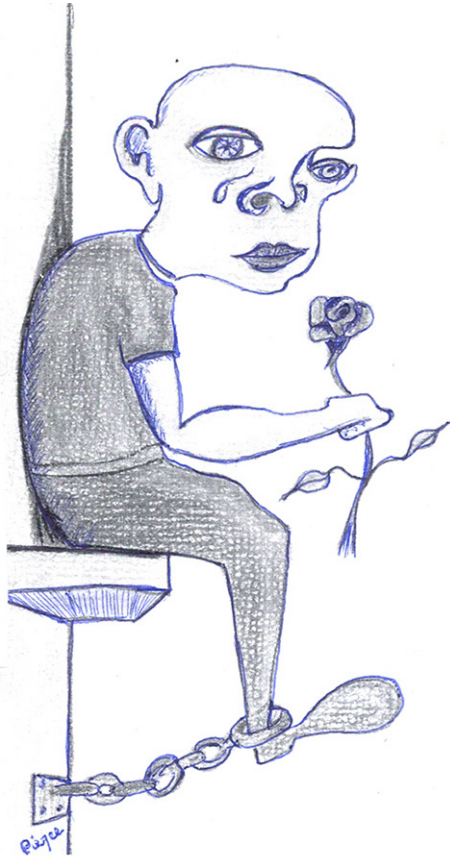


# Inscape

Number 25 in the 2River Chapbook Series



Be there if I could.

poems by members of the Summer Poetry Workshop  
Southern State Correctional Facility  
Springfield, Vermont



# Inscape

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## Notes concerning the title *Inscape*

Inscape, a concept central to the aesthetics of the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, is the unified complex of characteristics that makes an object unique. It is an object's defining core or essence that distinguishes it from all other things.

Poetry by prisoners, some incarcerated for many years, possibly cuts closer to that essence and possibly speaks from closer to the heart or gut of immediate matters. But these confined poets have plenty of patience for the ordinary, the everyday, even the frivolous and the humorous. Though a fair number of these poems are about the prison experience, others give voice to universal themes familiar to all of us.

The term *inscape*, then, is more descriptive of what the writing of poetry offers to those who write it than of what they write. Their writing is a form of escape from the daily boredom, humiliations and resentments of prison life. But it is not a movement to the outside, though for all these incarcerated poets, such an outward flight would be a blessing. Rather, *Inscape* is an escape achieved while still inside, physically confined, by turning inward toward what can never be confined, toward personal memory, thought, consciousness and feeling, perhaps above all and containing all, toward the singular and extraordinarily creative imaginations of poets who happen to be prisoners.



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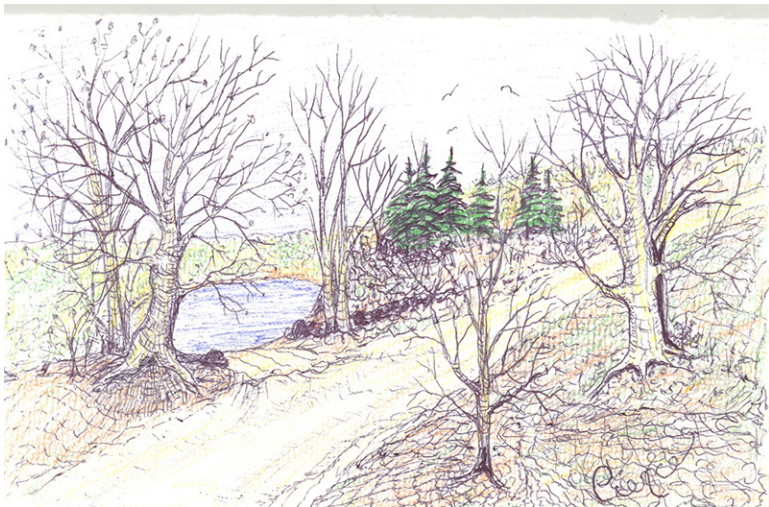
Editor: Richard Long

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"I Stole a Day" by Bob Sawyer originally appeared in *Rattle*.



