loose stone,
each protruding root.
In a moonlit meadow he appears,
warily prowling,
with curious bright eyes
he probes everything...

Looking to the moon for strength,
he opens his silver throat, howling gently, painfully,
singing from solitude.
He wanders alone,
looking for the path
that will lead him home.

—Randy Ekstrom
Lazy Eyes

I was with my mother, at home in her kitchen. We were sitting at an oak wood table. Sing my song, the one I always want you to sing she said. And she took a drink from out of a can and she looked at me. Her eyes were lazy. Sing She said again with her voice slurred. Mom! I said, then I grabbed all the cans that were on the table and threw them into the trash I stood away from her then she got up staggered toward me and put her hands on my shoulders Stand tall, be strong, always, she said Her breath smelled stale I put my head down and looked at all the cans that were in the trash Promise Promise you won’t be like this anymore I said She stepped away from me and straightened out the gray tablecloth so that it hung evenly Then she sat down her hard profile looking out the window Indian summer day Mid-afternoon Partly cloudy I heard the leaves outside the window Rustle making that sound they make when the wind blows them Then she opened the window and the breeze as if the wind spoke to her lifted strands of hair around her right ear.

Then she turned away from the window and looked at me blinking blood shot and her cheeks a kind of red cold weather causes Sing my favorite song now With her right hand she tapped on the table Sing Tap tap tap She wanted me to sing a victory song about winning battles about honoring those who fight But it’s also about preparing to fight preparing to win I started to sing Lakota She barely heard me

Then I sang louder and pretty soon I was singing so loud that my mother’s eyes weren’t lazy anymore

And when I finished Hoksila...little boy...Chase niyo...you will never cry She said and stood up and threw all the trash out the door.

—DAVID ST. CYR

Still...Thoughts

In your newborn picture, taken days after birth, Your eyes were closed. And both of your hands, two little fists, laid under your chin.

At the bottom of your picture it read: 7 lbs., 5 oz. September 28, 2000...I held it between my fingertips. I thought how appropriate... a small picture... of a small being of life.

I imagined holding your little warm body, hearing your short...little...warm breath if the both of us were in a quiet room.

A father spoke about when he held his daughter for the first time...it wasn’t about him anymore...and that he changed without explanation. Then he talked about how men should care.

And your hands are still in two fists and your eyes still closed, which seems appropriate because this world with its beautiful honesty... can be painfully bright.

—DAVID ST. CYR
A Community of Poets

by Harlan Richards

Poetry is the dance of life made manifest in words. Since becoming a poet (only a few short years ago), I have looked for poetry and poets everywhere I go. It is amazing the places they can be found.

When I arrived at Stanley (Correctional Institution) in 2011, one of the first things I did was look for a creative writing group to join. Since I first participated in a prison-based creative writing group when I was housed in Oakhill (Correctional Institution) in 2010, I have sought out opportunities to share poetry with fellow prisoners in a group setting.

There wasn’t any type of program at Stanley, so I wrote to the education director and asked for permission to recruit volunteers from UW-Eau Claire to come into Stanley to teach a class. At the time, I had only been writing poetry for a little over a year and hoped to benefit from the expertise of someone possessing or working toward an MFA. However, I soon found out that a non-staff member could not teach a creative writing group in Stanley without a staff member being present. My request was denied due to an ongoing staff shortage.

My plan seemed doomed but I’m a firm believer in the axiom that God’s delays are not God’s denials. I bided my time until I saw an opportunity about nine months later. The prison library had been operating for years with a “temporary” librarian, i.e., an administrative assistant who was assigned to run the library. Plans were made to hire a librarian so I tried again, this time asking the education director if it would be possible for the newly replaced administrative assistant to oversee a creative writing group when she ceased running the library. Instead, he referred the matter to the new librarian and suggested that she create the group.

Valerie Carter-Brown had never worked in a prison before. She had pursued a career as a librarian in academia and public libraries. But she was a fast learner and very supportive of the idea. I was a prisoner library worker at the time which gave us an opportunity to discuss the idea and figure out what a creative writing group should look like at Stanley.

