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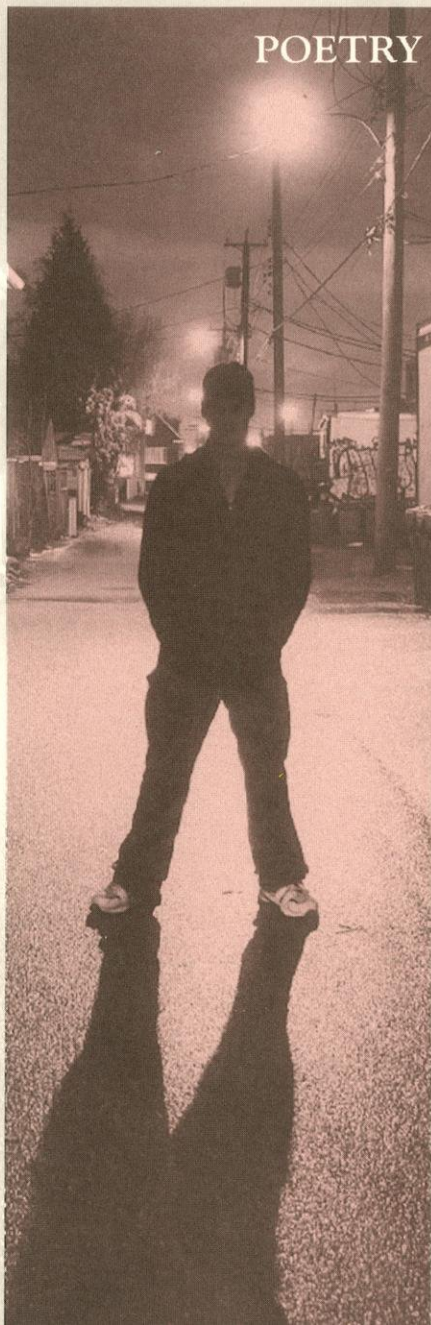
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acting lessons

POETRY BY JOHN LEHMAN



PARALLEL PRESS

A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

Acting Lessons

Poems by
John Lehman



PARALLEL PRESS 2008

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Many of these poems first appeared in regional publications such as *The Wisconsin Academy Review*, *Free Verse*, *Madison Magazine*, *Cup of Poems*, and *The State Street Sheet*, as well as in national literary magazines including: *Rosebud*, *The Manhattan Literary Review*, *Noir City Sentinel*, *The California Quarterly*, and *The Atlanta Review* (“Swimming Near the Cemetery” won a prize in their 2003 Poetry Competition). The “Sprecher’s Tavern” sequence was produced as a segment for Wisconsin Public Television. All but the last two lines of “As If I Had Never Lived” are stage directions from Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*.

John Lehman originated the “Wisconsin justified poem” as a style of poetry characterized by an intentionally chosen line length (usually less than that of a prose poem) and line breaks that purposefully interact with rhythms of the spoken sentence. In addition to distinctly Wisconsin settings, many of the darker poems in this collection (for example, “Tale of an Unreliable Narrator,” “Dreaming in Black and White,” and “Thirty-Two Feet per Second, per Second”) have a tone similar to the film noir movies that inspired them. That too has become a characteristic of the Wisconsin justified poem.

John wishes to thank his good friend, the poet Shoshauna Shy, for her invaluable help with this manuscript, and his on-line critique group, the Entendres, for their suggestions on individual poems.

FIRST EDITION

This book is dedicated to John Logan and Rod Jellema,
two remarkable poet/teachers who
“showed me how poetry could hotwire life.”

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*He worshipped the great God Flow
by holding on and letting go.*

—Robert Francis (about Robert Frost)

“In Memoriam: Four Poets”

Zelda Speaks

As I sit in the sun eating a ham and cheese sandwich, I'm actually creating a one-man play about unexpected encounters with women. They come and go between bites: my mom, the cat, a lady with hand puppets in her purse, my ex-wife. Each has taught me I know nothing about the opposite sex.

Oh, how I love a soothing gob of mayonnaise and the way the microwave melts ham and cheese into a gooey mound. I love the sun's warmth beneath my skin and the swaying sound of Northern pine. So, what do audiences want, I ask my pup. "Ham, ham, ham, ham," she barks; and ham is exactly what they'll get.

