

POETRY MONTH 2025

An anthology of poetry written by
Wisconsinites, in Wisconsin, about Wisconsin.

Gathered by the Wisconsin Arts Board, in collaboration with artists and arts organizations.

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Against Insularity

Brenda Cárdenas

Let us push air into our splenetic bubbles,
 until they contain brimming worlds
 we can plunge into—blood orange
skies tinged with lavender beyond the horizon
 we've never traversed, across the line
 we've never transgressed. Time to purge
our stampeding litanies, pistol whipped plans
 sutured to impossible futures, manacled
 to metal desks and manicured lawns.

Be with me a forest of deciduous trees—
 lizard wrinkled, century of rings rising
 to silver-streaked clouds.

All our granular wreckage, our tin-pan scraps
 are bursting with veridian tympany.

 Light the cosmic fire, feed it with lungs
the size of ships' bellows. Spark celestial candles.
 They will cluster into amethyst constellations
 like the lilacs we were born to be.

Poem in Which We Count the Weeks Backward

J.L. CONRAD

On the anniversary, a faint glaze hits
the trail: the season hinged with frost, weeds
latched into a feathered crust. We notice the squirrels
have learned to regrow their limbs, the raccoons
become quicker, experts at evading the headlights'
paired eyes spinning down the highway. The deer
get up from where they lay beside pavement, and
the birds that had hurled their small bodies headlong
into propellers or glass begin stretching their wings,
slowly at first and later, after the thin bones
of evening have broken apart, take to the sky again.
In the back field, the coyotes carry on with
their raucous party. We wish them well, then head back
inside where the double-paned windows remain clear.
Night fissures, then collapses. Change impends.
It is frivolous, you remind me, to order curtains.

What Stays: A Poem that Remembers

Denise Sweet

I remember the baseball glove
I was given for my 13th birthday,
the leather smell, linseed oiled,
it held a ball for days and slept
under my pillow

I also remember playing in the dark,
fireflies in mason jars, Ollie Ollie Over –
tossing that ball high into the air
again and again, the higher the better,
the darker the better

But most of all, I remember when
my father said I was easily as good
as a boy any day of the week, as long
as I held my bat high, as long as I ran faster,
slid into home straighter, and I
never got beat up because I was good
as a boy

Because at 13, I had a famous
Sucker Punch. My mother would fret
over my eventually broken finger,
“Holy cow, young lady. that’s
your ring finger.
Now what will you do?”

The Lake is Mother to Us All

Christopher Kolon

I climb across the boulders that line
the lakeside of Southport Park,
settling down on a thick ledge that juts
out over the water.

Waves gurgle underneath
me as they sluice through stone,
counterpoint to the sound of the bamboo
flute I am preparing to play.

Who else is greeting you, Mother Lake,
on this sunny, windy day?

Two men parked in a Kenosha City
pickup truck eating sandwiches, drinking coffee,
eyes scanning the endless blue.

Glassers on Simmons Beach, boaters at the Marina.

Walkers and cyclists, drunks and addicts,
lonely people on benches and lovers
walking hand in hand in Wolfenbüttel Park.

Tourists and teachers, school kids and shop workers.

And others whose lives are enriched
by the constancy of these waters.

Lake Michigan presents herself equally

to every one of her children.

And though there are times she berates
us with winter storms or summer squalls,
her power is just a reflection of our limitations,
a lesson that humbles as it teaches.

This Mother Lake, whose waters
are so full of promise and solace,
provides connection
to something bigger than ourselves,
a mystery and a gift
available to all who share her shoreline.

I offer my flute to the lake
and begin to play,
not really sure why I am playing.

The lake doesn't care, she listens.

