



# GREGG WILHELM

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## Town & Country

he smokes

spliffs

bitter sips

not a fucking

tooth in his

head

me on a drunk

ledge wondering

high

how high

a fall from the grace

of God could

B

my electric body sings

for a push from a person

of good use elsewhere

saint nowhere

here now

some of it is true

after all i hold the

memory & after all this

he asks he pleas

give me a smile

A

pit a mob a glam dance

breast to shoulder to ass

in stalk rows lifted

by a gale shouted

in chorus unison

so loud it spirals

above washes over

head he has me

i think he says down

to a

T

i mishear words quoted

through bourbon & brogue

who's the pogue here

if you're on the

frontlines but i'm not

you're everywhere

i'm not

i'm not

all this lost in the translator

lost while a hammered spirit

spits through the first set

collapses backstage during

intermission's eerie calm

like the center of a story

Sorted & plotted then

broken by six plucked

punches

B slide E

G E G

C

i see & feel the bass's rhythm

drum on my jeans our backs beaten

by his strum mummings

masked & mimed

sweat ignites lighter

fluid first lyric

his forehead against mine

an earful of feedback

this is the turn this tune

he says it's the best ever

this riff i think he says

his breath a skunky

drag

outside after all this

our breath rises & swirls

in silence now

cracked lips pinch a fag

another one extends jostled

from the pack his hands

cup lighter flame

beneath my chin

in his orange palms i see

everything everywhere

from every point & angle

i saw my own face

i saw your face

i weep over myself

wound tight in standard

tuning

him a drop

D

**Gregg Wilhelm** is Director of Mason Creative Writing and Associate Professor of English at George Mason University. His background covers book publishing, arts administration, and higher education. He is the founder and director emeritus of CityLit Project in Baltimore, where he lives.

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Gregg Wilhelm

# Five Poems by Gregg Wilhelm

## Leaning into Purple Lines

[Redacted text block containing the content of the poem "Leaning into Purple Lines"]

*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 Fennimore Cooper*

dale drive / doors are closing

[Redacted text block containing multiple lines of obscured text]

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## 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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