I Hear Voices

They say, "Fix the lawnmower."
"Clean the garage." Then I realize

I've left the door open and it's birds.
Please, I need voices that lie, not

issue orders. Voices that tell me
how lucky I am to be alone.

Tale of an Unreliable Narrator

I meet a strange woman while waiting on a wooden bench for a late-night train. She holds a worn cosmetic case on her lap (the type that's the smallest piece of a luggage set). She opens up the top and the little shelf inside proves to be a miniature stage. From under it she exhumes several crude, hand-carved figures. Within the case's open lid hang painted backdrops: one is a blazing sun with psychedelic fish and another, a palace on a hill without doors or windows. "A downtrodden magician," she begins, "is challenged by the king (a fat block of wood sways in her grasp) to a duel of wits. *Magician, do you think you can trick me into that lake?*" her deep voice asks. "No, the other rejoins, *however if you get into it, I can trick you out.*" So the king waddles in. "All right, he cries, *now trick me.* And the magician smiles, *I already did.*" For you see, there is no train, no woman, no station and no king. Only our willingness to be deceived.

Death of a Small Animal

On my sixth night alone as I watch a DVD,
the cat jumps in my lap and I feel his neck
wet with a swath of blood.

Before I get him to the sink, he's out
of my arms and out the door. Next morn-
ing he walks over me, purring and white.

Later I discover death beside the couch.
Not a mouse, rather the short tail, gray
body and slit eyes of a baby possum.

My husky, with only a few years left,
is oblivious to this. He makes guttural
sounds as he sleeps and doesn't do much
when awake. We both pace.

I miss the phone ringing and, when I look
out the window, you gardening in the rain.

Les Fauves

Matisse, our white cat with a black
toupee, chases his gray-haired sister
across the grass. It is a shadow
that hops and skips ahead of him.
The purple lilacs laugh.

A Shocking Truth, Beware

You probably should know that years ago I was electrocuted. Current went into my hands through 53 pin pricks and out my feet in holes the size of quarters. I was pushing a metal tower around the side of a building and the worker guiding it saw some children playing right where we were headed. He shoved that wobbling structure to avoid hitting them and this metal scaffold on wheels and me ran smack into power lines overhead. Did you know that current can short circuit the brain, make the heart fibrillate and boil internal organs like spaghetti sauce gurgling-over on a stove? One minute I was looking down at the ground and the next I was flat on it, lights out. Soles of my boots melted and left a trail of rubber when I tried to walk. That's all I remember of that day, except, if I go into a room at night and flip on a switch and the bulb flashes out, I know that death is never more than ten feet away.

Checking Vital Signs

When looking at cards, players stare longer at a bad hand than a good one. If they look assertively around the table, they have a bad hand. If their cards excite them, their blink rate will increase, and they can't prevent pupil dilation (eye-shades or dark glasses obscure this). If someone has a good hand, he or she will glance for a split second at their pile of chips. When betting, that person moves the chips forward in a quiet manner. Players with bad hands bet with exaggerated flare.

Perhaps you think you're above all this as you watch others watching you. Yet there's that unintended stare, how you blink and the way your pupils fail to dilate as you look at the words you now hold in your hand. Muffled noises fill the room as lights take on a pinkish glow. Listen, there's just one question I must ask: Are you bluffing or are you someone who knows there's more, right here, right now within your grasp? No, wait. Don't speak. You've already answered that.

Sprecher's Tavern

1. Wisconsin Stories

Well, I guess, living in Wisconsin is a lot like the tavern that sells rifles and beer.* It doesn't make much sense but it feels right when you're there. Roger, Johnny, Gordy, Elden and the rest tell stories or watch the Packers on TV. "Hey, Junior, why don't you tell this guy about the time you fell from the deer-stand and hung upside down for an hour from a tree?" Junior, now seventy-nine, pulls two mugs out of the freezer, fills them from the tap, gives me one and slowly takes a swig. "It was like this," he begins; all heads turn toward him. Outside, the world is changing. But here, within stories, is where we live.

* Sprecher's is in Leland, Wisconsin

2. The Turkey Hunt

Notice, if a turkey could smell you'd never kill one because its eyesight and hearing are the best there is. One hint of motion and a gobbler vanishes like a puff of smoke. That's why you scout before the season, check creek banks and around mud holes for tracks, listen at dusk for birds flying up to roost. Why you wear camouflage and a face mask and sit against a tree wider than the outline of your back. When you see a long-beard, call to get him working toward you. If he struts, wait till he extends his neck. A clear, one-shot kill is what you want. But note: hunts you recall the most are those in which the gobbler wins.

