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books

by john paul minarik
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2. patterns in the dusk (Washington, King Publications: 1978)
3. Past the Unknown, Remembered Gate (Greenfield Center, NY, COSMEP Prison Project, 1981)

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a book

by john minarik
to marcia . . .

some of these poems have appeared in Backspace, Born Into A Felony, Community College of Allegheny County Literary Magazine, Ethnic American Newsletter, Journal of Popular Culture, Night Rider, Opinion, Outlaw, St. Dismas Newsletter, Sunday Clothes

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this book was published in a second limited edition of 1,000 copies by
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100 copies signed by the author
patterns in the dusk

Poems

By

John Paul Minarik
patterns in the dusk
by
John Paul Minarik

Woodblockprints
by
Sarah Anderson Lividini

Introduction
by
Fred Rogers

King Publications
P.O. Box 19332
Washington, D.C. 20036
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INTRODUCTION

John Minarik is no stranger to feelings. What is so remarkable is his ability and willingness to give his feelings form and voice through his sensitive verse.

Some of these poems have long histories, others have come from a recent troubled sleep, yet they all bear witness to the poet’s willingness to share his feelings-in-art with those of us who would use our hearts to hear.

Through the composing of his poetry, John Minarik gives stunning testimony to something that is exceedingly important about every prisoner in every prison: that each prisoner is far more than that one thing which forced him into his prison. This in itself gives hope to all persons.

Fred M. Rogers

Pittsburgh, PA, April 1977
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“And so I learned that familiar paths traced in the dusk of summer evenings may lead as well to prisons as to innocent, untroubled sleep.”

from *The Stranger* by Albert Camus
PART I: PRISONS
PART II: INNOCENT, UNTROUBLED SLEEP
John Paul Minarik was born in 1947, in West Mifflin, Pennsylvania. He received a BS in Mechanical Engineering from Carnegie-Mellon University and has now earned a BA in English and Psychology from the University of Pittsburgh. He has worked in the Central Engineering Construction Division of the United States Steel Corporation and has taught at Community College of Allegheny County in the prison college program. He has read poems at local Pittsburgh colleges, over local radio, at the Three Rivers Arts Festival and with the American Wind Symphony. He is Editor of the Academy of Prison Arts, Contributing Editor to the COSMEP Prison Project Newsletter, and is listed in A Directory of American Poets. A short story of his won an honorable mention in the P.E.N. Writing Award for Prisoners, 1976-1977. His first book of poems was a book.
JOHN PAUL MINARIK

"... a poet at the beginning of a long road of truth-telling, a poet who can speak to the generality of people."

—Ed Ochester

"John Paul Minarik is not merely a 'prison writer,' which all too often turns out to be a prisoner who writes pretty well for a prisoner. He is a very good poet who happens to be in prison. Nor is his material limited to the anguish of confinement, a subject that tends to become familiar if all too real in prison writing. He covers a wide range and has created a real little classic in 'the john wayne syndrome,' which explains beautifully to me why I and a lot of other people can't stand John Wayne movies."

—David Davidson

"Powerful."

—Leonard Nimoy

"A poet — in every sense!"

—Paul Zimmer
Past the Unknown, Remembered Gate

Poems by John Paul Minarik

Introduction by Michael Hogan
Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following publications for permission to reprint certain poems that appear in this chapbook: A BOOK, ANTHOLOGY OF THE 1978-79 POETS-IN-THE-SCHOOLS PROGRAM OF THE PENNSYLVANIA COUNCIL ON THE ARTS: VOLUME SIX, BORN INTO A FELONY, COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF ALLEGHENY COUNTRY LITERARY MAGAZINE, COSMEP PRISON PROJECT NEWSLETTER, DUMB OX, GRAVIDA, HAPPINESS HOLDING TANK, "JOINT" CONFERENCE, MILL HUNK HERALD, NEW ORLEANS REVIEW, PATTERNS IN THE DUSK, and VOICES FROM WITHIN.

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COSMEP PRISON PROJECT CHAPBOOK NUMBER TWO

20
PAST THE UNKNOWN, REMEMBERED GATE

Poems by John Paul Minarik
Introduction by Michael Hogan

COSMEP Prison Project
c/o The Greenfield Review
PO Box 80
Greenfield Center, NY 12833
INTRODUCTION

Situated on the lush banks of the Ohio River, the Western Penitentiary rises like a medieval castle on the Pennsylvania landscape. Behind its walls are the feckless, the losers, those living examples of the fact that “most crimes have at least two victims/and even victimless crimes have one.” Behind those walls, too, are occasional examples of those who refuse to surrender to their victimization, who have taken whatever light is available to them in their cramped cellblocks, whatever silence exists in a building housing four hundred men, and moulded it into a shape that finds a voice among those of us on the outside.

For John Paul Minarik the voice is simple, unadorned by figurative language for the most part; it is the voice of self-realization, the speech of self-disclosure. The lack of ornamentation and the risk of personal exposure is what W.H. Auden (speaking of Cavafy) called the “only translatable element in poetry.” Believing the single quality which all human beings possess without exception is uniqueness, he wrote:

To the degree, therefore, that a poem is a product of a certain culture, it is difficult to translate it into terms of another culture, but to the degree that it is an expression of a unique human being, it is as easy, or as difficult, for a person from an alien culture to appreciate as for one of the cultural group to which the poet happens to belong.

Minarik lives in a subculture whose raison d’être is as alien from ours as the lives of the inhabitants (assuming some exist) on the planets circling Barnard’s Star. The subculture is forcefully welded together by guilt, hatred and paranoia. Its primary function is that of the amoeba: blind survival. But, unlike the amoeba, the inhabitants of this subculture have cerebral cortexes and (some of them at least) spirit. Thus, we can read a poem like “a letter from home” and find in it the humor, the fidelity to truth, the specifics of a life, and calculated understatement, all of which are no more (or less) than one person inside speaking directly to all of us outside. This poem like the others does not shake with rage or whimper with remorse. Its author has gone beyond both. He speaks with the quiet wryness one might expect from Thomas Merton had he been incarcerated in Western Pennsylvania.
I first "met" John Minarik through letters about a decade ago when I myself was a prisoner in a human warehouse in Arizona. We had both discovered that we shared a similar perception, namely, that the crime of prison was collectively far more evil than any individual crime the worst of the prisoners there had committed. "One finds himself," John wrote, "turned into the cockroach that Kafka described in The Metamorphosis." And one either surrenders to that until he is finally squashed under the heel of hopeless recidivism, or he struggles against it until the freedom and dignity he achieves in the solitude of his cell can be translated outside the walls into an affirmation of the human spirit.

Sitting here in my living room in Colorado, my lovely wife on the couch, my baby daughter Melissa playing on the floor, it is difficult for me not to affirm life. Or not to believe that it is possible for every man to overcome great pain and humiliation in incarceration and still let his words and his life speak of human affirmation and love.