Another six months passed as Ms. Carter-Brown learned her new duties and became acclimated to working in a prison. She then prepared a proposal and submitted it for approval. At first, there was some discussion about including prose writing in the program as well but it was deemed unworkable. Poetry and prose are too dissimilar and there would not be enough time to teach character development, plot, etc., for prose writers while simultaneously teaching poetry. A meeting was held between the librarian and education director to finalize the details. It was decided that fifteen poets at a time would participate in a twelve-week program, meeting for one hour each week and featuring weekly writing assignments (prompts). The class was to be held in the basic education classroom and the teacher, Ms. Decker, would help supervise (she retired midway through the first group and was replaced by Ms. Hoffstatter). Notices went out and requests to join poured in. Ms. Carter-Brown and I got together and worked out a 12-week syllabus which covered a broad range of poetry-related subjects. Participants were asked to write one or two poems each week utilizing a specific form or technique. We included assonance, alliteration, simile, metaphor, villanelles, pantoums, and other writing prompts. I was part of the first group and both participated in the exercises and helped facilitate the operation of the group.

It was amazing to watch, and be a part of, this group of diverse poets. These men for the most part did not know each other very well and there were many differences in culture, background, and commitment. Even though we did not see eye-to-eye on politics, religion, and a raft of other subjects, we set aside our differences for the sake of our poetry. We all knew that in Stanley starting a group like this and making it successful would be very difficult. One incident, one situation where the class got too noisy, or a guard had to be called in for any reason, would result in termination of the group.

I am proud to say that the guys in that first group realized what was at stake and rose to the task. The prompts were kept under wraps until they were passed out as assignments. That way, all of us were working on the same prompt each week. Participants could not skip ahead and work on something they liked better. This lent an immediacy to the sessions. The guys never knew what to expect and once they received the prompt, their finished poem was due at the next session. Initially, there was some resistance to trying new things. One guy particularly detested villanelles while another one had a hard time with pantoums. But they all produced finished poems for every class.

By the twelfth session, nobody wanted it to end. From a suspicious, diverse group of prisoners sprang forth a community of poets. We are all connected through our poetry. When we pass each other on the compound these days, talk often turns to the group and our latest creations. Each of the poets in that group came away enriched, not only in amassing a treasure trove of new tools with which to create verse, but with a new attitude toward those who are different from them. Plans are in the works to create a book of all the poems written during the class so each member can have a copy. Meanwhile, the second creative writing group is off to a great start on its way to a brighter future.

Here is the notice we ran to get participants in that first group at Stanley:

Calling All Creative Writers

I hear the whistle being blown, and in the
Air I’m tossed, ouch, I’m hit on the left
Side of my head. Black Jerseys have possession
Of me…I’m bounced and dribbled between the
Legs, around the back and passed through
The air until I’m in the hands of a shooter
That’s a 3 point threat, and with a flick of
The wrist—I’m in the air—swish—against
The nylon net I go – 3 points.

Blue Jerseys’ turn to have a shot with
Me and I’m being handled, dribbled,
Passed, layed up, shot and dunked until
There’s no more time on the clock, and
To think about it—I’m the reason why
Million Dollar Athletes are able to take
Care of themselves, family and friends...

I’m that Million Dollar Dream.

–James Foote
I Am (the South)

I am a child of oppression, my Mama’s third blessing
I was raised in the “Dirty,” so I’ve learned some filthy lessons.
Have been slept on more times than mentioned, but was sent to wake you and grab your attention.
I am the voice of ex-slaves, and have walked the same roads that their blood, sweat, and tears paved,
And when weary have stood in the shade under trees where they once hanged.
I have been on mountain tops and have dwelled in valleys low,
And for the cause I am the first person there, and always the last to go.
I have seen the birth of nations, and have witnessed the demise of Kings,
And have heard the last cries from fallen soldiers; when death the Reaper brings.
I am the crescendo in the symphony, the mellow melody in the blues.
I am a wild fire forever consuming, and the Mighty Mississippi River that gently flows and soothes.
I’ve been blessed to give meaning to the trials of life, and to make mere words rhyme poetical,
And for those words to live on in the hearts of many, and they deem them angelical.
But did I mention…That I am a child of oppression, my Mama’s third blessing,
I was raised in the dirty, so I’ve learned some filthy lessons.

