



DAHSE  
POEMS





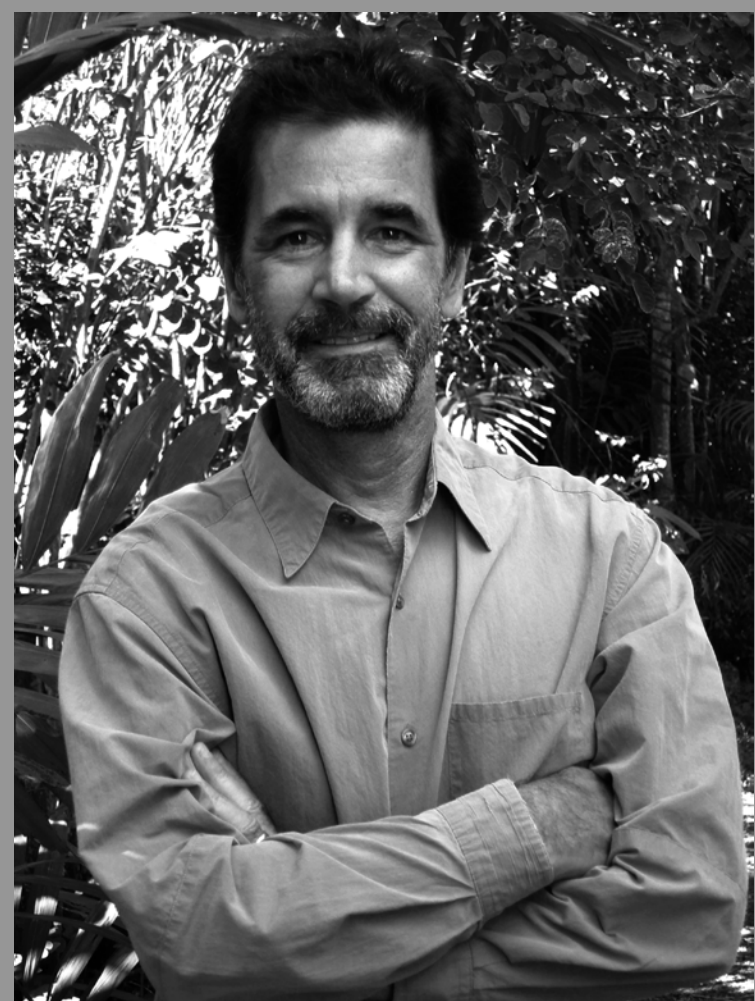




Joe Wilkins is the author of a memoir, *The Mountain and the Fathers*, and two collections of poems, *Notes from the Journey Westward*, winner of the 17th Annual White Pine Press Poetry Prize, and *Killing the Murnion Dogs*. He lives with his wife, son, and daughter in north Iowa.



Alison Stine is the author most recently of *Wait*, winner of The Brittingham Prize, as well as *Ohio Violence* and *Lot of My Sister*. A former Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University and recipient of the Ruth Lilly Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation, she lives in the foothills of Appalachia.



Michael Hettich has published a dozen books and chapbooks of poetry, most recently *The Animals Beyond Us* and *Like Happiness*. His new chapbook, *The Measured Breathing*, won the 2011 Swan Scyth Press Chapbook Award. His poems have appeared in such journals as *Orion*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The Sun*, and *Poetry East*. He lives in Miami and teaches at Miami Dade College.



Kathryn Levy is the Poetry Editor for *Dahse*, and the author of the poetry collection, *Losing the Moon*, and *The Nutcracker Teacher Resource Guide*, a guide to poetry instruction. Her poetry and reviews have appeared in various journals and anthologies including *The Seattle Review*, *Provincetown Arts*, *The Southampton Review*, and *We Begin Here: Poems for Palestine and Lebanon*. She lives in Sag Harbor, NY.

*What is the knocking?  
What is the knocking at the door in the night?  
It is somebody wants to do us harm.*

*No, no. It is the three strange angels.  
Admit them. Admit them.*

— D.H. Lawrence  
“Song of a Man Who Has Come Through”

We live in a society increasingly obsessed with speed, with incessant information and the easy condolences of status. But the poet’s job is to pause, to wait attentively at the door of what is not known, what can never be fully known. It can be frustrating to stand at that door, while the world keeps whispering: *achieve, don’t stop, get more*. It can be equally startling when the door flings open and you suddenly discard conventional knowledge and the tired habits of being. Those are the moments the poet lives for — when it’s possible to see and hear most acutely, when confusion clears and you can finally utter the unforced truth.

