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Gregg Wilhelm

Five Poems by Gregg Wilhelm

Leaning into Purple Lines

Vein between beltway and district
A stent to unclog exhausted arteries
This line a purple shawl draped
Over cross and bruised stations

bethesda / doors are closing

Fur and tobacco and lives traded
Along this dirt road arrow-shaft
Straight to Patowomeck banks where
Piscatawa waded waist-deep with Jesuits

connecticut avenue / doors are closing

Planks worn by our feet across a splintered bridge
Between same as back and hope ever forth to houses
We were welcomed to clean
But not to dwell within

lyttonsville / doors are closing

Believers fell hickory trees to build a holy house
Until trolley tracks laid shockingly close forced
A move a mile up the pike hauled by harnessed
Draft horses where sinner-saints congregate

woodside / doors are closing

Lincoln played town ball beside mica-chipped springs
That sprung into American suburbs that morphed
Into world headquarters that Zippy the Pinhead
Discovered at a lunch counter as the diner crawled away

silver spring / doors are closing

Life began when she got a free card
Her first emancipation found in stacks
Books borrowed before the day innocence
Slipped away with a sip from a fountain

neighborhood library / doors are closing

Sligo's surface mirrors emerald green of leaves above
Long ago it churned grist mills and quenched thirsts
Its ripple still tries to wash away deep creek blues
Years after Irish laborers faded along the canal

Beltway Poetry

Quarterly is an award-winning online literary journal and resource bank that showcases the literary community in Washington, DC and the surrounding Mid-Atlantic region.



Washington has certainly an air of more magnificence than any other American town. It is mean in detail, but the outline has a certain grandeur about it. The women dress a good deal, and many a village belle, who is not even receivable in her own county, passes here, for a prodigy, on consequence of political rank.

— *James Fenimore Cooper*

dale drive / doors are closing

Green space brings green peace to the density
Nature's beauty muscles against constructs
Engines muffle the creek's eternal voice but listen
Close to the call to retreat from it all and hit the trail

manchester place / doors are closing

I drop from the edge of a single sycamore leaf
Into a tranquil branch that meanders to a creek
That feeds a river that joins another toward a bay
I grow mightier with others on my current journey

long branch / doors are closing

Cook a third-world short-hand stew in a cauldronous pot
Brown halal chicken in a pool of palm nut oil and kosher salt
Take stock and add cowpeas mungbeans kumara and gai lan
Ladle over cassava bread and share with all who hunger

piney branch / doors are closing

Weary commuter where do these tracks lead?
Is your station elevated or underground?
At this juncture are you halfway there
halfway home or having to veer off?

takoma / doors are closing

The shortest route around the world is along the International Corridor
And through stomachs that fill themselves on the global grain of rice
Bún Chả Bibimbap Biryani Kabuli Pulao Tahdig Chelo Mansaf
Majadra Plov Paella Thieboudienne Jollof Jasmine Casamiento

riggs road / doors are closing

Eighty-five gilded youths swathed in under armor
Two-a-days and end the day running stadium steps
Under a searing sun at the heatstroke of midnight
Just to rub Testudo's nose to a fiercely turtled shine

college park / doors are closing

On granted land sown with bones and tear-watered
Charles Calvert's seed of an agricultural college
Cultivates educators from the ashes of devastating fire
To gather thinkers harvest knowledge reap empathy

plantation campus / doors are closing

Miss Bettie in a long yellow gown dressed for an "Old South Ball"
Did not notice me admiring her in the mirror as she arranged
Sweet magnolias in a porcelain vase while swaying to the fiddler's tune
When I turned she was gone leaving me spurned like Northern scum

haunted inn / doors are closing

In a station of the Metro
Silent as Pound's apparitions
Our faces glow like ghosts
Illuminated violet by devices

metro station / doors are closing

Everlasting rest of the founding Calverts' name
Between river branches Anacostans left pure
Counter culture meets higher educators
And old-timers elongate their accented O's

riverdale / doors are closing

Go tell it on the mountain said Baldwin
 To faithful stewards marooned on a hill
 So many crowns bought and paid for
 Gifts for their children to claim and wear

beacon heights / doors are closing

Deplete our State armories of their artillery
 To defend the most dangerous places on the
 Annapolis road for now the honor of the country
 Depends upon keeping this communication open

annapolis road / doors are closing

Remember Carroll's sacred trust
 Signed on the dot-dash-dotted line
 Declared a purpled contradiction
 Bruised by deeds versus words

new carrollton / doors are closing

Sakura

Cherry blossoms umbrella'd the view from Adele's fourth-floor condo
 Where she had moved after integrating Horizon House downtown
 Twenty-five years earlier when tenants on the elevator asked for whom
 She worked and Adele said Morgan College then corrected their English
 Not *whom* but *where*

Before the book published Adele traded in her cherry butterscotch Lincoln
 For a model-year jet black Infiniti I-30 with power windows and a screen
 That lowered and raised in the rear window depending on whether you
 Wanted to see the light while melting into leather seats that smelled slick like
 Payback if not reparations

If the two of us were going to drive around the state to promote her book
 We were going to do it in style and she joked about which Hollywood stars
 Would play my Morgan Freeman to her Jessica Tandy seen in the rearview
 Mirror in reverse a negative to the positive like opposite ends of a battery
 That charges me to change

Born in 1919 on Maryland's Eastern Shore she saw life in Pocomoke
 As dark as the namesake river that snaked through that bivalved town
 Where school ended for Negroes at the ninth grade so that boys could go
 Sow and reap on farms while girls washed dresses and hallways clean
 Of dirt that clung

Last two lynchings in Maryland happened just miles away from where Adele
 Came of age and implored her grease monkied father to please stop
 Petitioning for a 10th grade at the colored school because she saw how easy
 It was for a rope to lasso a branch how hard it was back then to change polarities
 From other to brother