—Jerome Joseph

Man to Man

Hold your head up, you have nothing to be ashamed about,
Keep your pants pulled up and don’t be poking your lip out.

Don’t ever show weakness and no matter what, don’t you cry,
always stick to the truth, but if you have to, tell a white lie.

Respect yourself first, and family, and all women,
and if the water stank real bad, don’t you go in it swimmin’.

Always do the best you can and don’t make excuses,
read every book you can so no one can ever say you are useless.

When they tell you, you can do anything and then leave you hangin’,
even with high unemployment, don’t you ever start slangin’.

When people underestimate you, work longer and harder,
even if you’re twice as good, someone will still think they’re smarter.

There is a big difference between actin’ hard and being strong,
don’t accept anyone else’s ideas of what’s right and what’s wrong.

If someone is hurting, help them if you can,
but, don’t you ever fight a war for the next man.

Don’t ever let a White man or Black man define who you are,
because, even during your darkest days, you’re still a shining star.

Remember, in the hallways—ALWAYS—walk, don’t run.
Now you’re ready for your first day of school, my beautiful Son.

—Ramiah Whiteside

Little Black girl, have you seen the Black girl?

All barrettes with Chiclet teeth and a sunrise smile,
only seeing life outside, such a beautiful child.
She’s a rainbow of happiness in a grey world.
Black girl, have you seen the little Black girl?
Smiles gone now, erased since her hero died.
Blood saturated steps bring memories of her brother that didn’t survive.
His life stolen by stray shots meant for the crack house next door,
ever again does she set her precious feet on the front porch.
Her father turns addict and her dismal existence grows worse,
bills become a black hole and her mother’s forced to whore.
Black girl, sad little Black girl.

Have you seen the White girl, the little White girl?
Golden pigtails bouncing, freckles and azure blue eyes.
Precociously prays every night looking to God in a star speckled sky.
She’s innocent, sensitive to the world, cries when small animals die.

Little White girl, have you seen the White girl?
A prisoner now, in the trailer she stays,
chemicals from the meth lab next door make outside unsafe.
Hungry but the bare shelves echo because her mom’s a customer.
It’s unsafe inside now because mom’s boyfriend starts touching her.
Tin shell trailer turns canned hell and there she can’t stay.
She decides God is blind so she runs away.
White girl, sad little White girl.

Ghetto kids, have you seen those Trailer kids?
White kids, have you seen those Black kids?

—David Harris
I Can’t Breathe

I can’t breathe. I’m dying from suffocation, asphyxiation. This being in prison is a messed up situation. I’m in a strange place. I see a strange face. I can’t catch my breath. It’s like I’ve been running at a fast pace.

I want to watch the game with my father. I want a meal cooked by my mother. I’d give anything to be hanging out with my brothers. Instead I’m incarcerated about to smother.

Somebody help me! I’m wheezing! I’m choking!

I’m paranoid sleeping with one eye open. It’s like all day long I’m inhaling smoke and it’s burning my nose and throat. It’s hard to cope.

Time is slowly passing. Constantly I’m gasping trying to get a grip. I’m grasping. Nothing seems to stop it. I can’t combat it 24 hours a day I feel asthmatic. I can’t stand it. Damn it! I’m in a panic, mind racin’ frantic. My life is going down like the Titanic.

It’s worse during the holiday season. I really Labor in my breathing. X-mas time. I’ve got kids and I can’t see them. No chestnuts roasting, no fa la la las on rum pum pums. Just shortness of breath till my release date comes.

I’m trapped in a dark cage. Can you imagine such a situation. Day to day hyperventilating. Frustrations got you so depressed and sad you breathing in a paper bag. There’s a tightness in my chest. Is it stress? Or cardiac arrest? Will I survive? Will I make it out alive?