That truth is certainly found in the hardscrabble reality of Joe Wilkins’ poem “Sources Say”: “Say you could live for weeks on what you find in the average Applebee’s dumpster./Sources categorically refuse to define the word *live*.” Or the moment when the sources stop saying and the speaker stares in awe at the fields of Gettysburg — a scene of both destruction and quiet renewal.

That truth can cover wide territories, as Wilkins’ work does, from the sweep of the highways of the American West to the twisted rage of a terrorist in a distant country. It can be as intimate as Alison Stine’s embodiment of the struggle of childbirth and renewal in her tightly woven poem, “Second Crop.” Or as disturbing and fantastic as the man in Michael Hettich’s “The Dogs,” who loses human speech and assumes the qualities of a barking dog.

Whatever the subject, each of these poets approaches the work with a piercingly distinctive voice and finely honed understanding of the heft and sensuality of language. It seems that these three writers not only see, but *feel* the world very differently. What unites them, however, is the urgency of their quest and the genuine sense of discovery in their ambitious poems.

That act of discovery, the adventure of waking again and again as a stranger to the world, is the deepest value in the pursuit of poetry. It involves not just producing a graceful package of words, or even the intoxication of a phrase that truly sings, as wonderful as that is, but being completely, dangerously alive to experience.

“In a dark time, the eye begins to see,” wrote Theodore Roethke. We have lived through a traumatic beginning to the 21st century, and for millions the struggle of daily survival is all consuming. Yet paradoxically it is at such moments that poetry, that all art, is most needed. It reminds us of why we are here, and also *how* we must be here – all teetering on the same precarious life raft, poised on the edge of destruction, treasuring each gasp of the air.

Kathryn Levy  
*Poetry Editor*

JOE WILKINS



## Sources Say

Sources say the already empty Great Plains are emptying, say every six years the coast of Louisiana remakes itself.

Sources say the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon are the most likely home of Bigfoot, if Bigfoot exists, which sources won't say.

Sources say anyway the sex lives of devout Christians and certain songbirds have a lot in common.

Sources say it's not what you think.

Sources say think big, think out of the box, think boxtop, black gold, blue lipstick, the way in February the hearts of frogs begin to thump again deep in the river's unfreezing mud.

Sources say a small node in the human brain, near the center-left section, where fantasy is delimited from reality, is eroding.

Say you could live for weeks on what you find in the average Applebees' dumpster. Sources categorically refuse to define the word *live*.

Say mistakes were made, too big to fail, she was primed for a fall.

Say the nature of the fall is multitudinous. Grace is paramount, of course. But also the idea of God's justice, and who wore what schoolgirl outfit in that music video — the one where you can see their tummies.

Anyway, it's complicated. You might not understand.

It has to do with the green-streaked fingers of broom-hipped boys.

It has to do with the price of a particular strain of red bean grown by indigenous farmers on the high plains of Coahuila.

It has to do with blooming cities of tarp and cardboard, a three-fold rise in existential graffiti, the way the mouths of women alone too long in the canyonlands work at the very air.

And isn't grace just another word for luck? Isn't it a shame the way we say *bloom, starve, justice, river, live* and mean basically the same thing? Is that why there's no subject, the very word *mistakes* like the tiniest of sparrows on the limb of an oak — and why worry about some silly little bird?

Anyway, sources say they're paid good money to know what's what, so don't get your pretty panties in a twist.

Sources say calm down, say we'll let you know when it's time to worry.

Sources say worry.

Say roadside bomb, border war, double-dip, downsize, dropout rate.

Say give a man a glass of water.

Say they wouldn't let a man give a man a glass of water.

Say in streets of dust the children of Azerbaijan gnash hungrily their portion of unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

No, no, no, sources say. It's not circular reasoning. It's selfless reasoning, the disconnection of subject from object, the obliteration of actor and action, of antecedent and effect.

It's not what but what you believe, not who but who's on the other side, not why but the poll's sudden slide, not where but anywhere, and never when but now, now, now.

Sources now say he was pulled from the bog with a small satchel of barley, two gold coins etched with crude depictions of the sun god, and in his right hand his own heart.

Sources say barley, god, heart. *Barley, god, heart.*

Sources fall silent.

Stare off into the long distances, where a veil of dark birds lifts from the still bare maples along the river.