MY PRIVILEGE

John L Koethe

I remember having dinner with Jasper Johns
At Bill and Willy's loft in Soho in the early eighties,
With Susan and John Ashbery. Ashbery and Johns
Weren't supposed to be getting along, and yet they did
In what turned out to be a lovely evening that returned to me
Today while thinking about the exhibition at the Whitney
I saw in New York last week that covered all of Johns' career:
His deflation of painting's dramatization of interiority,
His obsession with the banal and everyday that anticipated . . .
What? All of that was true, and yet what moved me was his privacy:
A target was concentric paint, and yet it stood for something
He alone could understand, and the Savarin cans he kept repeating
Occupied a studio in his soul that lay behind the galleries of art.
I like to think that privacy is everything, .and at the same time
That there's nothing there to see: it's everybody's world,
Yet my perspective on it makes it mine alone, a world that ends with me.
Why is this so hard to express? Someone in the catalog complained
That he was raised in South Carolina yet ignored his privilege,
But so what? It isn't what you say that makes you human;
It's the life concealed behind the words that makes you what you are.
I wake each day to anybody's poem, a poem that feels

So far away it might as well be no one's. It's odd how each of us
Is everything, and yet there's nothing there for us to talk about
Beyond the things we share, which aren't of any interest.
I realize that sounds inhuman, and yet the more I have to hear
About the things we have in common, the less I care---
Unless it's just that each of us begins alone, and remains there.
Each of us is vast beyond comparison, a whole kingdom to itself,
And yet what makes it so is something no one else can see.
I miss the way poems sounded when I thought that they were mine,
Or the way a painting felt before it felt like someone else's,
Since this public space we have to live in seems unreal.
This back and forth between yourself and what exists without you
Is the feeling of existence, the experience of "mild effects"
John wrote of in "The Skaters," a poem I used to think of as my own.
I read it just the other day, for the first time in, oh, thirty years.
It reminded me how much I used to want to talk about those things
You weren't supposed to talk about at all: the secret way it feels to be
 alive
With nothing to explain, despite "this madness to explain"; the reality
Of living in the moment, yet living alone; the fear of death.

These are thoughts I've had since going to that show.
I don't know what to make of them, but the basic facts are true,
Maybe more so than I knew: I've often thought about that dinner

With those two paragons of privacy, Johns and John, but last week
John Yau told me Johns had heard about "The Skaters" and asked Ashbery
To read it to him in his studio---a perfect fly on the wall scenario
If there'd been anything to see, which I can't imagine that there was.
That's what privacy means: not an absence of people, but their presence
In the face of something they can't recognize. I see it in my soul each day
And you in yours, and yet it's nothing we can talk about or share,
Except by accident or indirection. Sometimes in the middle of the day
A poem comes over me, or I remember how a painting struck me
That I didn't understand, and another life seems mine, that doesn't last.
I don't know what to make of them: I'm not sure you can even call them
thoughts,
These fleeting states of mind that answer to each other as they come and go.
It doesn't matter what, if anything, they say. I only know they're mine,
And that they mean the world to me---and that's it. Whether or not
They amount to anything at all, or even if I think they're real,
The point is simply that I think they speak to me, and add up to a life
In which my comfort is their presence, and my privilege privacy.

After the Inauguration

Adrienne S. Wallner

Now, I write and write and write

and the only thing that makes sense
is to persist
to resist
to insist
on something better.

I can provide relief.
I can speak truth.
I can supply poetry.

I can write
like life depends on it.

Because it does.

To bring
something better
in

is the only way out.

Real

Alison Thumel

One version of the story: a lover spent all day in a freezer
Elbow-deep in cadavers

Then took off the bloody gloves, came home, and touched me
With those same hands.

What is the difference? Perhaps none. Perhaps inside of me
Was cold like that.

If dreaming is not unlike death say sometimes I was asleep
Or near to it.

In the version of the story I will tell I am alive but dreaming.
Cold sweat on the sheets.

A memory of bodies getting up from steel beds, zipping skins
Up to their throats.

In another version of the story I leave out all bodies but my own
To bury the evidence.

What is the difference? Not understanding the chest stitched up
Like a divining rod

To be my own, or my lover to be an undertaker not a doctor
Seeking another pulse

Beating lower than the first. Here, I will ask again: what
Is the difference?

If one story is as real as a palmed stone, say I've been carrying it
For years, trying

To determine whether the sound of a broken surface is the same
However a stone is thrown.

Say I am truthful: if I were cut open, this too would float out
Like a clot of balloons.

ONE COYOTE CALLING

James P. Lenfestey

The sound traveled up the canyon
like a Hindu charmer's rope,
a persistent, pleading voice,
rare solo in the familiar chorus.

It entered the bedroom,
snaked into the quiet
between my wife and me
its rending note,
the fearful work required
to find more than food in darkness.

A star, perhaps, buried by the mist
that fills the valley tonight,
the necessary star that tells us
how to find our way back home.