Inhale exhale Inhale exhale

—MARK ROBERSON

Peter Branson lives in Rode Heath, a village in South Cheshire, England. A former teacher and lecturer, he now organizes writing workshops. Over the last four years he has had work published, or accepted for publication, by many mainstream poetry journals in Britain. He has also had poems published in The New Zealand Herald, and in Australia and New Zealand.

Brian Buster wrote this poem in a workshop with Marvin Bell.

Alan Catlin has been publishing for parts of five decades. He has over sixty chapbooks and full length books published during that time. He is currently serving as poetry editor for the online poetry magazine misfitmagazine.net.

Sara Clancy graduated from the Writer’s Program at the University of Wisconsin long ago. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in various journals such as The Smoking Poet, The Madison Review, Untitled Country Review, Poetry Breakfast, Oven Winter Review and Houseboat. She is an artist-transplant from the Pacific Northwest and southwest where she lives with her husband, their dog and a 21-year-old goldfish named Darryl.

Joan Colby has published in journals such as Poetry, Atlanta Review, and Prairie Schooner. Awards include two Illinois Arts Council Literary Awards, Rhino Poetry Award, the new renaissance Award for Poetry, and an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship in Literature. She has published 10 books including The Lonely Heart Killers, The Arrows Book and her newest book, just out from Future Cycle Press—Dead Horses.

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

Robert Cooperman’s latest collections are Little Time in Heaven (March Street Press), The Lily of the West (Wind Publications), and My Shower (Logan House Books). His work has appeared in The Wisconsin Review, the Sewanee Review, and The Mississippi Review.

Barbara Cranford was born in Chicago, where she was an encyclopedia editor, poet, sculptor and gallery owner. In her Central Wisconsin woods where she has lived since 1971, she conducts an occasional poem-making workshop and writes when she feels like it.

Mary Cresswell is a retired science editor from Los Angeles. She lives on New Zealand’s Kapiti Coast. Her work is in a variety of journals, and her latest book, Trace Fossils, was published in 2011. See also www.bookcouncil.org.nz/Writers/Profiles/Cresswell,%20Mary.

Jason Darrah wrote this poem in a workshop with Marvin Bell.

Holly Day is a housewife and mother of two living in Minneapolis, Minnesota, who teaches needlepoint classes in the Minneapolis school district. Her poetry has recently appeared in Hawaii’s Pacific Review, The Oxford American, and Spoonbill, and she is a recent recipient of the Sam Ragin Poetry Prize from Barton College.

Jay Deshpande’s poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in Washington Square, La Petite Zine, Narrative, Handmade, Shampoo, Spork, and elsewhere. He is the former poetry editor of AGNI and he curates the Metro Rhythm Reading Series in Brooklyn (metro.rhythm.wordpress.com).

Richard Dinges, Jr. has an MA in literary studies from University of Iowa and he manages business systems at an insurance company. Slant, Concho River Review, California Quarterly, Sunstone, and Miller’s Pond have most recently accepted his poems for their publications.

Randy Ekstrom wrote this poem in a workshop with Marvin Bell.

Yvette Viets Flaten’s great-grandfather homesteaded in Barron County, Wisconsin, in the years immediately following the Civil War, and those roots have proven fascinatingly strong as she researches the location of his 160 acres.

James Foote was a member of the Stanley poetry group when this poem was written.


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


Ray Greenblatt most recently has been published in APU’s Comstock Review and Wild River Poetry. His review of David McCullough’s new book The Greater Journey will be printed in the Schuylkill Valley Journal in December. His most recent book of poetry is Blasted Ships (Poetica, 2012).

John Grey, an Australian born poet, works as financial systems analyst and was recently published in Bryant Poetry Review, Tribeca Poetry Review and the hoover anthology, What Fears Become with work upcoming in Poesmus Review, Hurricane Review and Pynyon.

