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What Wisconsin Took

Poems by Paul Dickey

A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K



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Paul Dickey



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FIRST EDITION

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For Willyne

A Bad Break

Lou Gehrig is crying. Lou Gehrig is crying for every story in New York City. Lou Gehrig is wiping down every bleacher seat in Yankee Stadium with his salt. Lou Gehrig. Lou Gehrig. He has the right. He banged every one with a dinger.

DiMaggio can't believe the greatest ballplayer he ever played with is crying. Gehrig once hit behind Babe. Lou Gehrig is crying. It fills every stein and mug in the Bronx. Gehrig wanted to play in every game. DiMaggio wants a hit in every game. DiMaggio marries a bomb who will sleep with the president.

Lou Gehrig is crying up and down Broadway. He just got a bad break. He says he is the luckiest man in the world. The Babe and Gehrig are hugging like sisters. They don't speak to each other. Gehrig's mother said something about Babe's wife. Lou Gehrig is crying. DiMaggio still loves Marilyn. He is laying flowers on her grave. They were going to be married again. Lou Gehrig is crying.

Lou Gehrig is crying down at the financial district where someday the big bucks will build our future at the World Trade Center. Casey says DiMaggio won't play if he can't play ball the way people expect Joe DiMaggio to play ball and it's only to take the money. Joe DiMaggio is an American hero. Joe DiMaggio's father's name was Giuseppe in San Francisco in 1942. That took guts. Lou Gehrig is crying.

Ruth. Gehrig. DiMaggio. Now the Commerce Kid like Babe wants to hit a home run off every broad in the city. His dad Mutt gave him a baseball when he was hours old but sometimes Mickey Charles preferred a bottle. The Mick needs your liver now. He and Billy and Whitey for awhile drank up all of Gehrig's tears.

How Dickeyville, Wisconsin Might Have Got Its Name

I tell my wife, as we drive up highway 35 from Dubuque, how my great-great-grandfather, a War of 1812 veteran, settled a farm here. To myself, I worry: did grandmother tell me this, or did I make it all up? I remind myself that no one needs to know that grandfather was born in Iowa to a woman part Chippewa, that my line of the family got lost, stuck in an adolescent rebellion for 150 years, but that no one remembers why. We couldn't find the nerve to come home, and after a few generations we moved on to Oklahoma. You know how families go.

I crow that I am bringing the family back to forgive—to Wisconsin, the land where we first landed and loved America. I stop at the antique store across the road from the water tower, and walk in anonymously. I don't want to say too soon that my name is *Dickey* and become an instant celebrity. I try to be nonchalant. I ask how *Dickeyville* got its name. They shrug. No one knows. A codger smokes a pipe, rocks in the back corner next to a wooden Indian. He could be an ancient cousin. He is the spitting image of Uncle Elmer. He asks if I have seen the famous Grotto from 1930. You simply got to, son, he says.

Now I know. This town might better have been *Kieler*, settled by the good German Catholic Johannes Kieler and named when son George opened a post office. Or the ghost town *Burton*, where Daniel Burt built a steamboat to navigate to New Orleans. *Dickeyville* got its name like I did—a last minute date, the first man with whom my mother happened to love and later married, for my sake. Except whatever happened in the 1840s, Wisconsin was not watching.

Only Another Mystery of Love and Death

The rain last night, I swear, went *tick tock*,
tick tock. Of all things not to understand.
We know how rain is supposed to sound—
harmonize with percussion of thunderstorms,
or its harp tell us that all is okay. Out of bed,
we roamed the house to find where this was
coming from. Was it Quine or Wittgenstein
who said that truth was just a different language?
Didn't Aunt Rebecca say some things, dear,
are not there to get explained? In the den,
Rumi advised us only love can explain love.
The sound stopped. Rain we knew started. I held
all the angles of your body until you felt like air.

Jigsaw Puzzle

Be careful that curves do not
deceive you: there is one way
for this landscape to fit. First,
work straight edges only.

Complete the solid blue and green,
the border, ground and sky—
before you risk a difficult
discussion of ambiguous color

that is her piece, your piece,
her piece again—until appears
a golden saxifrage, a villa
at timberline where lovers meet.