We lay there, warm in cotton
under several quilts,
touching along our full lengths
after a month apart, and more,

Wondering too how we get back
home, learn again how to sing
through a long, starless night.

The Woman and the Whale

Ethel Mortenson Davis

The day was a day of celebration.
A small Right Whale stood vertical,
head out of the water,
straight up in the air,
his dorsal fins reaching like arms
toward the sky.

A woman diver
from a South Pacific Island
said the whale tried to tuck her
under his dorsal fin
when she interacted with him.

At first, she struggled to get away—
until she saw the shark
circling her, trying to get at her.
The whale kept his body between
the diver and the shark.

Then the whale grew agitated,
slapped his tail at the shark,
before finally running it off.

Today, the whale came back with his family,
many heads sticking straight up in the air.

The Fox of My Imagination

Cynthia Marie Hoffman

One summer, we followed the backyard creek
to see how far it went. Through concrete tunnels
my sister and I howled, jumping back and forth
across the glittering thread. We saw
the backs of houses, the lawn chairs and rusted
swings of other possible lives. The minnows
were the same at every turn, dark
disembodied thumbs. We ended at the reservoir
with the carousel of wooden horses bobbing
like creatures of the sea. Deep in the forest,
the fox still roams. He pauses mid-hunt
to lick the paw that never healed. I grew too old
to finish his story. Eventually, I peeled my reflection
from the surface of the creek and took it with me.
My sister rode a real horse, bought a farm,
settled in a life down south. I built
a family of my own, with a river of asphalt

out back. At our parents' home, the creek
gets angry when it rains, snatching
mud from under the roots of the forest. A tree
collapses on the neighbor's house. By morning,
the creek has churned a mosaic of shattered
beer bottles along its shores. My mother, in the window,
sees it signaling in the sunlight like a morse
code from the many years she watched
her daughters playing in the creek, all rainboots
and buckets. She grows old. Sometimes, she hears
the fox scream through the night. The fox
of my imagination lives forever. His den is never
washed away. His eats shards of glass. I haven't
forgotten. Sometimes, when I'm alone, I pull
my reflection from the drawer like a dark gathering of silk,
find my childhood face woven into the fabric,
let it spill over my hands like water, like home.

+liminal light

Moki Ruminksi

before the sun

returns abounding

bringing geese and

song birds in tow

retracing somewhat

i am finding

the footprints

left in the snow

thaw exposing

dormant loosestrife

vast contrast to

constants in life

stepping when it

seems unsteady

or ice looks thin

and ready to break

unfurling away

cold moist days

seeds are pressed in

granular heart space

cross horizon

to follow and praise

daily light

breathe still

the liminal light

The Climate's Changed Already

Mary Linton

I sit on the edge of the bed
wearing as little as possible.
Sometimes even the thought
of movement starts the sweat.
I'm listening to bird bustling
through the double pane
window. Adenoidal robins
and busy body house sparrows
penetrate air that would
be easier to inhale if I had
a coal shovel – breathe one
briquette at a time. After five
days of rain the world is
fifteen shades of green
with a few of those silly
red-leaved flowering crabs
thrown in to show how
humans must fool with things.
Just now I'll sit and watch
the small locust sprout
lift and twist in air as heavy
as Wagner. Then maybe
I'll get another cup of tea,
look for something to wear.

Slowly. Very slowly.

My Life by Water

Lorine Niedecker

My life
 by water—
 Hear
spring's
 first frog
 or board
out on the cold
 ground
 giving
Muskrats
 gnawing
 doors
to wild green
 arts and letters
 Rabbits
raided
 my lettuce
 One boat
two—
 pointed toward
 my shore
thru birdstart
 wingdrip
 weed-drift
of the soft
 and serious—
 Water

libation

DeMar Walker

this is for the folks who received their first kisses at Moody Pool. didn't care about perfecting their backstroke cause they were in "too deep" while flirting on its shallow side. this is for the folks who survived 1993. the cryptosporidium outbreak that rocked cream city. contaminated us but we remained undefeated. this is for those who know the bubbler & the fountain. where coins & sips are wishes of plenty. this is for the folks baptized in that large white gown but didn't drown. quenched our thirst from the backyard water hose cause running in and out the house was a "no-no". this is for the folks who took the polar plunge in winter's Lake Michigan. stuck their tongues on metal ice trays, too.