3. Returning Home

You do something one day, and the next, and it becomes your life, she thinks looking out from the kitchen. It's two years since she quit her job and left Atlanta to help her ailing mother. One-hundred-five, since her grandfather, Edwin, bought this grocery, now a bar, and the wordless dialogue of work began. But she knows we're worth most to ourselves and to others, where we're most ourselves, contented and at home. Out the window, rock croppings rise like old gravestones. There's nothing and then there's something. Wind across the hills at night. A fragrance of leaves. And, in the distance, the sound of returning geese.

Standing in Fall Leaves

No, you don't have to go anyplace.
Stay right where you are. Listen.
Don't even listen, just wait. Words
will come to you. Swirl at your feet.

After Fall Comes Despair

He has unusual contact lenses. One, the right, is to correct things in the distance. The left is to focus on whatever is close. Now as he sits in his kitchen late Wednesday afternoon, what he sees in the distance, through the window, is the river across the street—mirror-smooth with a touch of red at sunset. He looks at the silhouettes of trees and bare branches poking through the leaves. The sky itself, streaked moments earlier with pink gauze, turns slate.

What does he see up close? A white and black checkered floor, a black kitchen table...a small pile of unopened bills. A modern floor lamp with a red metal shade. A seam of wallpaper that has curled at its edge and should be glued. A shelf with unused cookbooks. And that photograph of the two of them on the terrace last summer with coffee cups in their hands. Her arm locked in his, she is glancing out past the camera, out into the distance.

And here is what he doesn't see, in the distance. How she now lives in her own little house. How she might get up lazily from a nap—her blonde hair a mess—and wrapped in an old blanket walk to her kitchen. How she pours a glass of milk, drinks some and leaves the rest on the counter by the sink. He can't see how she might switch on a lamp, grab a book she is reading and head down the hall to a bath, as, perhaps, someone coming in the back door calls her name.

He sits in twilight at the table with only the glow of his hands folded on his lap. Here's what he can't see up close: why he is here and she is not. Why they were happy together, but now live apart. To see with one eye corrected for distance and one for things that are near, the mind must choose between images. If it tries to hold both, nothing will be clear. No, he will wait, blind in the dark, for her to return and turn on the light, or...completely disappear.

Acting Lessons

The Woman:

Feed his ego, laugh at his jokes, order something expensive from the menu. You're a prize worth paying for.

The Man:

Act handsome and clever, as if you and she were both young, and it's you who are the desirable one.

The Scene:

Create something that will transcend the sadness of this bar. It's Last Call, folks, what's so hard?

The Blue Dahlia

Just don't get too complicated, Eddie. When a guy gets complicated he's unhappy. And when he's unhappy—his luck runs out...

—Raymond Chandler

When he first arrived, Chandler drove his gray-green Packard convertible high above Ciro's and the Hollywood Strip. Directly below the long line of La Cienega stretched till it got lost in the oil wells of Baldwin Hill.

During those last eight days of shooting he didn't draw a sober breath, didn't eat solid food, but slept with his black cat next to him while a girl from the studio went into the next room, typed the pages and left them on a bedside table to be corrected when he awoke. Raymond Chandler died slowly, one word at a time.

Outside of Grauman's Chinese Theater a janitor hoses off the sidewalk. Footprints fill with water. The once-curious move on.

Thirty-Two Feet per Second per Second

Did you ever step into an elevator, alone, push a button, watch the door close, wait because it doesn't move, only to discover that you mistakenly had selected the number of the floor that you already were on? And then as you reach out to try once again, the elevator starts, not to go down as you intend, but to ascend. Just one mistake and now you're at the mercy of something else. Up you rise like a suicide who's lost control, headed toward the roof, out of time, out of options—car lights and sirens beckoning through the dusk below. No, you get off at “eighteen” as two office workers in short-sleeved shirts come onboard. You depart as if this were your destination all along. Oh, what are the incredible odds of *that* coincidence? You get some water from a fountain, push the button and wait. This time you will select with deliberate care. You must get details right in order to return into your life. The next time there might not be this second chance to descend so slow.

Dreaming in Black and White

Though you don't look like Veronica Lake, as I watch her movie re-run on TV, I want to lose myself in its phony fog, hear the soundtrack soar and suddenly, caught in a Packard's headlamp beams, be that hapless jerk who falls in love once more.