Lisa Growe’s poetry has appeared recently in beetle Poetry Journal, A capella Zoo, and Poetry Foundation. She was born and raised in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and she still keeps in touch with her first grade teacher from State Road Elementary School. The poems published here are homophonic translations from Christian Morgenstern’s original German.

Rob Harrington coaches soccer as a profession, writes as a hobby and thinks often of taking up new hobbies but never does. He lives with his wife on the Eastside of Milwaukee where the characters are plentiful and walking is a way of life. Like all Milwaukeeans, he enjoys breakfast sausage and beer, and he’s disappointed he never gets to eat them at the same time.

David L. Harris has always enjoyed reading and writing, and uses these now as a means of escape.

Gayle Ellen Harvey lives in Utica, NY.

Sarah Hayes is a writer and visual artist, working in the forms of poetry, creative non-fiction, digital photography and collage. Growing up in northern Wisconsin, she feels most at home in the outdoors and is working on a chapbook of her adventures mountain biking and rock climbing. When not writing or working at her day job, Sarah volunteers as a poetry editor for Red Bird Chapbooks.
Michael Hill grew up in Western Wisconsin, where he learned to fish on local lakes and rivers. A husband, dad, guitar player, fisherman, librarian and dog owner, he currently lives in Austin, Texas.

By morning Byron Hoot is a reader and writer, throughout the day, a Quality Director, and during hunting season, a hunter. Father of four, uncle to many, co-founder of The Tamarack Writers, a continuous gathering for over 34 consecutive years.

Charles Hughes is a tutor at St. Leonards’s House in a retired lawyer. His poems have appeared in American Poetry Review, American Literary Review, Innisfree Poetry Journal, Iron Horse Literary Review, Measure, Sevaner Theological Review, Verse Wisconsin, and other publications. He lives in the Chicago area with his wife.

Joan Wiese Johannes was born in Beaver Dam, attended grade school in Waupun, high school in Plymouth, and college in Stevens Point; then taught in Wisconsin Rapids for 34 years while transitioning into a poet. Her poems in Verse Wisconsin—YES!

One a lifetimeback on Wisconsin’s 1963 Rose Bowl team, Shawn Kempthorne taught English in the UW Colleges and served as CEO/Dean at UW-Richland. Now retired in the woods of Richland County, he spends his days as a tree farmer and writer. His poems have appeared in Wisconsin Academy Review, Wisconsin People & Ideas, Verse Wisconsin, Mature Years, Verbatim, and other places.

Susan Kileen writes poetry from her century-old farmhouse and is a member of the Stone Kettle Poets.

Michael Kriesel's poems have appeared widely. He’s written reviews for Small Press Review and Library Journal, and has won the WPOF Muse Prize, the Lorine Niedecker Award from the Council for Wisconsin Writers, and the Wisconsin Poets & Ideas John Lehman Poetry Prize. Books include Chasing Saturday Night (Marsh River Editions); Feeding My Heart To The Wind and Mists Mail The House (sunnysidepress).

Jim Landwehr enjoys writing creative nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. He has had nonfiction published in MidWest Outdoors, Forge Journal and Boundary Waters Journal. His poetry has been published in various Wisconsin and Idaho journals and many others. Jim currently resides in Waukesha, WI. Visit www.writerjimlandwehr.com.

Mike Lane has lived in Delfield Wisconsin for almost 40 years with his wife Kathy. Mike's poems have appeared previously in Soundsoze, Third Wednesday, Echoes and Poetry Super Highway. His first chapbook of poetry, They Can Keep The Cinder Block, was launched by Exot Books in March 2012.

Kristin Laurel is a mother of three teenagers, employed as nurse. She completed a two-year immersion program in poetry at The Last Litary Center (MPLS) with Thomas R. Smith as her advisor. Publications can be seen in CALIX, Grey Sparrow Review, The Main Street Rag and others. Her first book, Giving Them All Away was recently published by Evening Street Press.

