



Lakefly Writers Conference

2016 WRITING CONTEST

WINNERS

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SHORT STORY

Theme: Wisconsin Choices



1st

Other Side of the Woods
by Karl L. Stewart

I'd never been in these woods before. Dad said there were bad old boys in here, and they wouldn't take kindly to snooping kids. Him saying that made me mad. I'm no snooping kid. I live here. These woods are as much mine as anybody else's. Besides, I'm the fastest runner in the whole school. Even Dad can't catch me when I mean for him not to. Still, maybe there is something to what folks say because every time I've neared this part of the woods I get a hackily feeling that sort of wards me off. So today I brought Sissy along for company.

Sissy's almost three years older than me. She's smart and don't scare easy. True, sometimes she's over-bossy, but I still generally like her company, leastways when my blood-brother Mooky ain't available. And today was one of those days. Sissy said she'd go exploring the woods with me, but it wasn't til late afternoon when the air was hot as blazes so's that even the little critters that normally haunt the woods were quiet and laying low under some leaf or rock.

My dog Reeko, a little yellow mutt with short legs and a curly tail, whined, panted in the heat, and slunk under the house when I tried to roust her up to come with us. So it was just Sissy and me as the kitchen screen-door squeaked open and slammed behind us. I picked up my favorite walking stick where I left it at the edge of our legal property. Dad says I should always take a stout walking stick when I go exploring the woods. It's a handy thing for climbing up and going down steep hills, and great for tapping copperheads out of the way.

I told Sissy I had something to show her and led the way. We were headed was a ways off, across one ridge and up another. I wanted to get there and back before dark. She tried chatting some, but the heat put the nix on that soon enough. We reached the edge of the woods and plunged in, hoping it would be cooler, but we were mistaken. It was just as stifling, but the air felt heavy and gloomy, and I wondered if maybe I should've picked a different day or got an earlier start. We stopped for a minute. Sissy plopped down on a fallen tree and said, "This better be good, Junior, because I am not enjoying this one bit. And my legs are getting all cut up." And that part was true as turnips. Angry red scratches covered her legs.

I wanted to tell her it was her own darn fault for wearing such a flimsy sun-dress to go exploring in, but I was afraid that if I did she would turn around and stomp of in a huff. So instead I said, "It ain't far now, and it sure is worth it. I never seen anything like it in all my born days." And that part was true. I never seen it, only spotted something deep in the woods once from a distance, and needed her company to bolster me up.

I must've said the right thing. She gathered herself up, brushed herself off, and stood. "Well, let's get on with it, brother. Day's getting long."

I pointed my walking stick like a sword and said, "Onward and upward," like a knight in a book. Sissy smiled and off we went. Leastways in the thick woods there was a lot less underbrush, so it was easier walking. But man, it sure was quiet. I struggled to find the way, and after a bit I started recognizing the area, a small break in the woods, now all growed up with volunteer scrub oaks and such. Then followed some broke-down, wormy apple trees that had been planted ages ago, and straight ahead past them a ways was a broken down house all covered with vines and ivies.

"Damn," Sissy said low. She didn't swear much so when she did, she meant it. I could tell by her squinty eyes and the way she hunched her shoulders, she was shook. "I never knew this was here." We slowly snuck up on the place like

there might be someone home. Of course there wasn't. "This ain't no old log cabin," she said. "This's got a second floor. Least it had one before that tree crushed it." It must've been the heat that made the air so wavy. We stepped nearer. "Stop," she ordered. "Junior, don't you see the gate?"

The path we were on came around the side, but out front was sure enough a rusty old metal gate, nearly buried under green stuff that grew up and over it. To either side of the gate was a stretch of some staggered and broken pickets, just as dilapidated and grey as the house itself. Still I didn't see why the gate mattered so much.

"Why would anybody build such a place way out here, miles from anybody else?" she asked. "And what ever happened to them?" She stopped walking. I could see her brain was working overtime. "Let's go through the gate," she said and pointed. "It's the right thing to do. There may be ghosts or haunts around and they need respect."

Her saying that surely made sense, but it also made the hair on the back of my neck rise. I let her lead the way. She put her hand on the top of the old gate and tugged. The gate and the fence attached to it waggled. Sissy said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that." I realized she wasn't talking to me. She pushed on it. It squeaked uncommon loud, like it was complaining about being disturbed, but it opened, and we stepped onto the house's property. If it was possible things quieted more, like me eats were plugged, or like everything was holding its breath. I felt like I was in a picture, but a picture with eyes looking at us. I glanced about to try to catch the spy, but everything stayed dead.

Two slow steps closer to the porch. Wavy old glass panes reflected us back on ourselves. I stopped and pointed over to the right side of the walk at a pile of rocks. "What's that?" I asked. I didn't really care. I was just stalling. Inside that old house was the last place on earth I wanted to be.

"Go check it out," Sissy whispered, and I stepped towards it.

"It's an old well, Sissy," I said as I carefully leaned over the weed-covered rubble. "I read that sometimes folks would throw valuable things down them for safe-keeping if they had to leave in a rush."

She joined me and we both peered into the shadowy depths. We saw nothing – at first. Then our eyes adjusted to the murk. "What's that?" she asked. "Something moved."