Nibii-wiiyawan Bawaadanan *

Kimberly M. Blaeser

Wazhashk

agaashiinyi memiishanowed bagizod

biwak-dakamaadagaayin

mashkawendaman

googiigwaashkwaniyamban

dimii-miinaandeg gagwedweyamban.

Gigoopazomigoog

ninii-chiwaawaabiganoojinh akiing

ogichidaa Anishinaabe

awesiinaajimowinong, aadizookaanag

dash debaajimojig onisaakonanaanaawaa

nengaaj enji-mamaanjiding

gdobikwaakoninjiins

miidash gakina Nibiishinaabeg

debwewendamowaad.

Waabandan negawan

aah sa ongow eta

maaaji-mishiikenh-minis

minwaabandaan aakiing maampii

niigaanigaabawiyiing

agamigong

Wazhashk waabamang, niikaaninaanig
zhiibaasige zaaga'iganan gaye ziibiinsan
mashkiig zhawendang
mikwendang
waawiindang
ezhi-bagosendamowaad
ezhi-googiiwaad
agaashiinyag memiishanowewaad begizojig
dibiki-miikanong.

Nangodinong enji-nibii-bawaajiganan
gidimagozijig aakiing endaaying
bakadenodang
dash nagamoying
jiibenaakeying
noosone'igeying
bakobiiying.

*** Translation by Margaret Noodin**

Dreams of Water Bodies

Kimberly M. Blaeser

Wazhashk,
small whiskered swimmer,
you, a fluid arrow crossing waterways
with the simple determination
of one who has dived
purple deep into mythic quest.
Belittled or despised
as water rat on land;
hero of our Anishinaabeg people
in animal tales, creation stories
whose tellers open slowly,
magically like within a dream,
your tiny clenched fist
so all water tribes
might believe.
See the small grains of sand—
Ah, only those poor few—
but they become our turtle island
this good and well-dreamed land
where we stand in this moment
on the edge of so many bodies of water

and watch Wazhashk, our brother,
slip through pools and streams and lakes
this marshland earth hallowed by
the memory
the telling
the hope
the dive
of sleek-whiskered-swimmers
who mark a dark path.

And sometimes in our water dreams
we pitiful land-dwellers
in longing
recall, and singing
make spirits ready
to follow:

bakobii.**

**Go down into the water.

Paralysis

Aleena Ahmed

Paralysis - The need to be buried, hidden, become one with the water beneath life and lilypad. Fear is an insect with legs that seep into my pores, take over my skin. *If only you knew*, Bhaiya would say. Before the invention of shoes, women walked barefoot home was the naked back, calloused and yet welcoming to infant arms. Feet bled and carried rubble carried sediment and salt, journeyed through mud and floodplain. *If only you knew*. Our history is documented into the pores of her skin, fossilized and encrypted - no need to relive it and *yet* it is ever present; all the scarring, all the sacrifice - a cumulation of croaking voices and scrubbing blood beyond *any* proof of its existence. *If only you knew, every sacrifice made*, she could have stayed home, be woken by the rhythm of rain, lyrical and vivacious beneath the tender sun myriads of conifers at every inch of her home eager arms garnishing her neck with jasmine, coating turmeric thick on her skin, massaging her scalp with mustard oil wandering through *Kaash Phul* near the riverside. Her head is clouded, of these rainy days, everyone bundled up close together eating *Elish* and *Khichuri*. *If only you knew, all the risks*, every entry into unknown territory, diving headfirst unknowing of where to land or how to swim. Tides push and pull, moisture clusters together, garners thunder and storm the current sweeps her away. These waters are warped; she doesn't understand, she doesn't know how to survive; rain only sings an ode for sickness here. *If only you knew*, every look into a mirror, unable to recognize the stranger staring back every time it came back - that violating sense of confusion and discomfort and guilt *She is cold, cold, shivering* every time she mistook a seething hand for the radiance of the sun, the warmth of her country. *If only you knew, perhaps you wouldn't be so afraid*. How did one live, above the lilypad?