MaryEllen Letarte developed and directs the Louise Bogan Chapter of the Massachusetts State Poetry Society. Her father was born in Pepin, Wisconsin. She matriculated at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and has won the WFOP Muse Prize, the Lorine Niedecker Award from the Wisconsin State Poets and the Tamarack Poetry Award. Publications can be seen in Calvary, Third Wednesday, Echoes and other places.


Richard Lugtf received the Cincinnati Post-Corbett Foundation Award for Literature and was a semi-finalist in the Penn State Poetry Prize. His poems have appeared in literary journals in the United States, internationally in Japan, Canada, Australia, Europe, Thailand, Hong Kong and India, and have been translated into Japanese, Polish, German and Finnish. One of his poems was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Tim McLafferty lives in NYC and is a professional drummer. He has played on Broadway in Urinetown, Grey Gardens, and many other interesting places. Visit timmclafferty.com.

Meredith Mason lives in Appleton, WI.

Daniel Melzt’s poetry has been published in Best New Poets 2012, American Poetry Review, upstate, Audio Zeno, Temenos, Aztlan, Mudfish, Calyx Review, and Lane Turner. He works as a tech writer for Google and lives in Midtown Manhattan on a block with nine restaurants.

Ralph Murre is a recovering Wisconsin farm boy who has taken to poetry instead of plowing, since the pay rate is about the same, and the females involved tend to be human rather than Holstein. His books to date are Crude Red Rock (CrossRoads Press) and Psalms (Little Eagle Press). He also attends to occasional blogging at the Anim Avrum Log.

April Neron recently graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. She currently works in a library. She is a full-time student, poet and historian. Her poetry has appeared in various journals and publications. She is completing an MFA in Literary and Environmental Studies at UW-Madison. Her short collection, The Edge of Damage, will be published in 2014 by Sycamore Press.

Mike Orlock is a retired high school teacher who splits his time between the Chicago suburbs and Sturgeon Bay. He is the father of two and grandfather of one, and he owes more than he could ever repay to Liz, his wife of 38 years.

Ester Hauser Laurence Prudlo is an UW alumna who has lived away from the state for some 28 years, but who returned in 2006 to teach in the Madison area. A retired counselor to soldiers and inmates, she is mother of 4, grandmother of 4. She lives with her husband, Tony, in Montgomery, AL, in the winter, and FRichburg, WI, in summer.


Dustin Renwick has visited Door County every summer since birth. He considers the entire peninsula his hometown, but he reserves a special place for Egg Harbor. Follow him on Twitter @drenwick110.

Harlan Richards grew up in Madison, Wisconsin, and earned a BS in business administration from UW-Platteville. He has had numerous poems published in print journals and online in various venues. He is currently working on his first book of poems. You can find more poems and essays on his blog at http://harlarichards.blogspot.com.

Michael Rinearthe wrote this poem in a workshop with Marvin Bell.

Mark Roberson wrote this poem from Thompson Correctional Center.

Justin Rogers might be found near Normal; bits of his poetry are scattered about. As for Wisconsin, he was once married to a woman from Lامsfly.

Tess Romeis is a Wisconsin native who tends to hover over, and ferret about, the Lake Michigan shoreline. She is a proud member of the Stone Kettle Poets.

Nancy Schmalz is a musician who teaches young flutists, gardeners, and knits at her home in Oshkosh. Her work has appeared in WPOF calendars, as well as in Flute Talk magazine.

Robert Schuler has been writing for fifty years. His fifteenth collection of poems, The Book of Jeweled Visions, was published by Tom Montag’s MWP Books, PO Box 8, Fairwater, WI 53931. Price: $12.50 plus $1.50 postage.

Anne Farrer Scott is a writer living in Des Moines.

Claudia Serra is a poet who immigrated to the U.S. in 1995. Nominated for the Pushcart Prize and for Best of the Net, she is the author of To Part Is To Die a Little (Cervena Barva Press), Angels & Bees (Phoenixia Publishing), and A Dirt Road Hangs from the Sky (Ruew Publishing). She-collaborated and co-translated The Vanishing Point That Whistles, an Anthology of Contemporary Romanian Poetry (Talisman Publishing, 2011). http://cserea.tumblr.com/

The Szwaja lives in a functioning church in Milwaukee where he tends hards, teas children, and performs other sexton duties. His biggest poetic influences are, equally, Kenneth Koch and Mary Oliver.