Then I saw movement at the bottom of the well. Not just something – somethings. Snakes, copperheads by the dozens slithered and slunk across the floor of the dry old well. They made a papery, scraping sound, like mean whispers as they shifted around. We both stood up, took a step backward, and froze. We both felt it. This whole place, and whoever still lived here, was telling us we were not welcome. Then the gate clicked shut behind us.

Maybe it was just out of balance and closed on its own. Or maybe the haunt what hung around here done it. I don't know and I didn't care. The sound of that gate slowly creaking shut was like a bullet fired at us. We jumped and completely forgot about the house. I was too scared to touch the danged gate so I lifted myself like a deer in flight right over a low stretch of fence.

That gave me a head-start over Sissy, who did the respectable thing and stopped a moment to open and leave through the gate.

Like I said, I'm a fast runner, the fastest I know. But Sissy caught up to me within a hundred yards, and with cheeks puffing and elbows pumping, passed me by, her flimsy sun-dress and legs whipped by the brambles.

The weird gloom of the haunted forest gave way to the normal gloom of the woods as evening settled down, and we

stopped to catch our breaths. “Junior,” she gasped, “that was so strange.” And then she did something strange herself. She laughed. “Do you think we can ever come back?”

I noticed then that in my panic I had dropped my walking stick by the snake-well. “Sissy,” I said, “I don’t think that place likes us, and I don’t figure to make it angry at me. It got my best walking stick,” I added as we started walking again – and that’s all of me it’s getting.”

Author Bio:

Longtime Wisconsin resident, Karl Stewart, author of three published books, calls Ripon, Wisconsin home. A graduate of University of Wisconsin, where he carried a double major in Political Science and History, and later earned his Masters in Education, Stewart mines his love of historical fiction for subject matter.

He is currently building a series around See-Bird Carpenter, a 19th century Choctaw Indian. The second novel in the set, published last fall, won Honorable Mention at the Southern California Book Festival, 2015 in “General Fiction.”

**2nd Truth Is Its Own Reward
by Mike Seybert**

He parked the car, letting it idle, and sat there, thinking. Lying had always been easy for him. Second nature. It was for most people; they just didn’t realize it, or were too dishonest to admit it. Which, he only now realized, was the essence of the game: you had to lie well enough to convince yourself of your own honesty. It was simple salesmanship, and he was the product. Which was why he enjoyed marketing so much. His new company, small, was growing. He hired people like himself, people unafraid of stretching, of spinning the truth to the point where any person of reasonable intelligence should recognize the game. Somehow, most didn’t.

He felt certain, however, he’d gone too far this time, and possibly put his company at risk. And the thing was, he’d been lying about something that had nothing to do with his company, or marketing. The truth, unfortunately, if he’d been honest enough to tell it, would have put him exactly where he feared he was anyway; therefore, why not lie? Once he’d tasted the forbidden sweetness, there was little choice. He had to hide it. If he’d not done the thing, of course, he wouldn’t have needed to lie. Nothing would happen. He’d be all right, his wife would be all right, they’d be all right.

He understood now how dearly he might pay—divorce could put his money and small company in jeopardy—but when opportunity knocked, he’d opened the door. To pleasure, this time, sweet pleasure. He turned off the ignition and got out. The bitter wind raked his forehead as he leaned into it. January in Wisconsin and no hat. Stupid, he thought, he should have known better.

They were to meet at Brewed Awakenings downtown. It would have a steady stream of customers this time of day. Why not the quieter place in the strip mall near their rented duplex? That’s what made him think his wife knew. She needed others present, wanted the security of the group. Which offended him. What on earth did she think he’d do? She was the one in the right. He’d be the one eating crow. What did she have to fear?

He was early. He stepped to the counter as other customers entered. He ordered a French press, two cups, and a scone to share, then found a half-way quiet place in a corner at the back. Maybe she didn’t know. Maybe this meeting was about something totally innocent. Their schedules hadn’t coincided much lately. Maybe she simply wanted to see him. A mid-afternoon tête-à-tête.

Doubtful. The marriage—nearly two years in—had gone flat. She was too smart not to have suspected something. He was too smart not to know she'd find out. He'd done it anyway.

He saw her arrive and signaled to her with raised hand. Taking off her coat, she sat down without greeting him. She wore a cobalt blue sweater with a jewel v-neckline, dark brown dress slacks, and sensible, but stylish, winter shoes. Others, he sensed, noticed her, as well they should. She was a pretty woman. More customers entered. He pushed the plunger down, poured their coffees, steam rising, and cut the scone in two. She didn't look at him. "Anything wrong?" he said.

She raised her cup to her lips and took a sip, then broke a piece off her half of the scone. "I have something to tell you." She brushed a loose strand of hair from her forehead, and set the piece of scone, untasted, back on the plate.

Here it comes.

She looked at him. "I've retained a lawyer. You're going to need one as well." She placed her lawyer's business card next to the carafe.

He knew it. She'd found out. He sighed and asked the obligatory question, though he already knew the answer: "Ok, why?"