How the day after a pale sun rose over Gettysburg. Those birds.

## The Holy Word that Opened Him

*...a man left the Koran containing a pound of explosives outside the shrine...*

— The New York Times

They took my children  
& laughed at me. Their mouths

red, dark, melon wide. Now I fold the magazine,  
hand to this man its skinless leaves

& false possibilities.  
These are not the things he asked for,

these are the things he gets.  
The stink of dung smoke was on them, those men

& their mouths. Too many men  
& mouths & always

their stink & the wind, the sounds birds make  
at their breakfast of dead things. They are not animals.

This is what is surprising. See,  
one of my sons was like a sack of sea-wet rice

slung off the road.  
One of my sons opened the holy word that opened

him & seventeen around him. One  
of my sons is with me still,

for he was hopping about,  
slathering at the mouth. They didn't

understand. Listen to me,  
back of my greasy bars, slathering at the mouth.

## Religion

The sign says, *Slow*,  
but everyone's  
speeding up.

If it weren't for the smoke,  
the men in rubber shoes  
running around with axes,  
I think I would slow,  
what with the sky –  
from obsidian to flint –  
a rainbow of stone,  
and the mountain finally  
alive, speaking  
in tongues of flame.

## Complaint

I ate the air in front of me,  
blew a great cloud of smoke out my mouth,

my black boots on the cobblestones  
a bang-and-clatter song. God,

but I was happy and dumb. The girl  
I was to meet at the pub

wore her pants low on her hips,  
an onyx stud in the thick of her tongue.

At least that's what I was thinking,  
when you grabbed my arm. I pulled away easy,

two quick steps before I looked back –  
nest of dark hair, rainblown face,

and still in your hand a gutted bag of crisps,  
silver foil you'd been licking the salt from.

What in the hell were you doing?  
You had a coffee can for change. I saw it,

or I didn't. Anyway, what did you mean,  
touching me like that? Like a woman? Go to hell,

I said. I said, Go to hell. And walked away.  
Hours later – streetlights snapping,

whining in the dark – I stumbled home  
and slept like a goddamn stone, simply woke

the next day. Can you believe it? Not even  
the wasps in your wrist, no rain

running your cratered face. Do you  
hear me? You never said a thing.



ALISON STINE



## Second Crop

Hot compress slapped to the slightest red. Olive oil on stems. Dark and bitter

vanilla. It made no difference. I was ornamental. Still men named me,

as men name: *natural*, *perfect*, or more commonly, *fine*. I was a fine vessel.

It was a difficult winter, then difficult spring. Rain. Too much rain.

The lilies all rotted, the iris and white beam. My favorite greenery swam,

some replanted while there was still time. But what is more important?

Food. Something to pull from the blood of black dust, knock the earth off the ends,

and bring in. Something with which to keep going. Keep going, though

my fingers, wrists and ankle bones ached as the calcium was pulled from me, as I

bled in my gums. He grew two hard sharp teeth from the bubble grin of his mouth.

My hair thinned, flung out in fistfuls, while he raised a fringe, yellow as spring.

My skin spotted. The baby wore a shirt that read *I will make a difference*.

The roads washed out, dreams under dark skies. You could no longer get there from here.

There were slugs in the marigolds,  
rose petals wilted and faded as dye.

But strawberries grew and pumpkins grew.  
Morels grew (and grew and grew) wild

from our waste, sprung in the dead logs,  
in the massacred acres, last year's rot

of leaf and fern. And that is why  
we lived. That is why we loved. That is

why we planted anything – to see that, that head.

MICHAEL HETTICH



## The Old Man

Then we stuffed the old man's body with newspaper to keep him with us a little longer; we asked him to sit still and smile for us, so we wouldn't feel our efforts were in vain. We unbuttoned his chest from neck to belly. It was easy, not much different from unbuttoning a shirt; we filled him up with rags and small tokens of our fondest memories — a model of the Statue of Liberty, a deck of cards, a shellacked turtle shell he had given me way back when grandma was alive. In his mouth we stuffed snapshots that embarrassed us a little but weren't *that* bad — myself on the beach with my belly falling over my bathing suit and a badly-fitting ball cap, and mommy as a cloud standing barefoot in a puddle. He seemed to enjoy the taste of those memories and having his mouth full of something all the time, though he drooled all over his paper-stuffed belly. So we had to put the dog's bowl there. We'd have let his feet go bare but they were turning black, so we covered them in opaque nylons. He looked fine. We could keep him in the closet, we thought, gutted out that way, but we thought instead to keep him in the kitchen, tied upright to a chair. In that way we'd be less likely to forget him. But still we did forget him.