Scott T Starbuck is a Creative Writing Coordinator at San Diego Mesa College with a chapbook of fishing poems, River Walker, recently published by Mountains and Rivers Press in Eugene, Oregon. Once, while teaching at Lake Land College in Mattoon, IL, he drove over the Wisconsin border just to hear voices of salmon fishermen since he was a salmon troller eight years off the Oregon Coast. Visit rivertrek.blogspot.com.

David St. Cyr wrote this poem in a workshop with Marvin Bell.

Gregory Vincent St. Thomasino’s latest book of poems is The Vanicle (Dead Academics Press, 2012). In his spare time he writes at his blog. The Postmodern Romantic, and edits the online poetry journal, Entity.

Heather Swan is a Ph.D. candidate in Literary and Environmental Studies at UW-Madison. Her short collection, The Edge of Damage won first prize from the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets Chapbook Competition in 2009. Last spring an exhibit of her artwork called ‘Loss, Longing, and Belonging; Inhabiting the Human Body in an Endangered World’ was hosted by CHE (Center for Culture, History, and Environment). She is also a beekeeper.

Marc Swan is a vocational rehabilitation counselor living in Portland Maine, a seacoast town with a vibrant arts and music scene; new work in Common Ground, Pearl, Shipstream and Owen Winter Review, among others.

Nancy Takaca lives in Wellington, Utah, and in Bayfield, Wisconsin. Her third book of poetry Juniper was recently published by Limberlost Press, www.limberlostpress.com. She is the recent recipient of the first-place poetry award in the Utah Arts Council’s Original Writing Contest and the 2010 winner of the Kay Saunders Memorial Award in the WFOP Triad Contest.

Tori Grant Wilehouse is a native of Wisconsin and holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University in London. Her poetry has appeared in Literary Mama, The Greensboro Review, anderworld.com, Melusine and is forthcoming in Glassworks. She has managed in media for the past two decades.

Ed Werstein, Milwaukee, spent 22 years in manufacturing and union activity before his muse awoke and dragged herself 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, Mobius Magazine and a few other publications.

Ramiah Whiteside was a member of the Stanley poetry group when this poem was written.

R. Scott Varbrough is The Honors Texas Piper Professor of Literature of 2001 and Editor of Forces Literary Journal of Arts and Literature. His full length collection, A Sort of Adam Infant Dropped: True Tales of the Living Dead, was published in the Spring of 2013 under Ink Brush Press, includes the three poems featured in this issue.

Dana Yost spent 29 years as a state and national-award-winning daily newspaper journalist. He is the author of three published books, Grace, The Right Place, and A Higher Level: Southwest States Women’s Tennis 1979-1992. He was nominated for a 2012 Pushcart Prize in poetry and one of his works, "Slaughterhouse", is included in the book, Kind of a Hurricane Press’ Best of 2012 Anthology. He lives in Forest City, Iowa.
Gil Scott-Heron

You couldn’t have known
couldn’t have imagined
instantly shared messages
with no corporate sponsors.
What a world.
You, Gil, couldn’t have known
the revolution before the revolution
the technical revolution.
It’s not that the corporations
and the politicians they own
aren’t trying to keep things under wraps
they sue
they privatize
they squelch
they jail, even kill
to intimidate.

And what they can’t stifle
they try to co-opt.
I once saw Che’s image in a Levis commercial
as if Che had fought
for the rights of the indigenous
to wear American blue jeans.

In 2009, I watched from six thousand miles away
my grandson take his first steps.
Imagine. What a world.

But you couldn’t have imagined
we youtube
we twitter
we googleshare
we skype
we saw a preview of coming attractions during the Arab Spring
and without a doubt
the revolution will be televised.

—Ed Werstein, Milwaukee, WI

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