She turned to a small window table at the front of the room and met another's eyes. He followed her gaze. The man at the table, almost in full silhouette, nodded. "I've," she paused, "I've met someone else. I want a divorce."

"What?" he said.

"I've met someone else. I'm in love with someone else." He looked again at the man. He hadn't seen him come in. The man no longer nodded.

"Him?" Her eyes said yes. "Jesus," he said. His mind reeled between chagrin and relief.

"His name's Jim," she said. "We met eight months ago when I flew to Columbus for that education conference. Remember?"

"He's from Columbus?"

She shook her head. "We happened to have adjoining seats on the plane. He's from here, Appleton." She paused. "Things picked up from there."

He shook his head and laughed. "Things picked up from there. You happened to have . . . Jesus. Eight months. Why's he here? It was necessary to bring him?"

"I'm sorry," she said, looking at him intently. No tears welled in her eyes. "I didn't want, we didn't want to lie to you anymore." He almost laughed. They were silent for a moment. "I took my personal belongings from the apartment this morning after you left. Clothes, shoes, and a few trifles. I got my brother to help." She reached in her purse, took out a folded piece of stationery, and handed it to him. "It's a list of what I've taken, item by item." She waited to allow him to read. "I don't think you'll object to anything. You can have everything else, whatever's left in the apartment, including furniture and appliances. Your car's yours, mine's mine." She touched her throat and pinched her neckline closed. "I want nothing else. No money, nothing. I've already insisted upon that with my lawyer." She brushed the same strand of hair from her forehead. "You'll need a lawyer to represent you. We hope to settle everything as quickly as possible." She

paused. "Please." She looked down at her coffee. "I'm sorry. We're planning a wedding as soon as the divorce is final. We want children." She looked up. "Please."

"I see," he said. "Yes, I see," and remembered his unease at the thought of children. He took a sip of coffee and looked for Jim. He'd not seen him leave. "You're being very generous."

"No, I'm not, not really." She touched her brow. Her diamond sat on the business card. He'd not seen her place it there.

"I've got someone in mind," he said, "an attorney, I mean." He touched his nose with his left hand and thought of Jean, his firm's attorney, his other. "The company needed legal work done four months ago." He paused. "She's also done divorce work. I know she'll help me." He brought his cup to his lips, not quite ready to drink. "She knows what she's doing." They'd gotten along well, very well. His humiliation had dissipated. Only relief remained. "You needn't worry. I'll have her get in touch with your attorney."

New customers entered. "Bitter out," he heard one say. "Way too harsh, that wind," another said. They stamped their feet, laughed, and made their way to the service counter.

"Thank you," she said, getting up to leave, the scone uneaten, the coffee barely sipped. "You're the one who's generous." His lips formed a slight smile. More people entered. She buttoned her coat. "Goodbye," she said. He nodded to her.

He glimpsed Jim through the window, then their quick embrace. She glanced back at him, trying to find him among the other patrons. Despite her honesty, her expression said she'd gotten one over on him. Which she had. But so had he, on them, only they would never know it. Jim's arm was around her shoulders. Her face reached up to his as he saw them walk away, leaning into the wind, huddled together.

He took another sip of coffee, picked up the piece of scone she'd broken off, and popped it into his mouth. Sweet, with a hint of tartness. But delicious. Definitely not crow. He smiled and put the ring and business card in his coat pocket, and got up from the table to leave. Outside, on the way to his car, he was glad the cold wind was at his back.

Author Biography:

Mike Seybert is a retired teacher living in Appleton, Wisconsin. Among other things, he enjoys reading, music, movies, plays, and writing the occasional story. He dreams of traveling a lot but can't figure out what he'd do after reaching his destination. Read, probably, which he can do more cheaply from the comfort of his home, with the added benefit of avoiding airports, not to mention packed-in-like-sardines, disease-ridden passenger planes. But he wishes you well on your travels.

3rd **Away** **by Billie Jean Diersen**

I don't think Mom is ever gonna stop crying. She's been up in her room all morning, stopping only to blow her nose. I even gave her the birthday card I made for her, three days early, hoping it would make her feel better. But it didn't do any good.

Aside from Mom's crying and blowing her nose, the whole house is quiet. All weekend there was laughing and music playing. Now there's just silence.

Dad's out in the barn again. It's long past choresin' time, so he's probably working on his schnapps. In fact, if I had anything else to do, I'd be gone too. I just hate listening to her cry.

Things wouldn't be so quiet if Danny hadn't left. 'Course, if Danny was still here, Mom wouldn't be crying either. She'd be in the kitchen, laughing and smiling, and stuffing us both full of German chocolate cake. But today is so bad she didn't even go to church.

Danny is twenty-two and as brothers go, he's not too bad. I don't know him very well since he's almost twelve years older'n me, but he sends me postcards and stuff from all over the world, which is pretty cool. So I guess you'd say we get along.

My Dad isn't his dad. My Dad only married Mom a few years before I was born. They met at some dance over in Madison just before Dad took over Gram and Grampa's farm here in Evansville. Danny and Mom were alone for a long time before that because Danny's dad left them when Danny was a baby. Mom says she loves us both the same, and mostly I believe her.