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## Introductory Remarks

For the past four summers at the Southern State Correctional Facility in Springfield, Vermont, with the indispensable aid of John Vorder Bruegge, a teacher in the high school diploma program, I've led a poetry writing workshop named Poetry as Personal Expression. The name of the workshop is not an incidental convenience. For men in the muffling conditions of confinement, it carries an important, liberating power.

Once each week, from 3:00 to 4:30, eight to twelve men gather around a table in the education section of the prison. About half are regulars, repeaters, you might say, though that's an unwelcome term in prison. At each session I suggest a topic or two for them to think and write about, though they often ignore the suggestion and go their own way. John Sughrue, whose work you'll see inside, noted wryly that "many of us are in here, you know, because we aren't very good at following instructions."

Whatever they write comes to me by email, and I scribble my comments, reservations, suggestions, and lots of well-earned praise in the margins. John VB makes copies of the poems, and during the workshop, the inmates go around the table, everyone commenting on every poem. They're free to pass, of course, a rare privilege in this place, but few do. Though they're hearing and seeing the poems for the first time, they have quite a lot to say, much of it discerning, informed, and helpful.

Not all remarks are laudatory. But even the criticism, often more hesitant reservation than criticism, comes with manifest affection. There is brotherhood here, the camaraderie of proud men similarly confined, some insist

unjustly, stripped of agency and entitlement, vulnerable to an array of humiliations, yet determined to make this time not a suspension of their lives, but, if possible, a useful and worthwhile part of it. Their writing, this workshop, is, I think, for many, an important part of that. It is for me, and I'm on the outside, getting on, no longer entirely healthy or feeling immortal, but otherwise remarkably fortunate. And free.

Some of these men are university educated, others broadly self-educated, some to the point of erudition. They are highly intelligent, delightfully witty, deeply thoughtful, and openly and movingly sensitive. You see this in some of the more autobiographical poems, but you hear it also in their responses, when a poem resonates to another's pained experience. Many of the inmates have visibly teared up on such occasions.

When I come to these sessions, I'm meeting friends and feel they know they're meeting one in me. Friends, not because all of us are gifted with all the strengths and virtues I've just named, but because, though some have done awful things, they are, as I perceive and have come to know them, good, decent, and unusually interesting men. Put simply, we like each other and enjoy being in one another's company.

What I hope is most apparent in the following poems is that these men are impressively talented poets. Some are new to the art. Others have been devotedly practicing and honing it for a long time.

Bill Freedman

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Richard Gagnon

## Sentenced

He's a young sixty two, with a beanstalk frame  
the grandkid loves to climb, determined to see  
the big picture same as pa-pop, once he tires  
of pushing jail chair choo-choos in a ragged circle.

What's that song? *Sunday morning coming down*,  
—it was always on the radio, like Sean Phillips and  
Buffy St. Marie, back when he could field  
threefourfive haybales like marshmallows.

He could get all Zen and say it don't mean nothing—  
that the visiting room empties out slow as church,  
mothers and children first, paunchy men last,  
their silence counted in footsteps, like unpaid debt.

The Catholic in him resents the intrusions of rigid  
sorrow on the holy day. Triumphant—was how  
his family marched past the baby powder priests,  
here it's just slack gray guards and cameras.

A pinball scattering of men makes way for those  
lucky guys, who will blend back into population,  
quick as a reheated mug of coffee set on a concrete  
floor—cools and bitters-up, wanting only a little sugar.

Richard Gagnon

## Bag of Bones

The guard dragged Frank  
feet-first, as if he were  
one more Saturday night special,  
just another drunk destined for the tank.  
Fifteen minutes of chest compressions  
got the COs winded by turns  
and the old man no further from death.

The corpse rested a few minutes.  
No need to hurry, really.  
It's not as if he was about to sit up  
and start dancing, but you never knew.  
When the EMTs arrived  
they might buzz him a few times,  
even give him the kiss.