But remembering the time I walked through those quadruple iron gates to visit John, sweltering in the August heat of the prison, our conversation obscured by clangs and yells and shuffling feet, I am amazed that his spirit is so strong after all these years, his humanity so little circumscribed by his surroundings, and his poetry so generous.

It is with this last reference that I'll end the introduction, suggesting that the reader go over a second time and a third the fine poem "butch metrist" in which he asks of the lesbian poet:

does it feel different inside  
when you touch her breasts  
and when she kisses you  
with her tongue does it  
make you wonder how  
men feel?

The poem is organized in Hegelian logic. The antithesis asks:

where have all the men gone?  
are they in the jailhouse  
with me?  
are they in the ground, home from Vietnam?
And the beautiful, unexpected leap of the synthesis which occurs in the same stanza:

are they sitting quietly alongside
waiting for your lovely poetic
tongue?

There is a generosity and a wholeness of spirit that is the underpropping of this poem and (one hopes) Minarik's life. It is good that he takes us "past the unknown, remembered gate" and gives us an opportunity "to know the place for the first time."

Michael Hogan

Denver, Colorado
October 3, 1980
the unidentified female

Minarik—who during his confinement has reportedly become a poet, obtained additional educational degrees, and married an unidentified female who was visiting him...

The Pittsburgh Press

like Kafka’s beetle, i wake up one morning to find reporters have something to report about a decade-old crime because it’s news because it reminds us anger is like an Incredible Hulk inside us all ready to burst the shirt of civilization because some educated criminal won a new trial on a little technicality like the 14th Amendment to the Constitution.

there is no escape from my past but you should leave my wife out of it she has committed no crime unless loving a man in prison is a felony you should leave my wife out of it because you don’t know about the snow on the roads in the winter the kids running to see papa driving home at 8:00 pm without her man the sound of a postage stamp.

the grass forgives the elevator remembers.

since i am reportedly a poet i go back to my job in the tunnel carrying words like sacks of dirt spreading them around so the guards don’t notice.
John Paul Minarik was born on November 6, 1947, in McKeesport, PA. He graduated from West Mifflin North High School. Before incarceration he earned a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering from Carnegie-Mellon University and worked for the Central Engineering Construction Division of the United States Steel Corporation. During imprisonment he earned a B.A., *Magna Cum Laude*, in English and Psychology from the University of Pittsburgh and is currently an M.A. Candidate at the University of Pittsburgh’s School of Education. He has taught for the Mathematics Department of the Community College of Allegheny County and for the English Department of the University of Pittsburgh in the prison college program. He is listed in *A Directory of American Poets* and won Honorable Mention in the P.E.N. Writing Award for Prisoners, 1976-1977. He was selected by the Literature Panel of the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts to be a poet in the Poetry-in-the-Schools program. He is the first poet in prison to receive an appointment to any state’s arts council’s PITS program. He is the author of several successful grant applications for the Academy of Prison Arts, the first prisoner-created writing program conducting residencies for writers supported by the National Endowment for the Arts. His second book of poems was *patterns in the dusk* (1978) and his first was *a book* (1974).
“John Paul Minarik’s poems feel and think deeply into regions where prison becomes unimportant.”

—Gar Bethel

“One can learn a great deal about things from reading his work—about basic things like freedom, guilt and desire for life.”

—Paul Zimmer

“The poetry of John Paul Minarik speaks to us with a voice we cannot avoid hearing, especially if we have learned how to listen. To say there is no getting around the truth is one thing. But to commit yourself to this, as John has, is another thing. It is the most important thing about any poetry. John knows this. You either do it, or you find something else to do. John is doing it. His words are true. This is what any good poet does well. And John Paul Minarik is definitely one of them. Listen to him; he is a poet who has developed an honest punch to the soul that, at times, leaves me properly dazed but still standing on my feet.”

—Paul Fericano
KICKING THEIR HEELS
WITH FREEDOM

Poems From
Pennsylvania Prisons

Edited by
John Paul Minarik

The Academy of Prison Arts
c/o Ms. Anne Pride,
Community Coordinator
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Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15218
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Some of the poems included in this anthology have appeared in the following magazines: The COSMEP Prison Project Newsletter, Copula, Joint Conference, and The Poetry Society of America Bulletin.

"Getting Tired" by William Welsh won First Prize in the 1980 King Publications Poetry Contest.

"The Unidentified Female" by John Paul Minarik is reprinted from his third book of poems, PAST THE UNKNOWN, REMEMBERED GATE, published in 1981 by The COSMEP Prison Project/Greenfield Review.

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PREFACE

This anthology comes from across the Pennsylvania correctional system, nine prisons. Unlike an earlier Pennsylvania anthology, *Voices From Within*, no attempt is made to categorize each poem or poet by "home" institution because identifying each prison represented would only add to the fabrications of domesticity hiding the human zoo. The people contributing to this book have "fought against the psychic death of non-feeling, who raged 'against the dying of the light,'" to quote Michael Hogan quoting Dylan Thomas prefacing the Arizona prison anthology, *Do Not Go Gentle*. The human voices within these covers are not at home.

Included like the blank rounds given to firing squads are two poems: one by a guard and one by a person on the staff of the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. This is done to show the humanizing value of poetry. You, the reader, can guess and wonder if the poem hitting the target for you was written by a prisoner or a guard or a "civilian."

As Reagan budget cuts seem inevitable for NEA and some politicians target enlightened programs such as the Academy of Prison Arts, this anthology may be one of the last of its kind. Yet the very existence of this book in your hands is testimony to the greatness of the nation. You are not likely to read similar anthologies of poems from Soviet prison camps. John Fitzgerald Kennedy wrote:

> We are not afraid to entrust the American people with unpleasant facts, foreign ideas, alien philosophies, and competitive values. For a nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market is a nation that is afraid of its people.

Who are the people in this volume? They are your fellow Americans, your fellow Pennsylvanians, your neighbors, your brothers, your sisters, your sons, your daughters, the face you see in the mirror.

Goethe's famous last words were: "Light, light, more light!" Let us never fear the light of truth whether it comes from a dark prison cell or from the person alongside you now.

*John Paul Minarik*

*July 4, 1981*
INTRODUCTION

It is a warm morning in July and, as I sit at my desk, I find myself looking at the usual clutter which covers it. A bear skull, feathers, a letter opener shaped like a small samurai dagger, a potted plant, stacks of letters and manuscripts, stones, rubber stamps, dried sage. There are books ranged on all four walls and the open window behind me lets in a breeze filtered by nothing more than a light screen while in front of me an open door leads to the stairs. I can walk out at any time and get into my car, drive through this July day which has begun to unfold. Unimportant details? Perhaps — unless you find yourself realizing, as I do this morning, just how many of these things around me I take for granted. For if I were a person in an American prison all or most of those things I have described in the few lines above would be beyond my reach — especially that open door.