Dad's a different story. He and Danny never got along like me an' Dad do. I don't remember them spending any time together except when they were doing chores, and even when they were working, they hardly had anything to say. Mom says it's because they don't see eye to eye. I don't really know what that means, but she said that's why, when Danny joined the service, Dad wouldn't even go with us to the airport to see him off. I s'pose Danny didn't care, though, since Dad's not his real dad an' all.

On Friday, Danny came home from the Army. Mom was so happy she sang all day long the day before, and baked a cake and had her hair done. Dad said that it was stupid to make such a fuss since it wasn't anybody's birthday at all. In fact, at supper that night, Dad didn't even change out of his overalls, and there was still manure on his boots from working in the barn.

After supper, he went right back outside. I sat in the kitchen and watched Mom and Danny do the dishes. They gossiped about all his old girlfriends, and talked about who was getting married, who was getting divorced, and everyone who'd died.

Things sure are different now that Danny's grown. He got to swear and talk rough without Mom even blinking an eye. He even had the nerve to smoke one of her cigarettes right in front of her.

Dad wouldn't have liked that, but he wasn't there. In fact, he barely set foot in the house all weekend except to eat. Mom said he had a lot of chores to do, but I knew from his breath when he came in for lunch what he was really up to. I'm a lot smarter'n I was before Danny left. Now I know why Dad sometimes forgets things and falls asleep during supper. I also know why he and Mom argue after I've gone up to bed, and why she sometimes hides his keys.

On Saturday we went to visit Mom's family over in Janesville. Danny wore his uniform 'cause Mom asked him to. Everyone said how handsome he looked. The babies stared at all the shiny stuff on his coat and my cousins kept petting his hair.

Then Sunday came and that's today. Danny was s'posed to stay 'til he got a job, but instead he's gone away.

Dad woke up, still kinda drunk and real cranky, and tripped over Danny's shoes on his way out to do chores. Then he stomped down to Danny's room, banged on the door, and hollered at him to put his junk away.

Danny said "Okay," but when he got out to the hall, Dad blocked his path.

“Where do you think you’re going, soldier boy?” he asked, grabbing Danny by the shoulder.

Danny shrugged himself free and told Dad to go sleep it off. Dad was about to grab him again when Mom broke in, begging them to stop. Then Dad took her by the arms and told her to get out of the way. Danny musta thought he was gonna hurt her ‘cause he reached between them, grabbed Dad by the front of his bibs, and practically lifted him off the floor.

“Don’t you ever touch my mother like that again,” he said in a voice so cold it almost made me shiver. “You hear me? If you want to drink yourself stupid every damned day that’s your business, and if she puts up with it, that’s hers. But if you ever lay a hand on her again, I will personally see to it that it’s the *last* thing you ever do.”

Then Danny pushed him away and Dad stumbled backward onto the sofa.

Dad just sat there staring at the floor for a few seconds, then he stood up, looking more sober than I’ve seen him in a while. “I gave you a home when you didn’t have one of your own,” he growled. “I took care of you like your own father never would. But that wasn’t good enough for you. So you left this family to go play with guns and march around for four years. And now that your little adventure is over, you think you can come back to this farm with your shiny shoes and your soft hands and expect everyone to welcome you home with open arms!”

“I expected and asked for exactly nothing,” Danny replied. “In fact, I was planning to stay with friends in until I found a job and a place of my own, but Mom insisted I come here, so I did. Clearly, that was a mistake.”

“You got that right,” Dad said, lifting his cap and running his hand over his sweaty hair. “The way I see it, you don’t need us any more now than you did four years ago, and we sure as hell don’t need you.”

“Fine. Then I guess I’ll be going.”

“Good. And this time, don’t come back.”

That’s when Mom started crying. Dad saw her cover her face with her hands, then stormed out to the barn. I was watching from the stairs as Danny picked up his phone to call a friend to come get him, and then started gathering up his things. Mom followed him around, sobbing, and saying Dad didn’t mean it.

I was pretty sure he did.

So now Danny’s gone, we missed church, and Mom’s heart is broken. I’d go in and try to cheer her up, if only I knew what to say.

I used to think that when I grow up I’d like to be a farmer like my Dad. But lately I’m wondering if I should be like Danny and go away.

Author Biography:

Billie Jean Diersen is an author of novels, short stories, and humorous essays. Her novels include the romantic comedy, Unmatched, and the heartbreaking yet hilarious military drama, Thinner Skin. Billie’s latest book, Psycho Babble: The Rants, Raves & Riffs of an Uncommon Blonde (November 2015) is a collection of humor from her online column, The Uncommon Blonde. When she’s not writing, she enjoys harassing her two adult children and hanging out with her husband and their handful of high-maintenance felines.



Flash Fiction



1st

**Unfinished
by Valerie Biel**

I stand in the middle of the bedroom, unsure of where to begin.

Gravitating to the bedside, I pick up the thick book she had been reading. A slip of paper marks her place . . . near the end, within pages of the conclusion.

I don't even realize I am crying until tears drip onto the cover, overcome by the thought of her reading all of those pages and never finishing the story.

This room of unanswered prayers drains my energy, and I sit down heavily on the bed, hugging the book to my chest. I stare at the ceiling, the walls, and the crucifix tilted at an uneasy angle. I feel no need to straighten it.