## The Blind

He remembers a back yard full of children playing happily.  
There's an old oak with a tree house up high, which some  
of the bigger boys, the daredevils, climb up to, and later

the smallest daredevil is too frightened to climb down,  
so the others just leave him, while the afternoon cools  
and the sprinklers come on automatically. Someone's singing

in the distance, and the boy sings back, until a man  
shines a flashlight at the tree, and his parents are there too  
and he's crying in relief now, while the adults hold their arms out

and whisper, *We'll catch you, you won't fall, take your time –*  
and then his mother's whispering: *Look up at the sky!*  
*Bats! It's like a revelation. They sing as they fly!*

But no one else is listening. They hug him. And later,  
when he's lying in bed, she tells him bats can see  
with their voices and ears that work like radar

in the night, to find insects to feast on. She smiles then,  
as though that could explain anything at all,  
as he closes his own eyes. *Because they're blind,* she whispers.

## The Dogs

This man lost his hearing, one night while he was dreaming of music, so he woke to silence and jazz inside him, a wildness that sang, it seemed at first, without pause. But he couldn't hear a thing, so he practiced another kind of improvisation, trying to remember sounds, the voices of the people he loved – and of a motor starting somewhere in the distance, a lawnmower on a weekend afternoon – the ocean, a waterfall, laughter. And he soon found he could do this so well no one noticed he was deaf, that all he seemed to hear was fashioned from recollection and careful observation: he'd learned to discern the inner life of movement, and he'd learned to intuit not just what people said – that was mere lip reading – but how they spoke, the tones in their voices. It was, in fact, a kind of miracle. But soon enough the silence affected how he spoke since he couldn't hear his own voice, couldn't imagine how it had sounded. So he started to swallow and mangle his words; he started to bark and grunt sometimes, until people – none of whom knew he was deaf – started scowling, turning away from him when he gestured and attempted his wittiest repartee, when he asked them exactly what was the matter. By the time his wife left him, rolling her eyes at his frantic whimpering, dragging their children behind her, he was barking day and night, causing all the other dogs in the neighborhood to bark too, in solidarity, driving their owners nearly crazy.





A DREAM OF HOME

JOE WILKINS INTERVIEWED BY KATHRYN LEVY

**KL: In your latest book, *Killing the Murnion Dogs*, you keep returning to “a dream of home.” What place or places do you think of as home? What does that word “home” mean to you?**

JW: Not long ago, I think I would have had a much easier time answering this question. I’d have probably listed a few places that I’ve spent more than a little bit of time in – the badlands of eastern Montana, the Mississippi Delta, the Selway River of central Idaho – and called it good.

But I’ve lived in the Midwest for five years now, longer than I’ve lived anywhere except the Montana of my boyhood, and this place is the first place that I can say is decidedly not home. Or, more specifically, the landscape here is not home. Though I’ve found places to enjoy and admire in Iowa, I haven’t yet found that particular curve of river or road.

Yet it’s more complicated than that, too! Because this place is home. My wife and I love our house, our backyard garden. In the fall I bike up the hill to the college where I teach; in winter I bundle up and walk through the silence of snow. And this is where my children were born. I’ll always have that tie. So, this is a kind of home.

I guess what I’m trying to get at is home no longer seems to me a still point but something we search and work for, something we often must accept. We might find homes everywhere.

**KL: So much of the work in that book involves childhood memories, the dislocation of early adulthood, and the lure of the highway. How do you think being settled in one place and being the father of two young children is affecting your writing?**

JW: In so many ways. That shifted and shifting sense of home, for one. And I also often get this feeling that I no longer belong to myself, which I realize sounds kind of religious, and though I’m not religious at all, I do think it has something to do with the sacred, with the shattering gift of a minute together. If it’s about faith, it’s about a deeper faith in this world. This world I share with and will one day give wholly over to my children.

And these different ways of looking at the world are definitely pushing on my writing. For instance, I find myself writing more and more persona poems, witnessing the world through some other’s eyes, perhaps trying to see how it might be for my children. I’m also working less with traditional narrative and more with lyric. I guess maybe I don’t know our stories yet; all I have are moments.