Veronica Lake. She remains behind the bar, her hair a curl of cigarette smoke. A go-fer on the set hands her drinks. She is the star. Alan Ladd pokes his head through a doorway to the back where he's playing pool. He smirks. At the bar William Bendix goes berserk.

Her voice is weepy, but articulate, and her face, a pale valentine that glows in soft focus when the camera nears. She serves beers to movie stars pretending they are you and me, while we, sitting in the dark, forget our lives and dream in black and white.

I push through the door. "What would you like?" she asks. "Gin," I say, "and a sympathetic ear." "Sure, why not," she replies, "it's a couple hours until we close, I'm not going anywhere." "Then make it coffee for us both," I smile and light her cigarette.

But through the window I see trouble, Robert Preston with the cops or Brian Donlevy and some goons packing attitude and rods. I duck down the hall, out back into the john, where a window opens to an alley. I climb out as Ladd misdirects the boys toward the joint upstairs.

Later, watching from shadows along the street I see her, one last time. “Stop,” I say, “It’s you who are the one in danger. Your luck is running out. A string of flops, a failed comeback, and then, at age 53, you’ll be living in an old hotel and tending bar for real.”

She looks at me incredulously and grins, “You’re very silly. I’ll always be right here, waiting on this set. I’ll always be just seventeen.” But nights like these it’s you I dream are back, not Veronica Lake, as fog rolls in, music rises, someone screams, an engine roars.

California Dreaming

Like the starlet who went to L.A., landed a big contract with RKO, then had her first picture bomb. She couldn’t make monthly rent so she trooped up Mount Lee one night and neatly folded her coat at the base of the *Hollywood* sign. There were no clouds, and the stars shone like newly-minted silver. She inhaled vast darkness, climbed some maintenance ladder and jumped off the *H*. Two days after she died, a message came from the Beverly Hills Playhouse offering her the lead in a new play about a woman who commits suicide.

Invisible Men with X-Ray Eyes

Last night I heard the whistle of a distant train. Today instead of going to work, I walk down a block to talk with the garbage man who is waiting inside his truck for the drizzle to let up. It's not one of those two-story, Frankenstein giants with weightlifter arms that hoists trash over its head to dump it with a grunt, but a sports car-sleek garbage truck, flaunting sort-at-the-curb bins that are politically correct. I've the urge to break away from my life for a while. And sometimes in the rain, strange alliances are made.

At the next stop the driver shows me how to lift a can—most are plastic now—and deposit its bags of spilling guts, then swing it 'round and grab another to a banging beat. I put my feet on the running board, he shifts the gears and when he brakes, I play it solo. I catch the rhythm. He nods. Garbage men are not the stuff of TV shows, but that's their mystique. They are everywhere, unnoticed, but aware of everything. From magazines we read to hair we've lost, to the degree that our discarded underwear is frayed.

They are anthropologists studying a world we furnish with debris. They smell our smells, taste what we taste, feel the cans and boxes that contain the food that shapes our shapes. *And here's my house.* What waste our lives become. Once I was in an experimental drama. Tom, a mid-level accountant, and I played hobos. He needed a release from the minutia of the "day by day." To prepare for our roles we went to the freight yard. I was chicken, but he hopped into the open yellow boxcar of a slow-moving train. I never saw Tom again.

And the Circle Grows Small

The black car ahead of you in the parking ramp goes slow. As if taking more time will uncover a space that isn't there. You note the smell of wet cement, the shapes that stain the walls and how the ceilings grow increasingly low. So, you lumber upward, together, like elephants on your knees past deserted rows of metal hulls whose souls have fled long ago, and you wonder about those steel doors without handles and the screeching sounds from below and who it is that plows the roof when it snows. A halo surrounds each bulb. The temperature is cold. *Park* or *Exit*, signs in metallic boxes urge; the only other thing you know, is the license plate of the car you follow. "Shaw" it says. And three days later you hear that name again—a man your father met just weeks before he died. The procession ride slows to a funeral crawl. But then, everyone knows somebody by the name of "Shaw."

End of a Season

As I sit in the kitchen this morning
eating my grandson's M&Ms, I see

my reflection in the microwave door
—an overweight, white-haired guy,

five hundred dollars overdrawn,
who imagines he is Robert Frost.

It was last March my brother died; my
sister, the same month years before.