Zeno's Pep Talk at the Special Olympics

The sports psychologist from the Green Bay Packers in the Nike sweats was positive. Picture yourself a winner, he said. Develop that photograph in your mind over and over. The cup is either half full or half empty. Only you can decide that it is half full. Someone has to win. It might as well be you. He grinned from ear to ear like a hare. The boys asked for autographs. He obliged and then got in his Jag. He couldn't stay for the boys' race.

Coach Zeno, on the other hand, came out all negative. You think Achilles (or a hare) running at his best can catch a tortoise? He got out his chalk. Consider. Starting at point S to reach the place $P(n)$ where the tortoise was, Achilles would need to run to $P(n)$ in some finite time, but meanwhile now the tortoise is at place $P(n+1)$. Never mind how short the distance between $P(n)$ and $P(n+1)$ may be, it at least exists. Okay, now let Achilles run to place $P(n+1)$, but the tortoise is now at $P(n+2)$. And so on for an infinite number of iterations. Of course, an infinite number of anythings cannot be accomplished in a finite amount of time. Thus, Achilles can never catch the tortoise.

The fathers groaned. Their boys have enough challenge, enough to overcome. They don't need this crap. The fathers wanted him out of the locker room, now. So Zeno proved that motion is impossible. To go any distance, one must first go half of it. But then to get halfway, one must first travel half of halfway. And so on and so on. Don't you see? One cannot run any distance, however small, without already running half of it. He could not leave the locker room any more than any boy could even start to run in today's race.

The fathers were furious. And so Zeno quietly explained, he had proven logically that a boy who cannot walk can win any race.

A Kind of Thief We Barely Noticed

A thief is living with us,
tearing shreds of wallpaper,
pulling threads from the carpet.

Every night it is the same.
His footprints wear the linoleum.
He steals luster from the silverware.

He sculpts your face and hands
after his image, chips away
flesh he no longer desires.

In the family room, he claims
his full share of an old man's
last air. I can't take it anymore.

No, I am calling the police.
But it doesn't matter. Already
you have left me for Paradise.

The Thought of What America Would Be Like If

Remember, you don't know me. This isn't just one of those tricks we pull off in America—walk into the Safeway 15 seconds apart and both buy 10 twelve-can packs of Dr Pepper for \$1.99 each when the limit is 10 per customer and then meet at the trunk of our car to stow away the goods. You don't know me. Really. I have a thought of what America . . . The police are at the door. Now. Quick. Ruth is beautiful, our beautiful Ruth. That is all you know and all you need to know.

Or as Lily Tomlin said, if truth is beauty, how come no one has her hair done in the library. Well, I'll be there, if you need me, getting a shave and being fitted for a new suit and wig. But don't tell the police *that* if you can help it. Be great in tact, as you have been untaught. Ask them in for a cup of coffee. Call in the media to advise. To see or not to see? Ask them *that*, will you? Is all that we see or seem but a cream within the cream? I'll use precious seconds to escape. By the name of Annabel Lee, my beautiful Annabel Lee.

It's okay, dear. You and I weren't right for each other anyway. She lives with no other plot than to love and be loved by me, and what America would be like if . . . So much depends upon the red SUV outfoxing the white cop cars. Two rogues divulged a yellow road. When the evening is spread out against the sky, I sing America next to of course God, I . . . I do not find that they will sing for me. Congress is the emperor of pipe dreams, Martha. In the *Mt. Vernon Gazette* this morning, my goodness, the very talk of a Borders at Key West, that kingdom by the sea. At the little league game, I heard a fly buzz before the side was retired. If the classics had a wide circulation, Emily, we could not B2B.

Ergo, I am home, Penelope. I just went out for a pack of Lucky Strikes at the Safeway. Oh well, it troubles my sleep. I shall be telling this somewhere with a sigh, ages and ages hence. When the evening is spread out against the sky, I too sing America. Nevermore. Ruth is beautiful, our beautiful Ruth. That is all you know and all you need to know.