**KL: It’s clear that you feel an affinity with poets such as James Wright and Richard Hugo. But as you’ve matured, have you felt a need to distance yourself from the writers who have influenced you?**

JW: When Lia Purpura sent me her good words on *Killing the Murnion Dogs*, where she claimed I was “tending the spirits of James Wright and Richard Hugo,” I was beyond pleased. I think we as poets sometimes feel we need to apologize for our first loves. I

refuse. Wright, Hugo, Levine, Fairchild, Laux – if the house was burning down, these are the books I'd save.

That said, about three or four years ago I did consciously decide to broaden my base of poetic influence. So I read all sorts of stuff, tried on all kinds of forms, forced myself to grapple with and write about other concerns – before I finally realized it was about language. To speak in a new way, to say what I wanted to say more clearly and powerfully, I needed a language that, however influenced by Wright and Hugo, was more fully my own. And there are a handful of poems in *Killing the Murnion Dogs* – “Jacketing,” “Mississippi Delta,” “Ruins,” “The Stone Eater,” “A Prayer” – where I think you can see the syntax and diction beginning to shift.

My upcoming book, *Notes from the Journey Westward*, which is in many ways a companion book to *Killing the Murnion Dogs*, continues that search.

**KL: When you are working on a poem, what are the pitfalls in the process of revision? What do you hope to attain in a finished poem?**

JW: Only two. And they're related. One, hurrying the process, trying to corner the poem before it's ready. And two, not looking away from the poem, not putting the poem in a dark drawer for three and a half months and allowing something else into your imagination, so when you come back to it, it is the poem, rather than your vision of it, that is responsible for all the necessary imaginative work. And that second point sort of leads into what I'm after in a finished piece. The poems that I admire most are worlds, worlds that shift and deepen my understanding of our shared existence. I hope for the same things with my own work.

**KL: Some of your writing seems to be an extended meditation on America. What are the questions you most persistently ask yourself about this country and your life as a poet here?**

JW: I grew up in a place of rural poverty, and I mean not only a poverty of resources but a poverty of imagination. It's not that we didn't think we could achieve certain things; it's that we didn't even know to dream those things. When I taught at a public junior high school in the Mississippi Delta, I saw the same thing. And I think this poverty of possibility is in direct conflict with how most of us understand America. We believe we are a place where the chance facts of birth – where, to whom, etc. – don't much matter. It's not true.

Who am I? Where do I come from? We don't want to believe these questions matter. We don't want to believe the answers have power over us. They do. In many of the poems in *Killing the Murnion Dogs*, I'm asking these questions of myself, trying again and again to find what to hang on to and what to leave behind.

**KL: I think writers tend to learn over time why we need to do our work. Why do you think you write?**

JW: I've never felt like I needed to tell anyone anything, like I had any big truth to share. I think I started writing because the moments seemed more than themselves. I was trying to discover why a particular memory or story so shattered me. In the end, I think I still write to discover. But, as you mention, I've found other reasons to write, too. For one, I've fallen even more deeply in love with language; I simply love playing with the sounds of words and sentences. I also feel like I'm part of the conversation now, like I need to do my part. And, as I continue to more deeply understand my poetic concerns, I think I've discovered that I write to honor the difficult, everyday world.

**KL: In a recent interview, you said, "I keep writing, I keep reading, I keep trying to figure things out, I keep being wrong and amazed." At the moment, is there anything you're approaching differently in your work? Anything you're finding particularly surprising about the way it's evolving?**

JW: I've been working on a couple of different prose projects, mostly fiction, and one big surprise is how comfortable I'm feeling with lines that go all the way to the right edge of the page. And I find myself moving back and forth between prose and verse more easily as well of late, which is good because I often get a little stir crazy if I work in one mode too long!

Beyond genre, though, I think the biggest surprise is those persona poems (which might go along with all the fiction). I feel, to a certain extent, like I've moved beyond my own biography. And it's been fun and challenging to reach more widely into the world.

DAHSE POEMS IS A SUPPLEMENT  
TO DAHSE MAGAZINE, AVAILABLE  
ON THE IPAD. THE IPAD EDITION  
ALSO INCLUDES AUDIO RECITALS  
OF POEMS, FASHION EDITORIALS  
WITH BOTH STILL IMAGES AND  
VIDEO, ARTIST AND DESIGNER  
PROFILES, STUDIO VISITS, AND  
VIDEO INTERVIEWS.

NEXT ISSUE  
SPRING 2012

LINKS

*[iPad edition](#)*

*[website](#)*

*[facebook](#)*

*[twitter](#)*