That's all there is. Such a boring place with no way to see much of anything out of the too-high windows. Why didn't I realize that? My heart aches as I think of her confined to this – this box with only a slice of sky to mark the passage of days.

Days spent waiting . . . waiting.

I should have brought her to my house with its views of the lake and countryside. I should have read to her when the books got too heavy to hold for very long. I should have . . .

The movement of leaves catches my eye as they wave in wind.

She could see the tree, I think. She could see the leaves turn from summer green to yellow, to red, to orange. She made it to the fall. A miracle everyone says, but it wasn't the one I had wanted.

I rise from the bed to see beyond the remaining leaves to the rickety tree house built out of love and grief. Something for my nephews to do with their grandpa while their mom was in the house waiting . . . waiting.

The quiet today feels unnatural. All the kids are back in school and not running in and out as we hovered and whispered and hoped and prayed.

A ragged sigh escapes my chest, and I urge myself to get the job done.

I throw the rest of the books into the library bag with my free hand, still clutching her final one to my chest. I begin to place it on top with the others and pause.

I can't do it.

I run out, down the hall and through the front door. It slams behind me with a ferocious bang that isn't nearly loud enough.

The place I'm going is just up the road . . . it doesn't take long to get there.

It's too soon for a headstone, but I find her where the withering floral arrangements stand as sorrowful sentinels. Sinking to my knees on the mosaic of sod so carefully placed over the freshly turned earth, I open to her bookmarked page.

I begin to read, finishing her story and hoping that somehow she can hear me.

Author Biography:

Valerie Biel's debut novel Circle of Nine – Beltany has been honored as a finalist for the 2015 Kindle Book Award, the Gotham Writers' YA Novel Contest, and the Readers' Favorite Book Award as well as being a B.R.A.G. Medallion Honoree. She has continued the series with a set of novellas and the forthcoming sequel Circle of Nine – Sacred Treasures.

Away from the computer, you might find her working on projects for the community theater or historical society and reading everything she can get her hands on. She lives in rural Wisconsin with her family.

2nd

**True Aim
by Lisa Rudolph**

She came awake to quiet kitchen sounds and coffee brewing, an intent smell. Ruby loved coming awake, like coming back to life each day as she saw it. Each day fresh with possibilities, some of which you were in charge of, some in charge of you, which seemed just about right to Ruby. This day was special. For one thing, she wasn't waking up in her own bed. She had been coming awake in this bed on this day since she was 13. It was tradition, and the best part was, she was included. They dressed quietly. The early hour lent itself to the calm, hushed tones in the car on the hour drive to the hunting land. It was a welcome respite to the sometimes loud, harsh household in which Ruby grew up and being the youngest, still lived. The fact that it was still dark outside added to the excitement. It would remain dark the whole way there. Her family had hunted deer on this land for over 50 years and she, Ruby, was the next generation. Ruby's brother-in-law was like a father to her, taking her hunting and fishing since she was very young and she loved it. Still, she knew she felt differently than the others.

Ruby loved the early hour, greeting the day outside as it broke, the first to experience it with all of her senses just like the animals. Ruby was old enough now to go off on her own. She preferred it so she could simply think. The temptation when she was with her older sister was to talk, (Ruby was a talker) and talking kept the deer away. She always hoped for a sunny day so she could steal away, get very comfortable and fall asleep to the sounds of the woods around her. It was like being cradled in God's own hand. Safe.

On this day conditions were perfect. No wind, snow dusted and sunny. Cold, but the extra layers provided ballast. None of the others had seen anything.

Ruby had been sitting quietly against an ancient oak and had fallen asleep as hoped. Her light dreams were of scurrying animals and sun warmed earth.

She awoke to a snapping sound very close by. Over her right shoulder stood a majestic, 12 point buck. Clear eyes, muscled chest. Ruby's heart beat wildly in her chest and rose to her throat. Swallowing, she forced herself calm. She began to realize he was casually grazing, not considering her a threat. A smile crept across Ruby's face as she allowed her eyes to close to better savor this moment. When she re-opened them he was there, still as a statue in all of his glory.

Ruby reached ever so slowly for her case. She had pictured this moment often. Time slowed, the world fell away. She took aim and got the perfect shot.

With her camera.

Author Biography:

Lisa Rudolph lives, works and plays in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. She can be found traveling the state each weekend in search of the beauty and bounty of nature which she feels Wisconsin supplies in abundance. When not canvassing her home state, she prefers to head west to hike in the mountains.

3rd

**This Time
by Billie Jean Diersen**

There was a time when I believed everything Patrick told me without question. Back then I was gullible. Naïve. Stupid.

Not this time.

Six years ago, when he proposed, he said he needed me and promised to love me. Now and forever. I said “yes.” And then, “I do.” Because I believed him.

But not this time.

Not long after our second anniversary I found a hotel bill. It fell from his coat pocket as I was headed for the cleaners. I assumed it was from his last business trip. But when I went to file it I saw he’d been to Denver when he was supposed to be in Philly.

“You must be mistaken,” he said when I asked him. “I’m sure I said Denver.” And I had no reason to doubt him. So I let it go.