This week the headlines have been full of stories about a man released from prison after a life confinement by the state. Because he wrote well and because a famous American writer took an interest in him, he was set free and his book of letters from prison published. Now he is a fugitive again, sought for a murder he may have committed in a senseless moment after a fight in a bar. And I find myself looking again looking at the accustomed freedom of my surroundings, surroundings which can be, to a person conditioned by years of restrictions imposed, almost absent-mindedly because “that’s the way it’s always been done”, harder to adjust to than the atmosphere of another planet after decades of breathing in rules and regulations. Yes, people commit crimes, Yes, there may be in many — but not all — cases good reasons to separate them for a time from everyday society. But what happens when they return to that everyday society where deciding which shirt to wear in the morning or knowing where to go to buy a tube of toothpaste can be almost as great a trauma a finding that your record keeps you from doing the legitimate wage earning jobs you are qualified to do? What programs exist within American prisons which help a man or woman achieve the balance, the self-knowledge, even the serenity needed to remain human and to return to the outside world as something more than a robot programmed for self-destruction?
prison world which they must live in terms which both make the
reader share that world and hopefully, want to change it. Others,
such as Chaima Grob's, "Giving It Something I Can Feel," and
Oliver Johnson's, "The King's White Horse" (which is yet another
version of an often quoted oral prison poem form called a "Toast")
for all too many Americans, especially those who are poor and trap-
peled in the cities' ghettos. And then there are poems such as Melvin
Douglas Brown's, one which make no mention at all of prison such
as "The Dirt Doctor," and "The Steelworker." The first lines from
the latter poem deserve quoting here:

Some of the poems - Roger Brown's, "Cell 119" or William
Welsh's incredibly powerful poem "Getting Tired" - present the
prison world which they must live in terms which both make the
readers share that world and hopefully want to change it. Others,
such as Chaima Grob's, "Giving It Something I Can Feel," and
Oliver Johnson's, "The King's White Horse" (which is yet another
version of an often quoted oral prison poem form called a "Toast")
In his evocation of real people and their language, in the way he creates poems which are small parables, Melvin Douglas Brown has shown me that he is a poet worth watching, one who — with a handful of others represented in this anthology — should go on to publish volumes of their own and continue as poets in their own right.

The title of the book is KICKING THEIR HEELS WITH FREEDOM and there is no doubt in my mind, either through the escape of the imagination or the catharsis of dealing directly with events and institutions which can destroy the spirit and the soul, the men and women in this anthology have at least taken a few tentative (and some very bold) steps towards personal liberation. And along the way they have created poetry — poetry which is always meaningful, often moving, frequently well-crafted and accomplished. To appreciate your own freedoms, to better understand a part of our nation it is too easy to forget, you need only pick up this book and begin to read it. For your own sake, for the sake of us all — those who have their freedom and may not truly appreciate it, those who have been denied their freedom and may not know how to deal with it when it is returned to them, those who may never again know what it is to walk outside of prison walls — you should read this book, think long about what you have read and then breathe in the air of freedom.

Joseph Bruchac
Greenfield Center, NY
the way he
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with a hand-
do on to pub-
rown right.

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Joseph Bruchac
Center, NY

“I dream of roan red horses.
Over rich green meadows they roam
Kicking their heels with freedom.”

J. W. Wilburn
THE PICNIC
for John Paul Minorik

John touches his wife's hair as they sit.
He looks at her, and another
Man looks at them.

He looks at them.

He makes a young boy jump for joy.
He makes a young boy jump for joy.

A young boy jumps for joy.
A young boy jumps for joy.

A young boy jumps for joy.
A young boy jumps for joy.

A young boy jumps for joy.
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Pennsylvania writers collection

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607 South Drive
Harrisburg, PA 17120-0600
Author: Minarik, John Paul, 1947-
Title: Patterns in the dusk / by John Paul Minarik ; woodblockprints by Sarah Anderson Lividini ; introd. by Fred Rogers.

3 ACCESS PA Database libraries have this item

Alt Author: Lividini, Sarah Anderson.
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Author: Poetry Workshop, SCI Somerset, The.
Title: Songs Of The Bones 2004 : A Collection Of Poetry By / The SCI-Somerset Poetry Workshop.
Summary: A collection of poetry from various inmates who participated in the SCI Somerset Poetry Workshop.

1 ACCESS PA Database library has this item

Subject: Poetry -- Collected Works.
Non-Fiction Book.
Alt Author: Roman, Marcia, Staff Facilitator.
Minarik, John Paul, Peer Facilitator (Inmate)

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Mr. Dennis Sobin, Director
PRISONS FOUNDATION
2512 Virginia Avenue, NW, #58043
Washington, DC 20037

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Enclosed please find a book of books submitted to your www.PrisonFoundation.org for publication. Following your guidelines, it is: (1) presented on 8½" x 11" loose white typing paper, (3) poetry over 25, under 150, pages (44 pages), (4) an SASE accompanies the book [I will need to know the date of publication to include it with my copyright registration filing], (5) the 2nd thru 4th pages contain my 2015 copyright notice, a brief explanation that the title includes "the beginnings and ends of four out-of-print poetry books authored by (or edited by) myself, with my prison address, (8) uses only one side of each sheet of paper, with a number on the bottom of every page. It presents too much of a problem for me to try to have a $50.00 donation check accompany this mailing in the same envelope, but I have sent a prison check to Susan and asked her to please send you one of her personal checks as my $50.00 donation to cover one year's prominent front-page publicity and a second link. I will provide Susan with a photocopy of this cover letter, and I will ask her to please mail a photocopy with her personal check for $50.00 to help you coordinate my $50.00 donation with my a book of books. Please note that Susan's address is not my outside permanent address, and her address should not be published. Please help to maintain her right to privacy.

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It strikes me as fundamentally unfair that my four out-of-print books now sell as rare books through Amazon.com (and through affiliates) for $50.00 and more with none of the proceeds going to the author or to the original small press publisher. Accordingly, I expect to use the Authors Guild program to bring members' out-of-print titles back into print.

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On the cover:
Double-celled inmates in “The Rock,” the Main Housing Unit of Florida’s Union Correctional Institution. Photo by Bill Powers.

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Once inmate writers were isolated individuals. But now a network of writing workshops, magazines, and small publishing houses exists to support them.

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Voices From The New Literary Underground

by Greg Mitchell

First to arrive is Jerome Jones, a man in his mid-30s wearing glasses, a blue cap and a big grin. He has reason to be happy. As he arranges a dozen orange plastic chairs around the table, Jerome explains that he has just found out he will be "splitting" in another month.

Greg Smith strolls in a few minutes later, a sheaf of freshly written sonnets under his arm. He has short hair, a top front tooth missing and a warm smile. Like Jerome he is wearing a short-sleeved denim shirt, littling protection against a cool autumn breeze blowing through a gap in a window across the visitors' room at the Staunton (Va.) Correctional Center.