Stories would be passed around  
like a beat up thermos of coffee  
spiked with airline whiskey.  
*Scared me shitless, said the fat one.*  
*Guy'd been flatlined for damn near to twenty.*  
*Skinny said, Marty had one start singing,*  
*right out of nowhere.*  
*Irish. Pretty dead, though.*

If Frank was alive he was keeping it to himself.  
The nurse checked her watch.  
She was sore from giving flu shots all day,  
and kept rubbing her arm as if to wake it up.  
It had felt good to actually do something  
with pretty much guaranteed results,  
not so scary-iffy as all this resurrection business.

No one said much after the story about the Irishman.  
The zap battery had gone dead,  
so it was all hand work,  
press and pump, press and pump.  
The fat one nearly said aloud,  
*Kinda like a factory job, isn't it?*  
The skinny one packed up without a word.

Frank didn't complain when the zipper  
caught on his nose. It was pretty big.  
Not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings,  
the fat one apologized anyway.  
He hadn't known the guy,  
but he reminded him of somebody,  
just couldn't remember who.

*Richard Gagnon*

## Where They Go

The dead are setting out on their journeys—  
some to a Martha Stewart-ish waiting room  
outside the Pearly Gates.

Others not so well connected will forever feel  
the blood pooling in their phlebotic ankles,  
while Allah's own TSA makes them reach for the sky,  
shed their slippers, and prod them  
with lewd questions in Farsi.

Pity them all: stricken, scourged believers,  
harried, shunned, and outcast,  
delivered from evil unto what, exactly?

Us atheists are partying like it's quitting time,  
one golden trumpeted last call.  
No Bacchanalian blues allowed.  
Pennies on our eyes? Are you serious?

Is it hot in here or is it me?  
That all-enveloping white light  
is a liberating match-flare  
incinerating my farewell roach as the  
Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,  
forever disoriented,  
ask a cop for directions.

*Richard Gagnon*

## **First**

Farsighted Arabs invented the zero,  
and then—Inshallah—nothing had a new name.  
A truly modest something,  
a stand-in—an empty coat rack.

What did the first zero look like?  
Thin, short, fat, ravenous? Try bulimic—  
shedding all values for one dubious privilege,  
the comfortable appearance of anonymity.

Where did zero go to school?  
Schoolkids loathe you, pal.  
You make chameleons nervous.  
You're the ultimate insult.  
Yet, put enough of you in a row  
like good little soldiers,  
and—mirabile dictu—  
the most modest of quantities,

say, one little pinkie,  
counted by a three year old,  
gains incalculable standing.

Now—people will die for you.  
Turn the tables and shout,  
'Get thee behind me, decimal point',  
and nothing almost disappears.

What did you expect?  
That you'd always be the place to be?  
Canoodle with dollar signs?  
Hob-nob with the deutschmark? Ones, twos, threes—  
they'll never have your sex appeal.

*Greg Clasby*

## Headlock

In my dreams  
I'm already out of here.

My mind doesn't mind  
that copper, when mined  
doesn't form into natural  
springs, sorted and sized  
by power and purity.

But my brain knows this is wrong.  
So I wake up.

The house I grew up in  
burned down twenty years ago.  
I often find myself in the middle  
of fixing this, or building that,  
and the carpets could use  
a little less dog hair.

But my brain knows this is wrong.  
So I wake up.

Sometimes, I'm driving  
from the back seat of a car,  
or hovering slightly above  
and behind, like I'm  
commanding a video game  
with real life consequences.

But my brain knows this is wrong.  
So I wake up.

Once in a while, I see,  
or hear, another inmate  
or an officer who's wearing a  
different uniform,  
or none at all, somewhere  
very far away from here.

But my brain knows this is wrong.  
So I wake up.

I wake upon a plastic mat  
on a shelf, with threadbare  
sheets and a barely-there pillow.  
The tag that my hands  
drape around my neck  
labels me, *Inmate*.

But my brain knows,  
this  
is wrong.