But not this time.

A few months later I was talking to my neighbor. She said she’d seen me and Patrick the day before walking out of a café downtown around half past three. Apparently she had waved at us, but we hadn’t waved back.

“She must’ve been mistaken,” Patrick said when I asked him. “Yesterday I was golfing with Larry, and we didn’t finish until five.”

His explanation seemed plausible, if a bit rehearsed. But I didn’t want to seem paranoid. So I decided to drop it.

But not this time.

Then he started working late, and coming in at odd hours.

He said they were short staffed, so he’d absorbed some extra projects. He said he was sorry, and sounded convincing. So again I let it go.

But not this time.

This time I couldn't drop it. Because this time I'd seen him—two cars back in the lane beside me, in an SUV driven by a woman I didn't know.

He must have spotted me, too, because suddenly the SUV turned right and sped off in the direction of his office. Assuming he planned to head back to work and pretend he'd been there all along, I took the next right and raced after them.

Although they were well ahead of me, with luck I would arrive in time to catch him emerging from the car and confront him. And this time there was no way he could deny it. This time, he could not explain it away. This time, thanks to his evasive tactics, he had no choice but to come clean.

But when I arrived at his building, Patrick and the SUV were nowhere to be found. Not in the parking lot or near the front door. Not even on the nearby roadways. And when I called his office line—which I now kicked myself for not doing earlier—he answered immediately, and seemed perfectly at ease.

I must've been mistaken, I thought. He didn't even sound winded. Or remotely guilty. So I chalked it up to insecurity, or coincidence, and again let it go.

This time.

Author Biography:

Billie Jean Diersen is an author of novels, short stories, and humorous essays. Her novels include the romantic comedy, Unmatched, and the heartbreaking yet hilarious military drama, Thinner Skin. Billie's latest book, Psycho Babble: The Rants, Raves & Riffs of an Uncommon Blonde (November 2015) is a collection of humor from her online column, The Uncommon Blonde. When she's not writing, she enjoys harassing her two adult children and hanging out with her husband and their handful of high-maintenance felines.



POETRY

Theme: Wisconsin Choices



1st

The Ethics of Lakewater by Paul Wiegel

“The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” Aldo Leopold

Every child has a choice to make
about how far forward they will carry
memories of the gritty,
cat’s tongue feel of lake bottom.
Or how long they will recall the
ceilinged look of lilly pads—
a dozen shadowy suns
resting on that dome of water,
and the devout silence of being
alone while laying underneath them.
They still know how food can have
the clean, cold taste of wet stone,
and how there are visions of wind that can
unsettle the lake’s surface
like the whispered calls of warblers.
If they recall that and what
it means, how easy it will be to
keep it alive in their very bones
so that it won’t get mired
in the shallows of adulthood
with its eye toward everything countable
or sellable. There is more profit
in that grateful season of water
than everything concrete or plastic.
Each future push and pulse of lake can remain.
Let it fill to overflowing, and leave a watermark
on each hemisphere of their mind.
We need them to choose to remember—
the beat of footfalls on that enduring pier,
the pious bowing of branches on a shoreline,
and each kiss of pine sap on their fingers.

Author Biography:

Paul Wiegel is originally from Green Bay, WI but now lives and writes from his home near the Fox River in Berlin. He has been writing and performing on-demand poems as a “street poet” on his 1957 Smith Corona manual typewriter for

passersby at art galleries, farmers' markets, and festivals for the past five years. He is the winner of the 2014 and 2015 John Gahagan Poetry Prize.

2nd

**For Love of a Cream Puff
by Michael Doran**

He watched her sitting there
Eating the cream puff,
Drinking the coffee
Into which she had already
Poured five packets of sugar.
Committing suicide she was,
He thought.
Grossly overweight,
Engulfing her chair,
She spoke as I approached,
“I shouldn’t be eating this, I know.
But they had them here today
For the first time in a long time
And I couldn’t resist.”
My partner sat, staring our way
Sternly, still disapproving of
Her misshapen mass.
But I
Would not begrudge her
The pleasure of eating
That pastry,
For the love of which
She had no power to resist.
In her moment of sublime
And guilt-ridden dalliance
She was so vulnerable to attack,
And I would not have myself
Heap coals
Upon her head
Despite my partner’s condemnation
Of her.
I felt I must
Somehow be the anti-toxin
To counter the venomous stare
Inflicted upon her
At a table’s distance
By him

Whose censure
Was unwavering
For her wanton public display
Of love
For a cream puff.

Author Biography:

Michael Doran was born and raised in Chicago, eventually earning a B.A. in Humanities from the University of Chicago and continuing his higher education at Union Theological Seminary, NYC. Returning to the midwest, he earned his certification to teach English on the Secondary Level. He moved up to northern Wisconsin where he taught in Winter, and, later, Ladysmith High School. An interest in modern dance led him to join Lynn Dance Company in 1977, inviting its founder, Barry Lynn, to relocate the Company from Utah to northern Wisconsin, where, for 36 years, they have operated a studio they named, "ChaliceStream."