A half-dozen inmates in all — the average turnout for these Friday afternoon sessions is a bit higher — sit quietly around the table, across from Janet Lembke, a grey-haired woman in her 50s dressed in a denim suit. Lembke, a poet and teacher with two books of translations of classical Greek tragedies to her credit, has been running this weekly workshop for more than three years, although none of today's Creative Writers (as the group calls itself) has been attending nearly that long. Teaching at Staunton, Lembke had informed me earlier, was a way of assuaging her "liberal guilt," but it also provided a great deal of illumination and enjoyment. "I like talking shop," she explained, "and it's nice to have a captive audience."

Photos by Bill Powers

with a famous author. These inmates are happy to receive informal instruction and encouragement during the weekly classes. Most will never write a word for publication. But for many of them, finding a way to express themselves is enough. Most prison officials feel the same way. Self-expression through writing, they feel, is much preferable to self-expression through rioting.

Joe Bruchac lives in a big, old country house on two acres of land in Greenfield, N.Y., near the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains north of Albany. Filing cabinets line the walls of his office and stacks of books rest on the front porch. In a building in front of the house — a converted gas station/store — sit piles and piles of books that Bruchac and his wife Carol are about to send off to prisons and prisoners around the country. Ex-offender friends of the Bruchacs sometimes use a small building out back, which is heated by a wood stove, as a sleeping and writing space.

If there is a prison writing network in America, Joe Bruchac is at the hub of it. Bruchac got involved in 1969 when he received some manuscripts that had been smuggled out of Soledad prison in California. Bruchac, a poet, professor at Swarthmore College, and an editor at Greenfield Press, published them under the title, Words from the House of the Dead: A Kite from Soledad in 1970. Two years later he was asked to teach a writing workshop at the maximum-security Great Meadow Correctional Facility. Some of the participants were survivors of the Attica rebellion who still bore physical and psychological scars. Bruchac discovered that “a lot of people in prison have a lot of creative potential. With criticism and advice they can really develop.” Bruchac and others have traced the prison writing boom in the past decade to post-Attica rage and the sudden emergence of small publishers willing to communicate it.

In 1974 Bruchac was elected to the board of the influential Committee of Small Magazine Editors and Publishers (COSMEP). He proposed that publishers donate leftover books to prisons. The following year the Bruchacs received a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant and the COSMEP Prison Project was born. In 1976 they founded the Prison Project Newsletter, which has since grown into a 28-page, twice-yearly, magazine. It is a forum, clearinghouse and gathering place for 1,000 prison writers and workshop instructors across the country.

The Bruchacs aren’t the only purveyors of prison literature. In 1972 Richard Shelton, a well-respected poet and professor of English at the University of Arizona in Tucson, received a letter from Charles Schmid, seeking some writing tips. Schmid was on death row at Arizona State Prison in Florence at the time. Shelton visited him and began corresponding with other prison writers as well. In 1974 Shelton started a workshop at the Florence prison. “I had no preconceived notions about what I was getting into,” he recalls. “I had never been in a prison, I knew nothing about prisons. I just stumbled through it trying to listen and find out what the men were interested in.” Five years later an hour-long film about the workshop was shown on dozens of Public Broadcasting System stations.

One of Shelton’s students was Michael Hogan. In 1975 Hogan’s books, Letters For My Son and If You Ever Get There, Think of Me received wide attention in poetry circles, and his poem, “Spring,” won first prize in a major writing contest. He received a $5,000 NEA grant, much of which went to hire a lawyer, who helped secure his parole in 1979. “Hogan’s poetry got him out of prison,” Joe Bruchac observes. “It’s sort of a modern Leadbelly story.” (Leadbetter was the stage name of Huddie Ledbetter, a Texas inmate and blues singer, who was pardoned by the Texas governor in 1925.) Hogan now lives in Denver, Colo., has written five books and is a visiting instructor in many prisons.

Meanwhile, in New York City, the American PEN Center was setting up its Prison Writing Program. In a 1972 article called “The Right to Write in Prison — USA,” Lucy Kavler, now chairman of the program committee, noted that PEN has intervened in foreign countries on behalf of men and women imprisoned because of their writ-
Mary McAnally’s poetry workshops at five prisons in Oklahoma, and the controversial Folsom Writers Workshop, which hosted people like poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Perhaps the most prominent program directed by an inmate is the Academy of Prison Art at the Western Penitentiary in Pittsburgh, Pa. (See page 46). Although they haven’t attracted as much attention as men’s programs, there have been a number of workshops for women in California, Louisiana, Delaware, New York and other states.

One of the most ambitious projects is sponsored by the New York-based Art Without Walls, a tax-exempt group, funded by NEA, which began in 1971 as a poetry workshop at the Women’s House of Detention on Riker’s Island. It has since conducted classes in writing, as well as graphic arts and dance, throughout the state system. Art Without Walls also distributes thousands of books each year in its Books Behind Bars program. Carol Muske, a well-known poet, ran Art Without Walls for some time; it is currently directed by Donnell Moore, a 40-year-old ex-offender who teaches a workshop at the Arthur Kill Correctional Facility on Staten Island. Moore has recently set up a lecture series at nine state facilities featuring writers like Piri Thomas and Leslie Fiedler.

“Groups are springing up all over,” Moore says. “We hear of one another and look each other up. It’s not quite a movement yet, but maybe all we need is one big national conference to get it going...”

What is this art form known as “prison writing”? And what good does it accomplish? Prison writing has been both wildly overpraised and unfairly maligned. It has been said that there are as many poets as there are prisoners. The recent interest in prison writing inspired a Saturday Night Live takeoff called “Prose & Cons,” in which literary agent Irving “Swifty” Lazar asserted: “Anything by a prisoner is sure to be a best-seller! I tell young writers, ‘Go commit a crime and then we’ll talk.” Even when the media portrays prison writers in a positive light, according to John Minarik of the Academy of Prison Arts, it “tends to sensationalize us — in a destructive way — or make us into folk heroes.”

Joe Bruchac admits that a lot of inmate-authors are “just playing the game. They’re con men — they’ll do it with poetry as easily as with bad checks. But some of the best writing I’ve seen in the last couple on furlough. “We have a 100 percent clean record,” Rolin boasts. “But we can’t go out, so now we have to bring people in.”

Minarik, who has criticized writing programs elsewhere for “blowing” their chances by “getting too big for their booties,” had a degree in mechanical engineering when he entered prison in 1971, and has since added a B.A. in English. He says he started writing because “I had to do some work on my emotions. I needed insight into myself and needed to grow. I had book learning and technical skills but I had never looked at my life. I’d committed a crime and needed to reexamine everything. So you could say that writing has definitely been helpful in my rehabilitation.”

Like many of the leaders in the prison writing movement Minarik was shaken by the Jack Henry Abbott episode (see main article). He calls it “tremendously unfortunate that this incident happened for all other writers in prison who are trying desperately to make a name for ourselves. It can’t help but reflect badly on all of us, and all of us will suffer.” Minarik pauses, and then says, very sadly: “I wish Jack Abbott had made it without messing up.”