Old icicles drip, birds return, a bus
of school kids passes, the coffee pot

perks on. Nothing seems to change
until March & March are gone.

A Brief History of My Tattoo

When I was thirty-three or thirty-four, my mother seeing me in a tank top at a picnic with my kids, said that she didn't remember the large birthmark toward the top of my left arm. It was one of those odd moments that make you wonder if perhaps babies had been switched at birth and you are leading someone else's disastrous life.

The tattoo parlor is a cross between a third world clinic and a neon-lit sideshow. Dragons, skulls and snakes line the walls. Did I mention that on the night of her bewildering remark, my mother threatened to disown me because I had not had my daughter baptized? She told my wife of the time, "He is no son of mine."

Holly is a petite, single mother of two who lives in a residence above the shop. She, herself, has no tattoos. Her mulatto skin is smooth and she has a reassuring smile despite a pinkish scar on the gum of her front tooth. She's studied art in night school, and now streams of blue ink are bleeding down my arm.

It hurts like a hundred razors cutting me all at once; I'm afraid to watch. My ultimate design is to alter who I am for life. What if this is just another big mistake? But Holly gently blots and caresses the brownish stain of my long embarrassment and it becomes a magic, art deco flower that forever undulates.

Months later, outside a gyro joint on King Street, as we sit bare-armed, my son—himself now thirty-four, his arms and shoulders intricately marked—examines my cleverly camouflaging art. "That," he says, "turned out well." Yes, mothers give us birth, but it's gypsy women in the night who adorn male bruises with tattoos.

The Nut Bread Murders

A friend sends a loaf of nut bread that's dense as a kiln-dried brick. I tell my wife it reminds me of something my first wife would bake. Is this a mistake? No, because upon hearing it, she makes me a fluffy coffee cake with a brown-sugar and chocolate-chip topping, and I deduce there may be a lesson about women here (how one can be played against another). So, I call my first wife who asks what the hell I want. Hmmm. Later, I decide to put her in a novel I'm plotting as a character out to poison everyone with her goddamn nut bread while I, the hero, am saved by a stripper named Brown Sugah. Writing comes fast. It's February in Wisconsin and I am going nuts.

Fiscal Disobedience

My dog wanders off the trail, through snake grass, to mud. The sewage canal runs in his veins. My mind wanders too. If I buy half a tank of gas with an out-of-town check, then send a deposit from my local bank, I'll have a couple days to cover the amount. Thoreau thought he could live on sixty bucks a year at Walden Pond. Meanwhile my husky considers an escape to town. I get ten dollars extra with gas and we both share a large pizza instead. In tomorrow's lesson an overweight cat and I interpret Henry James.

Written Below Constellations Named for Private Body Parts

Betty kicks it off with the line about taking tea one summer afternoon near a beach. Adele adds an imagined lover and Bob, the smell of dead carp. That's when Janette changes the tea to wine, at night, below constellations named for private body parts. And Fred, thinking of his senior prom, alludes to lyrics by the Four Sons. Adele's daughter, Sea (real name Cynthia), not much for spelling, imagines that four suns mean a hallucinogenic dream. After they leave, Janette and Sea smoke a joint in Janette's Chevy down by the boat launch. Fred sneaks over to Adele's for sex as Betty straightens up the front room and piles cups and saucers in the sink. Bob goes home to warm up fish "ticks" in the microwave and compose his own poem. It's about the poetry group's trying to write something together. And, it sounds a lot like this.

Revenge of the Vegetables

My Ozzie-Nelson neighbor carves nostrils
and a mouth in the end of a cucumber. He

places it by the river—a green mole emerging
from tall marsh grass. His grandkids laugh.

That night a zucchini with a machete lops off
the guy's right hand and leaves it trickling

blood behind Heather's Bar. In retaliation, I grab
a shovel and hack down all his tomato plants.

Two days later my dog discovers the neighbor
dead. There's a garden stake through his heart.

Police suspect a gang of radishes. Oh well,
I didn't like him much anyway.

Proof of My Existence

I'm sitting in the booth of a Perkin's restaurant in Minneapolis and over by the window recognize a man who does, and does not, look like Garrison Keillor. I'm eating "the fantastic six"—three fried eggs, three pancakes, coffee and four sausage links. This man is talking incessantly, although too far away for me to tell if it is, indeed, that mellifluous voice. A woman with him—his agent, a reporter, his biographer or nobody special at all—is writing thoughtfully. Now he sits back and, arms Christ-like across the booth's padded top, chin firmly set and bushy eyebrows raised, he gazes out through the window.