*Unattractive Girl in Bikini,
By the Water's Edge*

The shadows try hard not to look lonely.
Under the clear surface of the pool,
they bend in images of sky. Even softball
lights are only in it for the beauty.
She splashes her feet at poolside,
disturbs the stars. No parent can tell her
grace does not call attention to itself.
She thinks the scene is all about her,
the way she wraps in the towel, the way
she opens it. Unknown to her, stars dance
together in the water if I squint enough,
where even bodies reflect beauty, where
as best as I can tell, she loses all her
faults in cuts and angles of the water.

Photographs of Door County

At last, Joanie and I meet *James*. Fumbling,
he shows us photographs of Door County.
In the first, Lake Michigan is flat as glass
but with his single sail somehow in the center.
The only sound I hear is the awkward Canada
geese. In the next, there is a family in the distance
he did not know yet, having been there only
one day. A girl and boy have fishing poles.
Seems to me the father struggles to get the boat
into the water while the wife loads their final
needs. My daughter acts casual, but her eyes
wink that this may be *it*, begs me to study
his next photograph even more carefully.
No one sits in her mother's chair, although
she has been gone now a full season.
Joanie's sweet voice sails in from the kitchen
with coffee. There is no tide. This afternoon,
there is little wind, although the waves still
come in, they go out, and they come in.

How the Lovers Became Different

Some nights they did not sleep.
At one point in the late talks,
words took on meaning.

And he couldn't say she was right,
and he couldn't say she was wrong,
so he said, you can say that again,

and she did and began to believe it.
She had a thesis. Soon she found
evidence: books dog-eared, Bible

verses highlighted, notes scrawled
at seminars, lunch with professors
and colleagues. He stopped asking

for proof. Explanations stretched
long and tedious. She was convinced,
by authority of God and a career,

with a force he could not believe.
At a point, love and logic excused
themselves from the discussion.

Aging Man Has Fling With Mathematics

He couldn't go home again
to the old differential equation.
He thought perhaps the solution
was a return to the algebra
of puberty. For years
he calculated the unknown x
in faces of women in a choir,
or waitresses at the bar, *m plus one*
unknowns in m equations,

but tonight he discovered the Zen
of magic squares. Horizontally,
from one nipple to the other
drawn string taut, down from
neckline to leg, or diagonally
from right armpit to left ankle—
all lines add up to the same number,
not this time one plus one
equals two, or the limit as n
approaches zero or infinity.

There is a theorem he remembers.
He trusts that she will prove it.

How Galileo Scored His Ticket to the Super Bowl

It would have been easy, son. All you needed to do was call my hotline, 1 800-GOD-GAME. Tell them you know Cosimo de Medici. . . . Who do you think? Of course, the grand duke of Tuscany. . . . Everybody there understands. They take your word on faith. No one asks for an explanation. The tickets arrive by miracle. You get view level skyboxes at the center of the universe with Aristotle, Ptolemy, and Pope Urban VIII.

But no, he can't. I forgot. He is Galileo. He wants a certain and repeatable methodology. He won't leave well enough alone. He demands a chair for his old school buddy Copernicus. He wants physics to be a new science.

Galileo turns his back on me and orbits all alone around the domed stadium putting all his faith in scalpers. Copernicus couldn't even come. He said something about an inquisition, whatever that is. He might be under house arrest. Maybe he just said that he didn't want to be an imposition.

"I got your scientific method right here in my fist, bub." It's one of his former pupils at Padua, now a businessman. Galileo will take anything, even the nose-bleed section, studying all the action by telescope. He observes that the players' numbers are sunspots. He demands an explanation from anyone who will listen. He won't leave well enough alone. He wants a mathematical proof.

Stadium security explains the rules. It is nothing personal. There is no reason for a disturbance. *Reason?* Galileo laughs.

The Day After Memorial Day is a Workday

Cousins, uncles, and black ants
scatter with the leftovers. Memory
dawdles behind, doesn't come
when called. We honk the horn.
We need help to pack up the car.

The rusted swings creak and spring
back with laughter. We have hours
to drive. We never got a good photo
of Dad. He always wandered off.
I never caught him in good light.

Tomorrow will come too soon.
A softball pitch is yet in the air,
somewhere between the mound
and home. Someone has to go off
and leave it there, and it has to be us.