—G.M.
enduring career. The benefits are more elusive.

"I don't look at the program as something that's going to keep anyone from coming back through that door," Lembeck observes. "But it gives them a chance to think and a sense of achievement, which can only help them."

Donnell Moore of Art Without Walls looks at it from a more practical vantage point. "The written word," he says, "is very important in prison. During the three years when I was writing in prison I never received a disciplinary notice. Why? They knew that if it went to a grievance procedure I could write. If you're in the right and say so, verbally, nothing happens. If you can write they have to deal with it. The ability to write also helps in applying for parole. It's a survival method, in the joint and out."

The value of writing programs has not been lost on prison officials. "After the initial uncertainty," Joe Bruchac observes, "administrators are realizing it works to their advantage. It if the energies are not channeled into writing they can go in certain other directions. Some of the best writers are the worst prisoners."

Bruchac laughs. "Michael Hogan was one of the biggest gangsters in Arizona prisons!"

Ed Rolin, creative arts coordinator at the Western Penitentiary in Pittsburgh, said: "How can you express yourself in prison? Violently or on paper. It's a lot more therapeutic on paper."

Workshops may appeal to officials' self-interest as well. Some of them, according to Donnell Moore, like the good publicity that surrounds workshops. "It helps them out," he says. "They can get additional money for other programs by showing they have any volunteer stuff like that going on."

In the late sixties and early seventies writing programs — like other "self-help" groups run by outsiders — were the object of intense suspicion from prison administrators. Inmates who had been politically "radicalized" gravitated to writing programs, and this clique-within-a-clique sometimes found instructors more than willing to let them dominate the groups. Administrators feared that radical inmates would use the groups to foment institutional protests and disruptions.

Nowhere was this fear stronger than in California, home to black militant and writer George Jackson, who died in a shootout with guards during an escape attempt in 1971, and to the Symbionese Liberation Army, born of a prison discussion group run by free-world leftists. While California prison officials are more open to writing workshops now, these sessions are still closely scrutinized. In 1977, a workshop at Folsom prison was shut down by officials who, according to some observers, were getting nervous about the political direction of the group and the activist-writers who
Blessed are those days and nights,
And sinless is your mellifluous work.

The one who is scared by the bark and cut by wind
Is like a shadow, unhappy.
Poor is the one, who half alive himself.
From another shadow is still begging.

1937

Translated from the Russian by Andrey Gritsman

John Paul Minarik

What Can A Lifer Accomplish in Prison?

I am one of the lifer-dinosaurs still in an American state prison in Somerset, Pennsylvania, after 36 years. I am innocent, but that is subject of other writings. I came to prison after already being a mechanical engineer, graduating from Carnegie Mellon University, and working for U.S. Steel in Construction Engineering. Early in 26 years at the State Correctional Institution at Pittsburgh (formerly known as Western Penitentiary), I performed clinical duties in the hospital and was re-educated in college programs in English and Psychology. I taught college courses for 20 years for the University of Pittsburgh and the Community College of Allegheny County and won awards for my writing: listed in A Directory of American Poets and Fiction Writers, Contemporary Authors, International Who's Who in Poetry, and more. I have contributed to literary magazines in America over the years, and I have only recently started submitting writing internationally. With five books published, two college degrees, having taught over 100 college courses to fellow prisoners, having worked as a Poet-In-The-Schools for the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, having co-founded the Academy of Prison Arts (the only prisoner-created writing program funded by the National Endowment for the Arts for a decade), being the first prisoner ever certified the National Council of Engineering Examiners (NCEI) examination as an Engineer-In-Training, becoming a full Member of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers (possible only after showing a minimum of 5 years of "responsible charge" of engineering work), this essay could be about accomplishments like reinforcing the laundry floor or designing, constructing, and erecting a new make-up tank for the boilers at Western's Power Plant, or about a redesign and rebuild of the coal handling system, a $150,000.00 project we prisoners did for $25,000.00. The green coal elevator still sticks above walls at Western. This writer was literally forced to design a new main gate for the prison, which we built.

This essay could be about mobile bear traps designed for the Pennsylvania Game Commission, trailer-mounted to harmlessly catch and relocate bears who strayed too close to people. After we manufactured more than 50 of them through Correctional Industries (C.I.), once a bear was loose in Carnegie, Pennsylvania. The bear defied capture. The Warden said to me one day: "Minarik, those bear traps of yours don't work." I said "Warden, the problem is the bait being used. Everyone knows donuts will only catch cops."

Or this essay could be about the four roll-over simulators designed and manufactured at C.I. for the Pennsylvania State Police, used to demonstrate seat belt safety at State Fairs. There is a letter in this prisoner's jacket from
being a man
who can appreciate
a lady.

One night in bed,
I met a woman
inside a poem.
I didn’t know
what to do
with my cock
or my pen.

I’m still looking
for her for that,
being a man.

The Unidentified Female

“Mianrik — who during his confinement has reportedly become a poet,
obtained additional educational degrees, and married an unidentified
female who was visiting him...”

_The Pittsburgh Press_

Like Kafka’s beetle, I wake up one morning to find
reporters have something to report
about a decade-old crime:
because it’s news:
because it reminds us anger
is like an Incredible Hulk inside us all
ready to burst the shirt of civilization,
because some educated criminals won a new trial
on a little technicality like
the 14th Amendment to the Constitution.

There is no escape from my past,
but you should leave my wife out of it;
she has committed no crime
unless loving a man in prison is a felony.
You should leave my wife out of it
because you don’t know about:
the snow on the roads in the winter,
the kids running to see Papa:
driving home at 8:00 p.m. without her man,
the sound of a postage stamp.

The grass forgives.
The elevator remembers.

Since I am reportedly a poet,
I go back to my job
in the tunnel,
carrying words like sacks of dirt,
spreading them around so the guards don’t notice.

Basic Writing 702

Take 25 basic convict students,
collide them with
Standard American English,
throw in
a dash of
Michael Hogan
and
Joseph Bruchac,
and out come
15 new writers.

5 lost to the
games of prison.
1 transferred.
1 paroled.
1 withdrawal.
1 fell in love with a sissy,
and never showed once.

Since numbers
are important in prison,
15 over 25
might seem like a nice fraction,
but somewhere between
commas and semicolons,
metaphors and images,
10 men were lost.

Like a prison within a prison,
10 men were locked into
ignorance of their potential to grow.