The rain has stopped and a mist rises from the parking lot as a sun none of us can see turns the rows of cars miraculously gold—a portentous sign for all to behold. I decide that next Saturday I will listen to his radio broadcast and see if the sun shines in his Lake Wobegon skit. And if it does, I'll know that he and I do exist and that art has the power to transform us. However, when I pass their now-deserted table, I notice the woman had been working on a Sunday *New York Times* crossword puzzle. I put the top down on my convertible and think, the hell with it. Anyway, shouldn't a "fantastic six" have six sausage links?

In Other Words Employed

I don't reside in this office building where March wind growls outside like a hungry stomach, nor spend the prime hours of my day locked in its padded eight-foot square cell with a computer, telephone and e-mail. So, what am I doing here, you ask? I'm searching for clues as to where I *really am* when I put callers on hold, pretend to plan a report or sit and stare at fluorescent lights. Oh, the evidence is here, attached to e-mails I have sent to myself at home: "the burning soles of boots," a "peek-a-boo Veronica Lake," "the elevator which stops unexpectedly at another floor" and "Mr. Shaw" who is better known as Fate. These are impulses from one part of my brain to another. Invisible as flying sparks in the day. But at night they flame to become stories, each burning like a trash barrel on the corner of a street. The fiery blades mark faces of curious passersby who at times stop to warm their hands and look into my eyes.

As If I Had Never Even Lived

The stage is nearly empty. My parents, waiting for this moment, hug one another but smother their sobs, afraid they might be heard. They go out. Their carriage rumbles off. It grows quiet. Later a key unlocks the door and my grandfather enters, stage right. He mutters something and lies down. There's the thud of an ax in the orchard, lights dim. In dreams, other dreams begin. When I awake, it's morning. The windowsill shines with a lip of new snow.

Closed until Spring

This is the season of Ed Gein
and Jeffrey Dahmer. Sleep days,

fish through ice, pry firewood from
frozen mounds of snow. Buy wine

at the gas station. Court darkness.
Speak to no one. This is winter

in Wisconsin. Write horror stories.
Embrace the cold.

What We Want

We spend a lifetime searching
the carpet on our hands and

knees, beneath the banquet
table of the gods. For what?

A contact lens, dropped keys,
a shining cigarette lighter? Or

is it for a diamond, small as
a speck of dust—some clarity

which for one brief moment
appears, here within our grasp.

Two Years Later

I'm playing a trombone in my college marching band. It's after the half-time show and I'm trying to reach my brother on a cell phone. I frantically search for his number. It isn't listed under my contacts nor in an address book (which I also happen to have). I'm supposed to meet him somewhere, but I'm here instead. The crowd is on its feet cheering. Then I wake up and remember he is dead.

Things More Distant Than They Appear

Let's say that you had just two choices. The first, to leave Rick's Club, walk the six blocks down to your girl's place and apologize. The second, to stay and finish your drink. The entranceway—stark, mail on the floor, broken buzzer and unlocked door—with a little Scotch, takes on a movie-musical glow. A set where you tap dance up the staircase, into the arms of someone who is young and silken-robed. In fact, the place *is* shabby. One, two, three stories of fried onion smell. Then, of course her apartment door is locked and at this time of night, why would she answer anybody's knock? So, it would be back to Rick's anyway, right? No, not quite, because you see the door is inexplicably ajar, though all is dark inside. Now there are two more choices: to call out "hello"—the only sensible thing to do—or push the door open and, very quietly step within, the idea being that you'll make your way to her room, kneel beside her bed and whisper your affection in her delicate ear as she dreamily awakes. In you go, for this is the night of fools, feeling furniture with your toes stealthily as a cat. Each step takes days, each day is a week. Your lifetime passes as you breathe through the doorway to her bed which is—What did you expect?—empty. All you know for sure, is that you're tired and drunk and sad. You want to tumble on top of that bed for a minute's rest. You do, and dream that you are back at Rick's, and this time *she* comes in. She puts her fingers to your lips; there's no need for you to speak. "My place or yours," she smiles and since you already smell the lavender candles of her room and feel the softness of her pillows on your cheek, there are no choices, anymore. But you're not in her dreams, like she's in yours. You don't need to leave Rick's to discover that. So you sit and listen to Chet Baker's trumpet on the jukebox, to remember and forget.