Adele taught English wrote poems painted pictures that hung on her walls
 I loved the one that captured a stand of trees in the park below titled "sakura"
 Japanese for "cherry blossom" one of many things she taught me on long drives
 Across time with a trunkful of her jacketed memoir about life as it really was
 Down on the shore

Today my daughter and I walk through that park near Adele's old condo
 Wind stirs blossoms off the trees into a whirl of pink petals that blind
 Us from the world that I struggle to unpack and explain for her
 She scoops up a handful of what has fallen blushed to the ground and
 Blows it toward heaven

Thief River Scrap

Dark mound hides arched in wild blonde wheat
 A slumbering bull dead still for two decades
 My father-in-law abandoned the front of the combine
 In a corner of the family farm far angled from the '80s
 Until the price of scrap hit fifty cents a pound

He guesses the rusted hulk weighs a third of the
 8000-pound Massey-Ferguson that his grandfather
 Brought down from Canada when staking the claim
 His plan is to haul the carcass to Thief River Falls
 Fifty flat miles north on the shoulders of a Ford F150

Cold cash would help with boreal months coming on
 And little hay put up for 120 head roaming frozen hills
 Where Ojibwe tilled long before mechanical buffalo
 Arrived to labor endlessly for miserable homesteaders
 With names like Jacobson Buringrud Paulsen Moen

Fifty miles on Route 59 where dust-swept land erases
 Moose Dung's signature on the Treaty of Old Crossing
 Boomtown hometown of Artic Cat Digi-Key Steiger Tractor
 "Stolen-land river" where Dakotas secretly camped
 Along the banks of Red Lake River's renegade current

Farmer-in-law walks cautiously toward the beast
 Grade 80 chain draped around his neck like a serpent
 He shimmyes links under the threshing cylinder's belly
 Lassoos its heavy ends to the excavator's gnarled claw
 Hydraulics convulse as the behemoth mounts the pickup

Not wise to second-guess this ancient farmer's rhyme
 When for some reason he ignores the simplest physics
 That foreshadow effects of weight upon unequal weight
 Gravity a force down versus horsepower to hope forward
 Old truck bed buckles like knees on a rust-addled Atlas

Shoulder to shoulder in the cab as the Ford moans
 From dried pasture to gravel road huffing dirt clouds
 Eight miles an everlasting hour toward town for gas
 Treads shave from friction of wheel-well on rubber
 I watch at the pump as the pickup folds into a V

Tight with Hemingway

He preens between corkscrewed kudu antlers
 After pumping iron into lions on tawny savanna
 Far from Oak Park, Key West, and Ketchum
 Eyes shadowed under a comma wide brim

He fires iron into lions on tawny savanna
 Casts steel hooks into Walloon Lake walleye
 Dark eyes shaded under a wide round brim
 Hammered chrome flask snug against hip

Sharp steel hooks into lake trout and walleye
 Picador on blind mount bloodies metal lance
 Sips from flask pocketed by hammered hip
 "A man does not exist until he is drunk"

Picador punctures flesh with a bloody metal lance



Robert Revere, "Harper's Ferry, WV," gelatin silver print, 4" x 5" contact print, 2018. <https://revererobert.wixsite.com/home>

Sangria in Pamplona, proof whiskey on safari
 Some men must drink in order to exist
 Mojitos at Finca Vigia, sweet vermouth in Milan

Sangria in Pamplona, proof whiskey on safari
 Mind and liver shackled by genes and gin
 Mojitos in Finca Vigia, sweet vermouth in Milan
 Old man and he sees that his stories are terminal

His father taught him how to escape the Depression
 Two shells into the chamber of a twelve-gauge
 Silver and bronze stars burst over Sun Valley
 In time for a round with Gertrude and Scott

Coyotes at Dawn

He perches on the rusted tractor
 Like Ishmael in the crow's nest
 Cranky joints lubed by oil and coffee
 Shotgun wedged against gearshift

He navigates pasture like an ancient mariner
 Who knows how to cross a series of wakes
 Avoiding ditches through purple morning
 So that the old Knudson does not capsize

Or ground itself on a stubborn boulder
 That he has seen day after decade
 Until he sails five minutes of arc
 From pole barn to Polled Herefords

He grabs the butt of the shotgun to throw
 Tractor into neutral and cusses then fumbles
 For the gearshift and brake before disembarking
 To examine the sheep wreck he knew awaited

Carcass steam mingles with fog
 Pocked earth dances around ewe
 Rams and harem bleating laughter
 A chorus about moving on and on

Burnt amber eyes reflect him crouched
 Down to touch belly blood tacky and black
 He predicts the future and does the math
 She'd have fetched a right sum at sale

He weeds thick chain around her legs
 Hitches limp end to shivering tractor
 Sets a course toward home
 Spray of salt against his face

An earlier version of "Coyotes at Dawn" was published in *Broadkill Review*. "Thief River Scrap" was previously published in *Garygoyle*. Reprinted with permission of the author.

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Gregg Wilhelm has been a writer, publisher, teacher, and arts administrator in the mid-Atlantic area for more than 25 years. Starting at Johns Hopkins University Press, he went on to be publisher and editor-in-chief at Woodholme House Publishers, founder of CityLit Project and publisher of its CityLit Press imprint, and Director of Marketing and Enrollment Development at the Maryland Institute College of Art's Open Studies unit. Wilhelm earned his MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Tampa in 2014, and soon thereafter received an Individual Artist Grant from the Maryland State Arts Council and a RUBY Artists Grant from the Greater Baltimore Cultural Alliance. He is currently Director of Creative Writing at George Mason University.

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