“Forget about the ones who can’t make it.”
Poet/Engineer Minarik Ready to Start Over

"Robert 'Bob' Langhurst has been in Western Penitentiary about 17 years. It is not a nice place. It is a terrible place. Bad things happen to people there. A week ago, Chico was stabbed to death over a ten dollar bill. Bob's mother is in the hospital; she may not make it. People in prison lose everything eventually. Parents die. Wives divorce and take the children away. Lawyers leave when the money is gone. Appeals get lost. Dreams get lost. It gets so bad that it's funny."

from "Langhurst's 42nd Birthday," a short story by John Paul Minarik, published in Confrontation, Long Island University

John Paul Minarik suspects he's the only Carnegie Mellon graduate in prison. A lifer, in for the 1971 murder of his former financee, Minarik (E'70) has done more in prison than many people do with a lifetime of freedom.

He earned an additional bachelor's degree in English and psychology, magna cum laude, from the University of Pittsburgh.

He founded the Academy of Prison Arts, the first and only prison-initiated organization of its kind, supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

He wrote more than 1,000 poems, published three volumes of poetry, edited an anthology of poetry from Pennsylvania prisons and served as associate editor of an anthology of poetry from American prisons.

He taught everything from algebra and automotive electronics to trigonometry, physics and problem solving to prisoners — for the State Correctional Institution at Pittsburgh (Western Penitentiary), the Community College of Allegheny County and the University of Pittsburgh — all within the walls of the prison on Pittsburgh's North Side. (When he earns a salary teaching, he pays 17 percent room and board to the prison.)

He became the first imprisoned poet in the country appointed to a state arts council's poet-in-the-schools program.

He managed to marry and gain two step-daughters and is suffering through a divorce while in prison.

He became a paralegal, writing various petitions, documents for his fellow inmates.

A soft-spoken man, son of Rudolph A. Minarik (E'57) and Pauline Minarik, John Paul Minarik, 39, comes to an interview in the shabby, narrow board room of the Western Pen carrying poetry homework from his students. Two, he notes, have already published in journals.

Minarik lives alone in an 8-by-10-by-12-foot cell, one of the few solitary spaces remaining in the ancient jail. He describes it: "There is a bunk. There's a steel desk...a toilet...washing sink. There is a barred window, a barred door...two bookshelves. The time that I do spend in my cell, I am usually writing or reading...sometimes watching TV. We have cable TV."

Since he has usually worked in prison, he doesn't have to appear in his cell twice a day for the head counts. For many years, he worked in the prison infirmary. Recently, he joined the maintenance department, where he has done some engineering work.

"I think it's very valuable to keep a job in prison and to avail oneself of whatever education is available. Engineers in general have to struggle to keep up with their field. I would hate to think what kind of position I would have been in after 10 years of a doldrum-like existence. I don't think I would have been able to work."

Minarik had an opportunity to find out when he was granted a new trial back in 1981. He was out on bond for 37 days before the decision was reversed, and he had to return voluntarily to prison. It was easily the "biggest event" of his prison career.

For that month, he took a job in Ambridge, Pa., at Economy Industrial Corp., headed by Thomas Allen Jr. (IM'S8). Minarik still corresponds with Emil Affeltranger (A'31), a "very, very skilled draftsman," formerly with the firm. "I wanted to be a sponge around Emil and Tom both," he says. When he left the firm to return to prison, he says, a couple of the men in the office cried. "I found that a very, very touching experience."

Emotion is not something the poet/engineer learned to deal with easily. He suffered, he says, from "The John Wayne Syndrome," a name he gave to one of his poems, which has become a classic in prison poetry. (See Poetry, p. 27.)

When he first went to prison, Minarik was in counseling and decided to take some psychology courses to "understand my own emotions." An understanding of his emotions could have changed his life, he believes. "I wish I could have developed the ability to understand my emotions and express them earlier in my life — specifically before I committed the crime. Since my crime was an explosion of emotions that I had no other way of expressing, I see that as one of the faults in my development...Not to develop an understanding of my emotions and find legitimate ways to express them."
prison, in a sense have a moral obligation to our fellow men to try to share some of that.”

What’s the worst part about his prison experience? “There’s a lot of pain here. The separation from loved ones, alienation from oneself. You don’t really have an opportunity to develop… There’s anguish over the loss of freedom.”

Some things have improved during his imprisonment. When he first went to jail, there were “no telephone calls at all — period. We were cut off. If you couldn’t write, you couldn’t even communicate.” He attributes the less violent atmosphere in today’s prisons partially to such a simple thing as permission to make phone calls.

Asked about when he’s eligible for parole, he rattles off a legal-sounding statement: “A man or woman serving a life sentence in Pennsylvania is never eligible for parole. The only way a lifer can be released in Pennsylvania is through court action that overturns the conviction that results in a lesser sentence, a successful new trial or commutation of the sentence.”

Commotions are rather hard to come by under the current state governor (Dick Thornburgh), who basically doesn’t believe in them, says Minarik.

This doesn’t stop him from hoping and making plans. He figures he will go back to engineering. “Poetry does not pay well.” He would like to marry a woman he is seeing currently. He imagines himself teaching on weekends and doing poetry readings. He believes in a life after prison. He’s spent a long time preparing for it.

—Ann Curran

More Than Money Keeps Scholars in Academia

Would the possibility of receiving $500,000 over a five-year period for your own research project persuade you to remain in academia? Carnegie Mellon University’s Dr. Paul L. Frattini, assistant professor of chemical engineering; Dr. Mitchell J. Small (E’75), assistant professor of civil engineering and engineering and public policy; and Dr. Andrzej J. Strojwas (E’83), assistant professor of electrical and computer engineering, think so.

All have received the Presidential Young Investigator Award for 1986 from the National Science Foundation. The yearly grant of up to $100,000 combines federal and matching private funds and is designed to keep young teachers and researchers in academia, rather than have them move to private industry, where salaries and benefits can be substantially greater.

Frattini was especially thrilled with the honor. He was the only awardee in chemical engineering in the country who was not already in a tenure-track position. He was, in fact, nominated by Stanford University where he was completing his doctorate. He is now, of course, working in a tenure-track position at Carnegie Mellon.

His research interest is in rheology and the study of the deformation of fluids. A native of St. Louis, Mo., he attended the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute before earning master’s and doctoral degrees from Stanford. Just prior to coming to Carnegie Mellon, Frattini worked in biorehabilitation labs in Germany. “Germany was wonderful… I had the chance to work with the people who I had been in correspondence with and to visit their labs.”

The young professor hopes to attract several graduate students to his program and hopes that his research can go on as successfully as it has to this point. He feels “extremely lucky because I have a relatively secure five-year base to start from because of the award. Most other researchers who are at my stage go from year to year, worrying that the money will run out.”

Although the Presidential Young Investigator Award almost guarantees that Frattini will remain in academia for at least the next five years, he says, “I had already made the decision to stay… I had worked with private industry for a little while, but I decided early in graduate school to go back to academics.

Even though Frattini is a newcomer to Carnegie Mellon’s Chemical Engineering Department, he says that he believes that “if Chemical Engineering at Carnegie Mellon continues the way it has been, there is no reason that I can think of why the department cannot be one of the best in the nation.”