nature

Emily Igwike

tell me about the last time it rained tell me how

it felt

bloated clouds teasing gray sky so far yet so

perfectly touchable tell me how you felt

breathing heavy air chloroplasts impatient

with a photosynthetic necessity for purity for

renewal tell me how it feels to be loved by the

earth rhythmic disturbances and green

umbilical rooted within pulsing greedy dirt tell

me what it feels like to give letting go of part

of yourself in exchange for scraps a lungs

afterthought tell me how it feels to wait for the

sun each morning the darkness a little longer

every night fear clutching your xylem as you

pray for daylight

Like the Wind

Dasha Kelly Hamilton

Feel the wind chase and play
In ways our eyes could never see
Lifting motes and weightless matter
Dancing specks of wayward dreams

Breathe them in
Belt it out
Shake loose the quarter notes
Your starter dough, the shards of
broken hearts to be reimagined with melted gold

We breeze
and we storm
Strum electricity in the air
Scribble into the cosmos and seas
“Maybe” rustles comfort and through the leaves
“If” can uproot old and mighty trees

Ideas travel through us like the wind
Forces of our nature
Designers and makers
We are undoers
We are creators

Casting roles, molds and long shadows

We stack

We dance

We shatter, remix and line break

We bake, we glaze

Spin, shift and shape

We wander, wondering

Settling to rest on something fresh,

Somewhere new

Some solution, shortcut or fusion

Some evolution

of you

Breathe in

Sound it out

String the melody of your story along the eaves

Twinkle a mural across your starlit skies

Each of our lives

Already a constellation

We are lifted particles of stardust

Bending breezes into dreams

A Tasteless Life

Asia Moua

My native language is like sugar
Melting on my tongue
Leaving behind nothing
But a sweet memory

Mov, zaub, nqaij
My mouth automatically turns into
Rice, greens, meat
Effortlessly

Ib taig qaub thiab ib khob nab vam
My mind goes blank trying to grasp
My native words
Fading

I stare blankly at the lady before me
Quiet, no sound escaping my lips
As English strangles my neck
And speaks for me

One bowl of papaya salad and one cup of tri color
My voice box releases
Like a sigh of relief

As if English is my new primary

Here I write with the language
That effortlessly, easily, naturally
Expresses my thoughts and feelings
But is not who I am

“Speak English, so I can understand”

“Speak English, so I know you’re not talking behind my back”

“Speak English, this is America”

“Speak English, so we can ALL understand”

A whole generation
Stripped their original taste buds
Of their flavorful words
And implanted plain, standard English

A new language to sustain them
But so lacking in seasoning
That we search elsewhere in hopes
That a new language will help us swallow

All for what?

All for who?

A tasteless life for another’s comfort
But would they season their food for us?

Lake Affect

Nico Moore

Down by the light house

Feeling the breeze flow with my emotions

I feel in my self this is the closest

some will ever get to an ocean

A Great Lake to throw

Your thoughts

Fears

And hopes

Therapeutic are its sound and its motions

Lake front close companion to everyone

Welcoming one and all

no matter where you come from

no matter who you are

If you came from near

Or traveled from far

Short or tall

You are welcome regardless of your last choice

The tone of your skin

Or the tone of your voice

Come chill by the chilly lake side

and just be alive

Along this lake

I get endless waves of motivation

The lake front is my safe haven for inspiration

To see the water me the sky

Is a visual my spirit be craving

So many lives this powerful lake has taken

So many lives it is saving

A vast balance of memories

this lovely is making

Breathing through the Pipes

Kia Vang

Qeej.

Use them to inhale

Guide the spirit

Exhale

Congratulate love.

Words not expressed

Pass through the reeds

Carven bamboo

To the lost fields of

Our loved ones.

Ancestors

Stay in the mountains

Where the echoes

Echo.

Trade down the valley

Opium

Harvested

Like poppies

Their blood

Red like petals

Woe

Our language

A note is a word

A story is a song.

A lullaby hums

As we fly

Through the sky

Alongside dragons

In the new world

Play *qeej*

Let hearts resonate

Speak words

In which our tongues cannot

To new lands

To new people

Back to the home.

To the bamboo forests

Where we learn

The song of the soul.

Afterword

“The pleasure that poetry gives is that of imagining more than is written; the task is divided between the poet and his reader.”

- Alexandre Vine

Thank you to all who contributed to this beautiful anthology.

- The Wisconsin Arts Board