At the Last Minute, Beauty Escapes Stardom

Beauty, the boys can't take their eyes off you,
they got you in the crosshairs, in the sights,
trying everything we got—false lashes, meter,
eyeliner, rhyme. Okay they take a little practice ever
so often with a target pistol, write a love ditty
to you and your little sis Art, but our real business
don't forget is crime, cosmetics, and bullets.

Okay we'll let her go, scam kid get out of here,
shake that booty, tell mama Sis might not be home
for dinner. Now don't mess with us Beauty,
you're ours, you're too far in bed with this thing,
we own you Beauty, you are what we came for.
If we can't have you, no one ever will.
We're aiming Colt 45 millimeters at your head.
Only lucky for you, beauty doesn't last forever.

When It All Comes Down to the Last Resort

Our star reliever is truth although on occasion we may keep him warming up in the bullpen, rest his knuckleball, doubt that he exists, fine him for showing up late for pre-games, consult with the general manager about our options on his contract. After all, dear, it is our life and no, we didn't mean to have it all happen like this.

So what right does he have signing autographs for the kids to sleep with when we may be going into extra innings? I admit, he sleeps with the third baseman's wife. The manager knows these things, but I have a team to think of.

Meddling Old Aunt Betty's Advice to the Young Married

*All that you love perhaps will come and go.
You speak of love but only try to live.
You never think your luck will come to grief,
but always at the end of day are things
to quarrel about, not time to be alone.
She could not bear to see us live our way.*

*That we had sinned she said in her own way.
If you have nothing kind to say, then go.
You act like children do, and you alone
will be sorry if you choose not to live
for love, but always work the blame in things.
Those days she did so put us all to grief,*

*but nothing takes care of itself like grief.
In time, the path toward home did find its way.
Regrets were hung upon the wall as things—
the souvenirs one day just had to go.
It was better for both of us to live
to care, than stand on principle alone.*

*Older, she acted as if death alone
could make important to us her grief.
No one could tell her that she could not live.
For long, it seemed to us so much her way,
until there was no place for her to go
among the very odds and ends of things.*

*We cleared a place for her and all her things
and took her in for one last month, alone
we knew in time her needs would need to go.
But then, our home at first was meant for grief.
So long ago, and in that other way,
she taught us how to die and thus to live.*

But something more than love still tried to live.
She'd look for a button among her things.
And still of course about her, was her way—
to search in drawers not meant for buttons alone.
But how does one deny that grief is grief,
and what becomes of us must come and go?

Their way is how the old want us to live.
When words no longer work, we let go of things,
and leave the buttons alone to hoard their grief.

Near the Fox River Wildlife Refuge

Just this week, the weather has turned.
At the refuge, the few remaining
snow geese scatter at a handclap.
You cannot tell them goodbye.

Movement is an awkward flutter
of wings. Wind flaps the doors
of the Dairy Delight, the shelter that once
was an Ace Hardware. Farmers' sons

drive south to Madison for nails
and girls. Their leaving lets no sound
stay, although some words dawdle,
and always mean to come home soon.

Close Play at the Plate

We try to talk the game through, be friends,
say nothing really: old times, other games.
From the first pitch, we play
father and son, read stats, players' bios.
It is the third inning and we are doing okay.
I have not offered to save his life. He has not
explained to me why he gives it away, like me,
to first impulses. So alike, we analyze every play—
grounders to short, foul balls, the pitcher's
staying power. In the seventh inning,
I try to get up courage to ask if he remembers
playing third base and pitcher, or if all his
metaphors died during his world series,
the score tied 3-3 after his best eight innings.
He looks at me. I know I am an idiot.
In the ninth, there's a hit with two outs,
whether we mean to say it or not,
and the runner on first takes off. This will
be the ballgame. The call will need
a split second, unerring judgment. There could
be a fight, maybe even a brawl.
The runner rounds third like his life
and another's life depend on it. There's a relay
from shortstop. It's going to be close at home,
and I know nothing that can be said to a son.