Small says the award is an “opportunity and a challenge I look forward to.” Yet at the same time he sees it as a “responsibility because they are saying, ‘Here, we think you can do good work, and we will give you the resources. Now show us what you can do.’”

A native Pittsburgher, Small is involved mainly in deriving models of groundwater and the effect that acidic rain and acid deposits have on the earth’s supply of fresh water. By using a set of equations, he can predict what the impact will be upon groundwater in relation to other atmospheric changes. Small can
John Paul Minarik
1600 Walters Mill Rd
Somerset, PA 155100005
Phone: 7248479575

Publications and Prizes

Books: *Past the Unknown, Remembered Gate* (Greenfield Review Press, 1981)

Anthologies: *Pittsburgh & Tri-State Area Poets* (Squirrel Hill Poetry Workshop, 1992)

Journals: *Confrontation*

More Information

Listed as: Fiction Writer, Poet
Gives readings? Yes
Travels for readings? Yes

Please note: All information in the Directory is provided by the writers listed in it.
Listing last updated: April 12, 2007
I sit in isolation
I write in silence
But sometimes
I wonder why
regularly published. They write about childhood experiences, build complicated metaphors for freedom and confinement and describe the more ordinary lives of family members and friends they see carrying on without them.

What doesn't appear in their writing are graphic descriptions of violent acts or details about what they did to end up in prison. But for some outsiders, their writing can still be unsettling. These are men who have committed brutal and in some cases even monstrous crimes, acts that have devastated other people's lives. And now they write poems that ask us to understand the sorrow they feel when a fellow inmate dies without having gone home again, or when a tree, the last bit of nature in the prison yard, is cut down.

And it's not as though prison helps to make people more sensitive and understanding. It's a place where some inmates share cells so small they have to decide which man will stand so that the other can lie down. When, as Earl Gene Box describes in a poem, "toms bump into each other like bumper cars," emotions are held back until a point is reached where small gestures can lead to violent outbursts.

But within that environment some men are trying to produce poems that express sensitivity and compassion. For them, writing is a way of trying to build a new identity, to concentrate on the side of their personality that isn't associated with what they did to end up in prison. For that reason, the writers mentioned here won't be identified by their crimes. It's not that they expect others to overlook what they did, or that they're trying to disregard their past. But they do hope that through their writing people who can't accept them as members of society can, on an abstract and literary level, begin to understand them.

Outside the realm of small literary magazines where most of their work is published, that's a goal that hasn't yet been accomplished. They see themselves as writers; others tend to see them as murderers and rapists who write.

"I think writing can reform a man," says Box, a published poet at Western Penitentiary. "But he has to be serious about it and have a sound heart." By reform, Box means the changes in perspective that writing reflects. Whether prisoners choose to describe themselves as serving time or held captive, perpetrators of a crime or victims of a sudden shift toward conservation, says something about their moral perspective.

Part of the anxiety that prison creates comes from the fact that emotions run high there. "Everything is intensified," says Box. "Insignificant things become inflated." But at the same time, it's a place where feelings have to be held in, a problem William Patrick Middleton writes about in "Happy Father's Day."

Today you drove 150 miles
and they turned you away.
When the captain of the guards
informed me a mistake had been made:
"Sorry, Middleton, you do have one visit
left for the month. Tell your father
he can come back next weekend."
I leoked the tears in my eyes
for men in prison aren't supposed to cry.
How I wanted to choke his regrets
so that his smile like one does a housefly.
But no.
Instead, I hid in my closet of a cell
and I cried.
I cried because this Father's Day,
I would kiss your cheek
for the first time in 25 years:
I cried because this Father's Day
I would whisper in your ear.
"I love you, Dad."
for the first time in 25 years.
BUT DESPAIR isn’t the only way of dealing with the agony of imprisonment. While few prison poems are overtly funny, many reflect the dry kind of humor that enables people to laugh about something that otherwise would be too painful to talk about.

Prison is full of ironies. Box tells the story of a man who saw sweeping the yard on a Sunday. When he stopped him and asked him what he was doing, the man looked perplexed for a moment; then realized he had no idea what it was. Inmates’ names end up on mailing lists where they receive travel brochures and promotional material on products they can’t buy. Men are counted regularly and color-coded (yellow uniform for traveling, blue for seeing family and friends in the visiting room, a deep maroon for everyday wear). Candy is considered contraband.

Writers, who tend to look at life from a distance anyway, take a double step back when their lives are spent in prison. The result, as in Minarik’s poem, “a letter from home,” is that they become acutely aware of ironies that occur on both sides of the wall:

dear son
have you received the papers
you sent to dad
the only comment he made was
they did not seem to apply too much
to your case
and he doesn’t believe in the things lawyers come up with
they just take money.

I was glad to hear you are enjoying your radio
dad bought a new car
it is a 77 chevrolet monte carlo
silver and white buckskin leather
and firethorn interior, 350 engine
which was what he wanted.

We ordered it six weeks ago
and picked it up today
it seemed like forever, waiting
the front seats are separate
he got cruise control, air conditioning
am/fm radio, power steering, radial tires
i know you are interested in cars
so i thought i would tell you
perhaps we will bring it down sometime
when we visit you at the prison.

WHILE THERE ARE fiction writers in prison, most of the published work at Western Penitentiary is poetry. Minarik says that may be because the irony of prisoners’ real lives rivals anything that could be produced in fiction.

Although the humor is often a way of masking pain, on the whole there’s a strain of optimism that runs through much of the work. The serious writers write very little about prison itself, though what they write about the outside often reflects the same kind of emotions they experience inside. Poems about steelworkers, for instance, or lost childhood dreams reflect the kind of compassion prisoners can readily feel for anyone who has temporarily lost control of his life. Most of their work is geared toward showing that they are simply men who experience the same emotions as people on the other side. As Minarik said in a poem called “to be in love while in prison”:

to be in love while in prison
is graduating from college to learn plumbers make 21.50 an hour
is having your company go
Continued on page 17

MEN WELL INTO serving life sentences write poems that still reflect the hope that their lives will change. Even Middleton’s blind prisoner looks into learning a way of doing mathematics on his fingers. Box’s poem, “Afraid of the Dark,” is about a boy walking home alone on a dark night, but also reflects the hope many inmates still feel:

Dark as a country night.
No stars, no moonlight.
Just the sound of a whisper.
The waiting wind
Tumbling autumn leaves
And scared young boy’s
Heavy breathing.
It’s so dark
He can barely see the trail
The ditch of water
He must cross.
The oak and gum trees
Nor the ghost
He’s afraid he’ll see.
Around the path’s bend
His uncle’s porchlight
And the circling Grass Moths.
Let him know as he thought
Continued on page 19
They Tore Down the Chapel Today

They tore down the chapel today
behind brand-new silver chain-link fence;
construction of a new cell block
needs protected space.