Victory and Defeat

In the lobby of the VA Hospital are dog-eared Westerns, magazines and boxes of doughnuts. On a coat rack, caps and jackets identify each wearer's place in history: USS Missouri, Vietnam, Korean Vet. Now history is content to check blood pressure, temperature and the regularity of old men's bowels. What soldiers learn, no matter which war, is how to wait. It's six-thirty this January morning. The news of Iraq blares on a wall-mounted TV. Today I only need to endure a few tests. Plenty of time for that big battle still ahead.

Waking from Anesthesia

The pain in my groin is an endless Sunday rain. I've lost my dreams, and when they return, I don't know what they mean.

In Search of Eva Braun

On nights, late, like this, sometimes I think of her buried alive, a madman raving in the room next door. Her fate to be a footnote in history. And me? I'm, just practicing the "right to examine," what detectives call "discovery." I still see her twenty years ago wearing a half-slip and bra in an underground play, the lighting dim, the actors—shades, whose costumes appear to glow. I'd like to say that there was music of Weil and Brecht but she wasn't Polly Peachum or even Sally Bowles, much less Eva Braun, mistress of the master race. But note, an investigator must begin soon after an incident, for evidence disappears. Like she did, over years. She said she lived in a cage within a cage, but what if fate should open up the door? What would you do? Succumb or use your tongue to conceal the capsule in a corner of your mouth and later spit it out, as you clamored up stairs through an unlocked opening into night's smoldering air to prowling the dark and see whether all was lost? And if it was, to know at last you are free. Except, of course, from me. For I am memory.

“All Right, Mr. De Mille, I’m Ready for My Close-Up”

What you don’t understand is that *DeMille* is another name for *God* and a *close-up* means *the last judgment*. What you forget is, she was an *actress* playing an *actress* and that her lines right before these were: “There’s nothing else. Just us, the camera and those wonderful people who are out there in the dark.” Perhaps you don’t quite believe *the clicking projector* signifies *time passing*, but you can’t deny that outside of the dark theater’s interior, it is also dark, that *Sunset Boulevard* is a real street and *the siren in the distance* might be genuine. Or am I wrong? Go ahead, all you people out there in the dark, take time to sort this through. But remember, Cecil B. DeMille waits for you.

Vertigo

On a piece of paper draw a vertical rule that divides the sheet in two. On that line, note the bench marks in your life. Start from the earliest at the bottom and work your way to the top.

Label the right column “Did Happen” and the left “Did Not.” Went to “Catholic school” versus “the public one.” “Parents divorced” or “stayed together.” Did you join the Army? Get a job? After, or before, you fell in love?

Now live both lives. Scramble up fire escapes. Leap from rooftop to rooftop. Grow wings as you fall.

The Game of Without Within

Sit down in the middle of a quiet place, one with little furnishings is preferred. Spend a few minutes in silence, knowing that you're going to both speak and to hear. Listen for the slightest sounds. Prepare for your peacefulness to end.

Say your first name out loud. Articulate it distinctly and then repeat it insistently as if hailing another who's away in the distance who can't see you, on a boat or in a foggy field. You're calling someone who's remote in a mysterious way.

Lengthen vowels and stress syllables, exaggerate. Continue the calling of your name, twenty, thirty times until you start to get the feeling that you, yourself, are being called. Keep calling. Yes, this is your voice but it is also something more.

It's you who are calling, you don't know for whom. It's you who are being called, but you don't know from where. The one who's calling is the same, and yet not the same as the one who is called. Feel the strangeness of this so familiar name.

Only other people call you this. Go on, do it more. The goal is to produce the slight, but not necessarily unpleasant, sense of unease, when self becomes unstuck from self. To escape and close the breach, simply say, "Here I come!"

In the Middle of Nothing, Greatness

I pass a sign on Highway 26 that states
Juneau is 5 miles away, Oshkosh 53.
I saw the same sign just ten minutes ago,
but wait, when I check my gas gauge
(then, it had been a little below a quarter)
now, I swear, it shows half full. And there,
around a curve, against the steel November
sky, in a field of cornstalks far as a crow can
see—are you ready—rises an assemblage
of grain elevators more magnificent than
the Cathedral at Reims.