3rd

**The Witness Tree
by Gary Jones**

My great-grandpa Isaac cut the tops from the four white pines,
not to improvise baskets for the grandson he would never know
but to clear a pathway for the west wind to spin the windmill,
long gone when I was a boy, then a tower tipped with a TV antenna.

From my crow's nest in one of the pines I could see beyond the windmill:
the steeple of the Evangelical United Brethren Church marking the cemetery
where I couldn't begin to imagine that some day in a far distant future
both of my parents would be buried under yet another grove of pines.

But already I knew death: our neighbor Barney had gone to fetch his cows
taking with him a rope by which he hung himself from still another tree,
perhaps an oak, like the three that now stand sentinel in my city lawn,
witnesses to history before the establishment of the Wisconsin Territory.

Witness trees were bent askew by Native Americans to mark their trails,
and early surveyors, to center the midpoint for new sectional squares,
silent witnesses to time, like a boy perched amid cumulous clouds
high in the cradle of his civilization, watching life slowly unfold.

Author Biography:

Gary Jones is a writer and teacher who summers in Door County and Winters in Platteville.



Jean Nelson Essay for Young Adults



Topic: Notable Wisconsin figure (living or dead) who inspires me most

*Ages 12 - 17 eligible for this category

Jean Nelson, (1928 – 2011) a native of Oshkosh, was an avid reader all her life. She belonged to two Oshkosh reading clubs which were organized over a 100 years ago, and was President of the Friends of the Oshkosh Public Library Board for the last five years of her life. She was active in the Learning in Retirement Program where she led a monthly forum on current events and a “Reader’s Choice” series. Jean was a graduate of Oshkosh State Teachers College and for 23 years she served as the Alumni Director at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. She and her husband, Philip, received an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from UW Oshkosh in 1997. The Friends of the Oshkosh Public Library Board are proud to fund the Jean Nelson award as a tribute to Jean’s memory and her love of reading and writing.

1st

**Simplicity
by Maria Poehls**

Living in Wisconsin my entire life I’ve come to love several aspects of its history and culture, but the most amazing part about Wisconsin is the inspirational people who have lived here. One such person, Laura Ingalls Wilder, is best known for her Little House On The Prairie book series, telling tales of her childhood living with her family on the prairie. Her stories and legacy will forever be an inspiration to people everywhere, including myself.

Laura once expressed that, “It is the sweet, simple things of life which are the real ones after all.” This particular quote changed my perspective on life. Growing up I didn’t always have much; I wasn’t by any means poor, but this being said I also wasn’t rich. My family and I had to often make do with what we had. Now, although after the fact, I’ve begun to finally realize that while I may not have had much money, I was blessed with an abundance of other things. I had a mom who could find everything free, a brother who could invent whatever we couldn’t buy, and a sister and dad who could make me laugh about practically anything. We weren’t wealthy with money, but we had time, talent, and a love for one another. As simple as these items are, they are, in the end, the most important things in life. I never used to understand this, but Laura taught me that living a simple life can be just as fulfilling as a life filled with many material possessions. Laura’s life genuinely reflects this idea.

Living on the prairie and constantly moving around with her family, they couldn’t possibly have had many physical belongings. They could only keep what could fit on their wagon, which was only the bare necessities. While Laura’s life and my own are difficult to compare, what she realized during her life and what I’ve come to learn and appreciate is that every little thing in life comes as a blessing.

Also during her lifetime Laura Ingalls Wilder said, “Remember me with smiles and laughter, for that is how I will remember you all. If you can only remember me with tears, then don’t remember me at all.” This quote forces me to realize how I want to be remembered and what will truly be important from my life, after I die. Often times I wonder about my importance in the world. I am merely one person who couldn’t possibly make an impact on other people. Looking back at Laura’s life, I begin to wonder if she felt the same way. She couldn’t have possibly dreamt as a child that she would eventually publish a world famous book series about her ordinary life. Her books have been read by hundreds of thousands of people all around the world. She has become a great inspiration, touching the hearts of millions.

While these achievements of hers are extremely astonishing, there is much more to her than simply the accomplishments she is remembered for. She is regarded by many as the lovable, charismatic little girl in the Little House On The Prairie book series. The way that Laura Ingalls Wilder is remembered is the way that I want to be commemorated when I die. Knowing this, every day I focus on being a bubbly, loving person to everyone I meet, never taking life too seriously. I concentrate on being helpful and caring, not selfish and cold. Although we all have our moments when we are feeling down or we put others down, I strive to not let such moments affect my entire life. This single quote from Laura Ingalls Wilder inspires me everyday to make my actions mean something and be the person that I want to be remembered as.

Although Laura's words are as inspiring as they are, I believe that her actions speak louder than her words. Laura and the Wilder family were constantly on the move, traveling from one home to another on their horse pulled wagon. Constantly moving from one location to another, the children's education was far from normal. They would attend local schools when they could, but this not being very often, the children were forced to teach themselves and one another. Even with the lack of standard education, at the age of just 15, Laura got a job, becoming a school teacher at a one room schoolhouse in De Smet, South Dakota. Although life for many settlers back then was quite difficult, Laura and her family had more than their fair share of hardships and tragedies. When she was barely fourteen, Laura's older sister Mary, went blind, causing Laura to take on more responsibilities in the family. Shortly after marrying her husband, Almanzo, he too suffered health issues and became partially paralyzed. Beyond all of the misfortunes that Laura suffered, she also lost a baby boy of hers shortly after he was born. Laura's perseverance and overcoming of obstacles all throughout her life is an inspiration to everyone. Beating the odds and growing up to become the person that she is, Laura's greatest accomplishment didn't even occur until she was nearly sixty five years old.