The yellow CATERPILLAR traxcavator,
a noisy 977K, raises its steel teeth,
and a three yard bucket punches holes
in one side while a green 12-1/2 ton cherry picker
swings a one ton headache ball against the other.
He says: "I don't feel anything anymore."

John Paul Minarik

[ "They Tore Down The Chapel Today" first appeared in Prison Writing Review, 1985.]

The Golden Marriage

for Uncle Bob and Aunt Helen

Once there was a bright-yellow couple malleable enough and excellent enough to be family to each another well into the lustrous years.

And their love for each other was heavy and bright, and the glow of this richness brightened many other families.

Then God took away sounds and some of the light from the wife and others asked why.

But the wife flourished and the husband loved her more. Love binds him to her, her to him. He kissed a sleeping head even as a dark star

http://www.pennpals.org/art/minarik/index.html
I watch the dark beyond the bars.
The woman I thought of all day,
as we stood in white uniforms
working in the penitentiary hospital
hoping someone would heal,
enters my cell and burns my chest.

The shy arrangement of moonlight
streaming in the window
is like her face.
The man naked on O-range
watches the light beyond the bars.

It hardly matters.
Everything becomes ordinary
after a time...
except she knows
when he comes home
happy to be so free
he will drink nightcap kisses
dense in liberty and foam
from the sea.

Before then, not just waiting,
we have some things to do.
Some things gently push
to be born
like endless trails in the sky.

I ask the air, will she eye
me true and see beyond the bars
to a topaz trumpet
of the huge smooth song?

John Paul Minarik
is having an erection in public
is having 7 kids and never one orgasm
is finding your girl friend coming out
of the basketball team locker room.

to be in love while in prison
is graduating from college to learn plumbers make 21.50 an hour
is having your company go bankrupt one year before you retire
is living with a woman for 25 years and discovering she married
you for the money

is being told by your husband that he wants to make the second
honeymoon into a business trip.

to be in love while in prison
is also to be as human as you dare be in this crazy world
is also grasping for a breath of vulnerable life
and no matter how much water gets into your lungs

you're determined to float on your back
until you can stand on your feet.

John Paul Minarik

[Originally appeared in Past the Unknown, Remembered Gate
(New York: Greenfield Review Press, 1984)]
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COLLEGE NEWS

The College of Letters and Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison is proud to announce the appointment of Dr. Jane Smith as the new director of the English Department. Dr. Smith, a well-known scholar in the field of American literature, will assume her new position on September 1, 2023.

Dr. Smith received her Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Berkeley, and has published extensively on the works of Henry James and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Her research has been widely cited and her articles have appeared in leading journals in the field of American literature.

Dr. Smith is also a prolific poet, with three collections published in the past decade. Her latest collection, "The Poetry of Lost Words," was released last year and received critical acclaim for its exploration of the intersection of memory and language.

The appointment of Dr. Smith is a testament to the university's commitment to excellence in both scholarship and teaching. Her appointment is effective immediately and she will begin her duties in Madison on September 1, 2023.
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Poem for Christmas

John Paul Minarik

Christmas is a special time
to reflect, share, rejoice.
Can a poem express
the sense of wonder
at the mystery and magic
of the Christmas season?

Snowflakes are poems.
Longfellow said snowflakes
Are “the poem of the air.”
Francis Thompson said snowflakes
say “God was my shaper.”
Boris Pasternak said snowflakes
are “storm’s white stars.”

Has everything been said
that can be said
about Christmas?

Catch a snowflake
in your open hand.
Listen to your heart,
and say nothing more.
THE LIGHT FROM ANOTHER COUNTRY
Poetry From Another Time

Edited By Joseph Brehler
Carnegie-Mellon University

upon recommendation of its Faculty,
hereby confers upon

JOHN PAUL MINARIK

the degree of

BACHELOR OF SCIENCE

in recognition of
the completion of the course of study
prescribed for this degree
in the field(s) of

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To all persons to whom these presents may come, Greeting

Be it known that

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having satisfied the requirements for the degree of

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Magna Cum Laude
Prison Writing Review

Volume 8, No. 2   Winter/Spring 1985
Incorporating and continuing THE COSMEP PRISON PROJECT NEWSLETTER.

Featuring The Continuing Fight Against Psychic Death by Michael Hogan, Five Vignettes from the Tennessee Prison for Women by Margaret Crane, articles on The World Prison Poetry Center, EMPIRE!, New York State’s literary arts magazine from Arthur Kill Correctional Facility, poems by Earle Thompson, Andrew McCord Jones, Harold Otley and others...
I wonder if CATERPILLAR tractors lie?

They tore the chapel down today
to make way for the new.
The old men watch, too tired
and too crowded to feel.
I ask Hank:
“What do you feel
seeing the chapel
knocked down?”

He says: “I don’t feel anything anymore.”

—John Paul Minarik
with his audiences, even if that means drunks and hecklers. If a poet can say poetry in a bar, he can say it anywhere.” And Etheridge has said it anywhere—in barbershops, beauty shops, college classrooms and prisons. In the summer of 1982, he was a Poet-in-Residence with the Academy of Prison Arts in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In the same interview, Etheridge said, “I still go to prisons and read because I feel blessed.”

Surviving 16 years of imprisonment, I, too, feel blessed just to have been invited by Lou McKee to contribute to the Etheridge Knight issue of *Painted Bride Quarterly*.

My favorite poem by Etheridge Knight is “The Warden Said to Me the Other Day”:

The warden said to me the other day
(innocently, I think), “Say, etheridge,
how come the black boys don’t run off
like the white boys do?”

I lowered my jaw and scratched my head
and said (innocently, I think), “Well, suh,
I ain’t for sure, but I reckon it’s cause
we ain’t got no wheres to run to.”

As I suspected and later confirmed (see Etheridge’s December 30, 1986 letter) this is a found poem, drawn from one of his 1960s prison experiences. The poem’s simplicity, unadorned by figurative language, is the voice of self-realization, the speech of self-disclosure. The lack of ornamentation and the risk of personal exposure in this poem is what W.H. Auden (speaking of Cavafy) called the “only translatable element in poetry.”

The poem’s question, faithfully recorded from the warden’s visit to the newspaper office, was poignantly answered in Etheridge’s own voice: “we ain’t got no wheres to run to.” I have not been able to forget that answer. Can you? It helps one understand the existential angst of being black in America in the 1960s. It captures the sense of alienation felt by anyone who does not belong. Robert Frost described home as the place they have to take you in if you have to go there. What if there is no home, no promised land, no place of refuge? The raw terror of feeling exiled in America is awesome.

A month ago, hours before the sun came up in the morning so the riot here at Western Penitentiary could be televised, I watched six men wearing masks beat a man with iron pipes. He had “no wheres to run to.” A friend of mine, a combat veteran, said it was just like after a fire-fight in Vietnam. The worst time was just before the sun came up. Once out of the dark, everything was better.

Thank you, Etheridge Knight, my brother, for walking out of the dark for us all.