*Greg Clasby*

## **Get the Fuck Out of My Jail**

Overcrowded, smothering, stifling  
even when it's cold enough to freeze a witch's  
teats in a brass bra doing push-ups in the snow

Which we're not allowed to play in anyway

Bad smells, bad tastes, too bright to sleep  
even if you could hear yourself think  
you might think better of wanting to

Which we're not allowed to do for ourselves anyway

Always alone, with someone always underfoot  
unable to communicate with the outside world  
and nothing to say when the questions keep coming

Which we're not allowed to answer anyway

I keep seeing you and you keep staring at me  
we talk over each other when making our points  
that are no more valid than the feelings behind them

Which we're not allowed to feel if we had them anyway

Make your way to the front of the line  
your lawyer called, or the judge called the time  
whatever way it's calculated, I'm happy for you

Which I'm not allowed to say, but I say it anyway



*Greg Clasby*

## The Dead of the Day

The dead of the day are hauling in their nets  
Hustling on the corner between Nowhere and Main  
Dodging cars like raindrops, they place their bets  
Ignoring each other with focused disdain

The dead of the day don't care about your troubles  
Or give a passing thought to whither thou shalt go  
They bide no time on introspective struggles  
Drifting like leaves wherever the wind may blow

The dead of the day take up the leftover spaces  
When the artists and visionaries are through  
They pretend to appreciate the subtler graces  
But care more for diversion than something to do

The dead of the day take pains to complain that there's  
nothing much for them, between Nowhere and Main.

Victor Hall

The Bitches Can Have Him (with lines from Mark Strand)

Nothing moves,  
only the boards of the porch  
beneath my feet.  
The short coat I wear  
over my bare skin  
is enough to ward off  
the night's damp cold,  
But not to shelter me  
from the chill in my spine.  
He's a dog. Out all night,  
drinking from toilets;  
sniffing butts and chasing tails.  
He chased mine back when.  
But familiarity breeds contempt.  
Now he strays when I'm "asleep."  
Familiar, contemptible breed.  
Do I put him out?  
I've seen what divorce does to people.  
I want revenge. It is morning.  
He comes up the walk  
and knocks at the door.  
I rush to greet him.  
He hears me. Or some sense  
makes him back down.  
He rounds the house  
to the back door. I tiptoe.  
  
It's locked. The chain is on.  
The dog door. Appropriate.  
Does he dare? The flap cants inward.  
He noses in. I pounce. My nails rake his face.  
He howls. And flees. I purr.  
Humph! *Piss in my litter box!*

*Victor Hall*

## A How-To Poem, or How to Poem

Pick a random subject.  
Any one will do,  
literally.  
Describe it,  
detailing its diverse facets;  
as many as you can wring out.  
Inflate each element  
to mammoth proportions.  
Worlds within worlds.  
Talk is cheap,  
but a poet ought not to be:  
men of few words perish, not publish.  
Shakespeare's first form  
of Romeo and Juliet  
was a haiku about a hangnail.  
Applying blunt-force thesaurusorcery, cudgel every  
expression into  
substitute pleonasm. Multifariously so.  
References esoteric? obscure? archaic?  
all mother's milk  
and honey in a poet's pen.  
Perform an -ectomy  
on any thematic cohesion  
at risk of misleading a reader to meaning.  
Be open-minded:  
workshop an "early draft"  
before a jury of poet peers.  
It's already finished; no poet cedes to  
refraining from disdain to retraining  
his voice to harmonize with others'.  
Bask in obligatory praise.  
Daydream during kind advice.  
Snub, and plot revenge for, every criticism.

## Figuring Things Out

1. Hearing the jury's verdict made her heart sink like the boat anchor she'd tied to her ex-husband.
2. Her orgasm was like the moon landing to a conspiracy theorist – and he could tell, so he bailed out like a bucket of seawater from a leaky boat.
3. "You don't hear as often about mixed similes," said the English professor, easily fielding the tenure board's questions like slow grounders homing in on his baseball glove like housecats hearing a can opener.
4. Crafting a simile is like your girlfriend's bra: you have confidence going in that you know how it works, but actually pulling it off is tricky.
5. As he stood in her bedroom, his exposed penis an invitation printed in rapidly fading ink on the wrinkled stationery of the pretense of her actual invitation to her place, he felt the knee of her laughter in the nuts of his self-esteem.
6. Metaphors are my bitch!