Digitizing My Wife's Old Vinyl

Imagine a table that turns, spinning
a black dinner plate like a universe.
A steel arm tracks you from first
apartment to new house, from town

to city, your whole life. A diamond pricks
a darkness, or rather the blackness orbits
through it. Played in stereo, scratches,
pops, and old sentiments sound like love.
When she played the tracks years ago,

I should have known better. Even then,
I could not listen—the sappy *blue*
on blue, heartache on heartache. Now,
I edit out crackles before I burn
all of her recordings into Memorex.

Epistemology While Getting Lost in Minneapolis

In the voice of a son

About the third time he told Mom, who was driving the car: “Exit at MN-62E, coming up in a quarter mile,” she said “I know.” *I know that you know; I am saying it over and over because I cannot know that you know.* Again Dad didn’t know what he was saying. A proposition cannot state its negative meaningfully. He should know better. He has a degree in the field. In the night, he could see the road map only when lights flashed randomly through the side windows. Later, he would explain what he meant: the duplicity of meaning with the term *know*, the failure of propositional logic to express us, the human. To me, it was always only my lost father, a few hours older now, in the dark, his raised voice sounding like screaming, speaking his nonsense.

The Poetry Doesn't Even Know Where They Live

This so-called poetry doesn't even know where he lives, although it follows him constantly. A woman drops him off at the curb. He'll walk home, dart in and out between bushes to elude the assassins. She gives no good-bye kiss. It would give away too much. She might lose an imperceptible edge.

His son is angry for all the mistakes his father made with him, and all the time the old man lived in his own mind while they were playing catch. The son sleeps tonight next to his Humvee just outside Baghdad International, at the very origin of human civilization. The 1st Armored Division has not yet fully secured the camp. It has cooled off to 112 degrees at 1 a.m. He is playing a recruitment video game called "Back Home in the States." *From the sharper graphics to the more intuitive controls and enhanced AI, you are in total command. The scenario and your challenge? Your mother in the old man's arms hears rocket-propelled grenades. Terrorists with all their hearts pray to gods behind their gods' backs. Can you save all of human civilization from Armageddon?*

Another man whispers in the mother's ear. Maybe the gunfire is just in the distance. Don't make a sound. Please don't tell a soul. Your husband doesn't love you. I love you. God, be merciful to us.

On starless nights like this, the poetry wants them dead or alive.

What Wisconsin Took

The maples are out of work this winter. On the state highway lining the fields, the trees are stripped, but create no new economies. The wind strums a guitar that is badly out of tune. The corn men of Orfordville with stubble faces drink their coffee black, parlay excuses on hockey games, argue over an obsolete war and a buzzer-beater basket thirty three years ago, wink at the widowed waitress and a dad's Prohibition profits. Somewhere else in town, the plump and skinny wives crow of granddaughters with money and day jobs in Milwaukee. Someone else's daughters have the night jobs. The men could forgive their own, had they not forgotten when they left what it took to make this life.



PAUL DICKEY holds a Master of Arts degree from Indiana University, Bloomington, in the History and Philosophy of Science. In the mid-1970s, he published in quality literary journals, including *Nimrod*, *Karamu*, *Quartet*, and *Kansas Quarterly*. Since 1980, he has owned and operated an out-of-print book business and pioneered the use of the personal computer and the World Wide Web in the antiquarian book trade. He moved his family from Wichita, KS to Omaha in 1986. A professional career in information technology has included periods at Metropolitan Life, Mutual of Omaha, and Ameritrade, Inc. After taking a long hiatus from writing, Dickey started to publish again in 2003. He has published in nearly fifty print and online journals. Recent work is in *Rattle*, *Sentence: A Journal of Prose Poetics*, *Cue: A Journal of Prose Poetry*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Swink Online*, and *Cider Press Review*. He is married and has two adult daughters and one adult son.

Dickey writes with one eye focused on the history of philosophy and science and the other on a deeply personal but sharable human experience (although appropriately fictionalized—don't expect accurate biography in the poems). He expects of himself that his work be accessible and frequently comical, but at the same time to demonstrate the intellectual honesty and seriousness that his subjects deserve. Although he prefers mostly free verse and prose poetry, he also has written formal verse, translations, and “flash fiction.”

What Wisconsin Took is the forty-third chapbook in the poetry series published by Parallel Press, an imprint of the University of Wisconsin–Madison Library.

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