Women Who Walk

Each morning my wife and our neighbor
walk the road up on the ridge between

our two homes. Talia, windbreakered,
thin; Sarah, heavy-set, in an old barn coat.

Followed by a meandering parade of their
dogs, they discuss today's topics—recipes

for apple/pecan pie, husbands and Ben,
Sarah's seventeen-year-old autistic son.

Boots in winter give way to the Adidas
and flip-flops of spring. One more slow

back and forth. Then, rehearsal over,
the theater of their day begins.

Wisconsin Noir

I fry potatoes and eggs, talk to my
dogs, commute to the woodpile

and back, keep an eye on shadows
of trees slanting across the snow,

read a Raymond Chandler paperback
and stretch out on a well-worn couch.

A wheel of cheddar cheese ascends
the afternoon sky. There's a knock,

like a blonde in trouble, at my door.
A poem enters. We share a plate

of brats and beans. The poem tells me
all I need to know and more. We listen

to the creaking house then fall asleep.
Later, I awake, hungry and alone.

The fire's out—except for one or two
lines of poetry smoldering in the cold.

Listen, I'm Tired of Me Too

I'm like some mime no one wants to see
performing his act between movies in an old

theater. "Hunts Butterflies with an Invisible Net,"
"Struggles against the Wind." Presents: "Youth,

Old Age and Death." A few politely applaud.
Then lights dim, and the feature show begins.

Have You Forgotten Me?

We are reading Raymond Carver and I invite them to talk about some object—the emotions or memories it conjures up. The Carver short stories are “Cathedral” and “A Small, Good Thing.” In the first, a man who’s blind asks another to describe a church by drawing a picture of it on rough paper. The blind man’s hand rests on the narrator’s pencil as he does this and later touches the impressions they have made. Jack recalls that he himself was asked by a blind person to describe an elm. He happened to have a Bonsai tree so he took the man to his apartment and guided that blind man’s fingers slowly over its trunk, branches and leaves. Then Annie, a forty-year old who acts seventeen, when it’s her turn, reaches behind her chair and plops a backpack on the table. From it she removes a fuzzy, cartoon-like duck. As she caresses the doll that someone’s left at a Starbucks where she works, she tells us, “My son died when he was six, one summer at my ex-husband’s house. Nobody knows what happened, only that they found him in the morning, a small rubber ball lodged in his throat.” Her eyes look down. She straightens the bowtie on the duck. Then Annie unfolds the handwritten question pinned to its coat.

Rejection

Listen, I’m like that woman who wants her son to go to Princeton. He gets caught cheating on the entrance exam but she boasts to her diary that he’s in their Honors Program earning straight A’s. And when her husband leaves her for a younger woman, she grieves his death from leukemia. Months later, she runs into him at the grocery and thinks she’s seen a ghost. Today, I stare at a letter from the Arts Board informing me that I did not receive the grant I had applied for. So, now I’m headed out to Harvard where I’ll pen a new translation of *Beowulf*.



John Lehman is the founder and original publisher of *Rosebud*, a national magazine of short stories, poetry, and illustration for people who enjoy good writing. He is the poetry editor of *Wisconsin People & Ideas* as well as managing partner of Zelda Wilde Publishing. For three years, with editors Andrea Musher and Marilyn Taylor, he published the free, street-quarterly *Cup of Poems and a Side of Prose*. He also originated the Prairie Fire Poetry Quartet along with Shoshauna Shy, Robin Chapman, and Richard Roe. His latest venture is an interactive Web site called www.CoolPlums.com. John was a finalist for the Wisconsin Poet Laureate position in 2004 and again in 2008. Dramatic readings of his plays, *A Brief History of My Tattoo*, *The Jane Test*, and *The Writer's Cave* have been presented in Milwaukee and Madison.

John Lehman's previous collections of poetry, *Shrine of the Tooth Fairy*, *Dogs Dream of Running*, and *Shorts: 101 Brief Poems of Wonder and Surprise* are available from Cambridge Book Review Press, Salmon Run Press, and Zelda Wilde Publishing. His latest nonfiction books are *America's Greatest Unknown Poet: Lorine Niedecker Reminiscences*, *Photographs, Letters and Her Most Memorable Poems*, and *Everything is Changing: How to Gain Loyal Customers and Clients Quickly*.

John Lehman grew up in Chicago but for the last twenty years has lived with his wife, Talia Schorr, their four dogs, and six cats in Rockdale, the smallest incorporated village in Wisconsin.

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