*John Sughrue*

## Disappointment

Disappointment rumbles around in my stomach like the huge machines at the quarry that move the slag to the pile of discarded, unwanted stuff, that's probably good for something, but nothing that's immediately useful ... throbs and thumps in my guts like longing for the one you Love for nothing, they either don't Love you anymore, or didn't really Love you to begin with, or told you they Loved you but lied, or Loved you but cheated anyway, or were incapable of Love but needed a ride... grinds and scrapes in my innards like being stood up—again—going from window to window to see if they're pulling up out front or if they've swung around to the back by the barn or if they just took the shortcut through the woods or checking the phone again to see if it's working 'cause you explained how crazy it makes you being stood up and they pretty much swore a blood oath to never do it again, so they couldn't possibly be doing it again ... boils my middle like lava, like that smelted stuff they smelt at the smelter ...

*John Sughrue*

## **I Remember How It Felt**

At that moment  
It seemed so life changing  
We hadn't even met

At that moment  
It seemed like everything  
I had to fight for it

At that moment  
It seemed like the end of the world  
We cried together

At that moment  
It seemed time had stopped  
And I couldn't breathe

At that moment  
It seemed like gravity increased  
She just kept walking

And didn't look back

*John Sughrue*

## Meeting Arianne for the Very First Time

Thigh deep, and wet and heavy, the snow  
impeded her progress so several hours  
into labor, anger and heartbreak fueled her advance  
Cursing me, she found the truck behind my lover's house  
She drove herself to deliver this child  
To release herself from her burden  
To unshackle me from mine  
Fortune smiled and sent a slipping, swerving taxi  
Chased and apprehended at a red light  
Conscripted to convey my sorry carcass  
Tail tucked, contrite and ashamed  
Facing the music facing the storm  
facing up to taking the heat and biting the bullet  
Arriving within the same hour  
Miraculously  
As this tiny being  
Brokering Peace  
United, wee three  
Freed.  
Hello, Arianne!  
Nice to meet you, you Sweet Freakin' Thing!

JR Lane

## Stuck

Stuck between a block wall and a steel door  
I decided to play some rock and roll  
And appreciate the irony of my life.

Like a skit on Saturday Night Live,  
I find myself fifty years young and  
the center of satire.  
Picture this—

My wife makes a 911 call and fabricates a crime.  
Alec Baldwin portrays the responding officer perfectly,  
an uncanny rendition of Sean Hannity.

As I'm being handcuffed he screams *Assault!*  
Apparently in memorable pain,  
because, it seems, I'm squeezing his hand with  
the power of Bruce Banner turned green!

Oh, what a production unfolding.  
With my pickaninny kids in the front row,  
(who don't need no father anyway) I'm arrested  
for a crime I didn't commit.



Flash forward a year,  
I sit sweating with the foul stench of incarceration.  
Fabrication or not, the feel of the cold cement seems real ...  
this is still an SNL skit, right?

I finally get the punch line—  
Blond hair, blue eyes, #MeToo ... with “jigaboo” kids!  
Plus, she wanted me to love her but I no longer did;  
how dare me!

Ha ha ha, I get it now.  
Whew, good one, yeah...  
So, what was the joke again?  
Can I go home now?

*JR Lane*

## That Hour I was Most Myself

That hour I was most myself ...  
Hmmm, I cannot recall.  
Pleasing the masses  
Provoking the fascist  
Napoleon had nothing on me.  
Upon my reflection, if one must compare,  
Alexander the Great was merely a flea

That hour I was most myself ...  
Hmmm, when could that have been?  
A man of the world, a Renaissance fellow,  
Elegant, bourgeois, essentially mellow  
Amorous, urbane, polished with flare  
Classy contrite regal debonair

That hour I was most myself...  
Hmmm, is it not so?  
A leader, contender, a man amongst men  
The picture of courage, the master of Zen ...

Wait, no, see not my façade,  
Let me continue to enchant you.