Laura always loved to write, but was discouraged when her first autobiographical work, Pioneer Girl , in the 1920's was rejected by numerous publishers. Even with this obstacle in her path to success, Laura fought on. At sixty five years of age, Laura published her first of eight books in the Little House series. Twelve years later at the age of seventy six, she published the final book. This is clearly, to anyone, an amazing accomplishment. Throughout Laura Ingalls Wilder's life, her words and actions have become an inspiration to people all around the world, holding a special place in my heart. All throughout my life I've heard and read about many inspirational people from all over the world, but the truth is, the most inspiring person that I have come to know and love lived right here in Wisconsin. Thank you Laura Ingalls Wilder for changing my life.

Author Biography:

Almost 16, Maria Poehls lives in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin with her parents, her brother and sister, as well as her dog. While not going to school she enjoys playing tennis, performing in the band, as well as reading and drawing. Maria hopes to one day become an inspiration to other people all around the world.

2nd

**Pursuit of Happiness
by Chase Chadwell**

Imagine if you didn't know where you and your son were gonna sleep for the night. What if the one person you had looked up to died in your youth leaving you lost. Ever wondered where do I go from here. These struggles tell the story of Chris Gardner, an entrepreneur born in Milwaukee Wisconsin. The *Pursuit of Happiness* [sic] starring Will Smith is based off the book Chris wrote. Growing up he didn't have many positive role models, His real father was out of the picture, and step father was abusive. After being sent to foster care he met his Uncle Henry. Henry was the one of the few positive role models in his life. Sadly when Chris was 9, Henry had drowned in the Mississippi River. But it gets

worse. He had been living in a foster home for quite some time now and lost contact with his mother. That day he saw her, escorted by two prison guards, chains on her hands and ankles. Aspiring to be like Henry, Chris joined the Navy. During this time he became acquainted with a cardiac surgeon who offered him a job. He worked his way up the ranks, met his wife to be, had a child and that's where it got real rough. He decided one day that he did not want to become a doctor, like his wife wanted him to be. Long story short that relationship was cut off. For the years to come he and his son were homeless and drifted from place to place. Odd jobs to get by. His career was decided when one day he bumped into a well-dressed man, he was driving a Ferrari. Curious he asked the man what he did for a living, and he said that he was a stockbroker. From that day on he worked towards that goal, and became well connected. A few years later he established his own firm, The Gardner and Rich Co in Chicago. He even met Michael Jordan and bought a ferrari of his own from him. The plates read "NOT MJ." I would say Chris inspires me because I know what's it's like to come from very little. I've seen family situations on par with his. I know the want to become more. I have dreams of my own, and I go about them like Chris. Patience and hard work pays off and the story of Chris Gardner proves this.

Author Biography:

Chase Chadwell is currently a sophomore at Fond du Lac High School. He enjoys cooking and art and is studying writing among other academic explorations. He is currently 16, and has been writing for over 6 years. In his free time he likes to study music and art. Even though he has been writing for so long, this will only be his second competition. In 8th grade he represented his school among a few other students and took home bronze. That has inspired him to strive for more and do better with each story. He is also a prolific poet and often studies Shakespeare.

3rd

A Person Who Inspires Me by Kasey Chmela

A person who inspires me is Amanda Kensaard. She is a librarian in Lowell, Wisconsin. She has blonde hair and she likes putting her hair in a bun. She wears really fancy clothes. I like her because she is very graceful and always listens to what I have to say. I always feel I can talk to her about everything. I love her personality because she's loving, kind and always is happy. I want to be like her, pretty, fun, cool, smart, and fashionable. Sometimes I feel like she is my 2nd mom. Every time I am around her I feel a little more inspired. I started getting inspired when I first met her. I felt like she was the creative person I was looking for. But the main reason I like Amanda is because she lets me do crafts and sometimes does crafts with me. I like her so much I call her Fancy Panda. Amanda reminds me of a beautiful young lady who has lots of life yet to live and so do I. If Amanda was not one of the librarians I would not go to the library. I love Amanda so much she was the one who inspired me to write this story. I took the challenge because I knew I could do it. Even though I don't win 1st, 2nd, or 3rd place I still have Amanda, my mommy, my daddy, my 2 sisters and my only brother. I love you Amanda and my family and you all need to keep it in mind everybody.

Author Biography:

Hi my name is Kasey Chmela. I'm 12 years old. I live in Lowell Wisconsin. My mom's name is Dawn and I have 2 sisters and 1 brother. I go to Dodgeland Elementary and I'm in 5th grade. My favorite colors are pink and blue. I don't like the color green. I have 2 dogs, 1 German Shephard named Sitka and 1 Miniature Pinture named Chips. So that's a little about me that I wanted to share with you so there it is. I hope I did well.