That hour I was most myself ...  
Alas validity has been maintained  
Embellishments have waned  
There was never such a time  
Where one might observe the true self that is mine.  
In the depths of despair, where I reside  
The bowels of hell, psychologically tried, emotionally tired  
A boy who's deflated, paltry and lost  
An hour that I am most myself?  
I could not afford the cost.

*Robert Pierce*

## **Bio Call**

Where am I  
when the shit hits?  
Bio hazard get your wagon  
and drag your ass off to clean up  
in the defiled corridor  
of some dumbass steel door warrior,  
kicking like hell and screaming.  
I guess he didn't get his own way  
so he'll slay himself this day,  
Whatever!  
Fuck him I say,  
Attention seeking son of a B,  
pile of piss, wasting the air I breathe.  
Good rewards for bad behavior.  
What a bunch of crap, literally,  
wasting my time with shit like this.  
The cement walls, smothered in red  
or brown fecal matter, don't matter!  
Arterial artwork from some jerk  
who can't control his emotions.  
Another mess, bloody hell smells of  
OC spray in this god forsaken place.  
Riot control spray in a six by ten.  
Choke the disorderly into conformity I say.  
Who cares if he can't fucking breathe.  
Don't worry,  
I'll soon have it smelling like poison again.  
Bleach and bottle X for sure  
will kill all the creepy crawlies,  
in this nasty little shithole  
in the wall. Hope it was worth  
all the coddling he  
could swallow today.

*Robert Pierce*

## **I Am**

I am from dysfunction,  
a token of broken wills.

I am from chaos in forms  
of guilt and anger,

I am built on pain  
and hunger,  
thrashed for the masses,

trashed for the laugh of it.

I am from jealousy  
and envy,

alone

I survived the mind fucks  
and manipulations,  
frustrations and uncertainties,

surely I grew up the minority.

Mental illness  
like anxiety and depression,  
that messed with me more  
than the rest of it.

I am from the back woods  
of society,  
the riots I survived  
within  
the perimeter of the family.

I am strong inside  
from the refinery,  
of the fires that left the child in me  
dead,

resurrected on a miracle.  
Disassociation played a role in it.

I am the mistakes I've made  
throughout my ages,

I am the struggles that I face  
on a daily basis.  
What I do today is the legacy I leave  
tomorrow.

And sorrow  
no longer labels me.

*Robert Pierce*

## Strawberry Picking

Red rubbed shirts  
sweet with smells  
raw from the strawberry patch.  
Pickers stripped the rows  
With working hands  
and smiles stained  
with fruits of labor.  
No better day than  
buckets and bellies both  
filled to the brim.  
And pickings piled high  
In tiny wooden baskets.

*Bob Sawyer*

## **I Stole A Day**

I stole a day today.  
It was an outright theft.  
I just took it and hid it away.  
There was no planning,  
there was no premeditation  
or calculation,  
just a simple burst of spontaneous larceny.  
I wanted the day to myself, for myself,  
and I was unwilling to share it,  
so I grabbed it by surprise and ran with it.

I've never been a day stealer before,  
never contemplated the idea,  
I'm not sure I'd do it again,  
but I did it today and it was  
profound and satisfying, like an artistic  
triumph or a structure well-built.  
But, alas, it's now lost to history and I cannot show it off  
or give it back.  
It must remain my private criminal act.

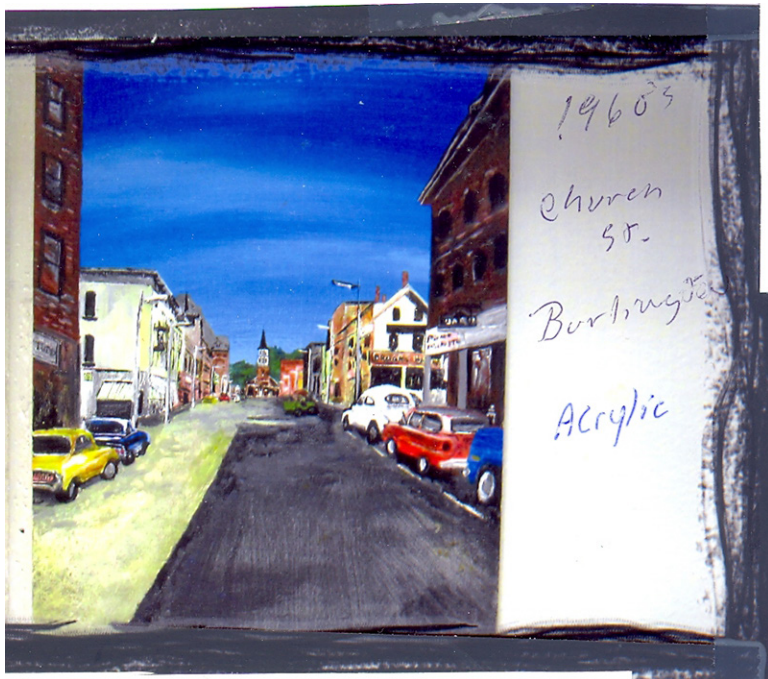
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## Bios

Greg Clasby is a professional blacksmith who has appeared on the Discovery Channel's *American Chopper*. His work has been used by the Plimoth Plantation Living History Museum, as well as by fellow artists in demonstrations at the Smithsonian Institution.

Richard Gagnon says writing has been a haven throughout his life. Though prose was his first love, poetry later grabbed him by the iambus. He credits Bill Freedman with clarifying and guiding his first attempts at poetry. Sixty-five, he says, is a good age to begin a new adventure.

Victor G. Hall, a New Mexico native, was Editor-in-Chief of *Abecedarian Chrysalis*, his high school's poetry anthology; a columnist and features editor of *Round Up*, his university's





newspaper; and Managing Editor of *Echo*, his university's monthly magazine. His poetry, jokes, and academic articles have appeared in various publications. He says he was pleased to discover he can turn anything into a poem just by hitting 'enter' a lot.

JR Layne, of part Dominican, part Jamaican/Barbadian lineage, was raised in a privileged community, where his rigorous education included poetry. Later, his poetry was smothered by the less pleasant responsibilities of adulthood. A "rock bottom" chapter in his life reintroduced the power of poetry and the beautifully positive effect it can have on his emotional health.

Robert Pierce is an accomplished regional artist and writer and Vermont native. After completing a business course through the University of Vermont in 1993, he started and ran a successful business for sixteen years. He also served as a Vermont-certified Firefighter for six years and was a nationally-certified E.M.T. for five years. In 2018, he graduated from the Community High School of Vermont.

Bob Sawyer died last summer, after 26 years of incarceration and weeks before his scheduled release. In "Why I Write," a piece he wrote to accompany a poem of his in *Rattle*, he said there was a joy in choosing the right word or phrase and that the poetic universe invited him to express himself with freedom, diversity, and imagination.

John Sughrue was originally published in *One Imagined Word at a Time* (Writers for Recovery, 2016) and again in *One Imagined Word at a Time, Vol. II*. He currently has a poem on display in an art installation at the Museum of Everyday Life in Glover, Vermont. He wants people to know he isn't nearly as interesting as he thinks he is, but believes he has a perfect face for radio.

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## About Bill Freedman

Bill Freedman is a retired English literature professor (University of Haifa, Israel). He has published books on Laurence Sterne, Edgar Allan Poe and Joseph Conrad; and an oral history of baseball fans. He has poetry in *APR*, *The Antioch Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Literary Review*, *The Quarterly*, *Rattle*, and elsewhere. His fourth book of poems is forthcoming from Future Cycle Press. Freedman has lived in Israel since 1969, but owns a small country home in the woods of Vermont, where he and his wife summer. During the last four summers, Freedman has conducted a poetry writing workshop at the Southern State Correctional Facility in Springfield Vermont.

## About 2River

Since 1996, 2River has been a site of poetry and art, quarterly publishing *The 2River View* and occasionally publishing individual authors in the 2River Chapbook Series. 2River is also the home of Muddy Bank, the 2River blog.

Richard Long, Editor  
2River

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