

News poem  
William Gillespie

Dear Friend,  
My housemates just left to go be in a midnight performance of Waiting for Godot on unicycles at the Rubber Nose Free Theater. So that gives me a few hours to catch up on my correspondence with you. I sure hope they don't get hurt like last night. Anyway, things here have been pretty confused since the shelf cave-in, as you know. What with the pneumonia I have been unable to open any of my mail for about six weeks. You should see the unread newspapers on my front step. We use the back door now. I know we haven't seen each other since we were at the Dreamtime Village in conservative West Lima, Wisconsin together, and I was too shy to talk to you then. But I remember the night you asked me about metaphor and I only croaked in response—a two-hour lecture stuck in my throat and that night I wandered the fields with a loose goat trying to find the words. Just as well. Many the night I stood in the moon just outside the mansion hoping to serenade you, desperately trying to detune the thing before the sun came up. You have a piece of me anyway, and I'm not sure what that leaves me with but your water-color hangs on my wall growing bluer with fermenting memories like blackberry wine. If I could be there over again I wouldn't even try to write. Just watching the leaves groping across the window turn to fire and die on the branches here as I sit at this keyboard for seven weeks trying to decide between "I" and "we" inspires in me a sense of urgency so urgent I almost act on it but can never decide how to start the next sentence of my life. The pneumonia developed into complications worse than music and I caught typhoon fever, which ran its course before I knew what I had contracted. The fact that you are a stranger is spicy to me and strange. If I could lure a small blue part of you through the postal system I'd probably swoon like a gypsy, erratic like a moth. Things are cold here, but they have a certain clarity. Better than ice but no warmer. Something inside of me is on fire though, but I'll save it for a future letter. As I may never have mentioned, I am in the second and final year of a Masters in Creative Writing in Normal Illinois. The only restriction the academy puts on my writing is that after two years I have to check a box to indicate whether it's poetry, prose, tech, drama, or theory. This, of course, is not that. This is a letter. I am writing a novel I will happily send you at the slightest sign of interest from you, including none. It is supposed to be 250 pages and I have finished two. A very tight two pages though, I managed to keep it at 240 words after six months of rewriting. I got lonely and your afterimage seemed etched on my studio wall. My thesis is like a divorce, only with less paperwork, and quite possibly I am more into it than people there are, on average, into their own things because I am more into mine, on average, than people here. The comparisons are false but unavoidable. I am ready to be in school again. The theory and tedium are a lavish dream to me. Being in school really beats working in a bookstore, which I also do. All I want to do is write, it's weird. It's a little bit sick. I'm not interested in food, and I go without sex for days. I love writing—the backache and the blurred vision; the cough and the carpal strain; it's heaven. Beats trying to read Lyn Hejinian in a crowded bar during some football game, which I also do. Sundays at the bar I had to quit reading My Life when I noticed that Hejinian kept repeating the sentence "The obvious analogy is with music." I found this too distracting, or maybe it was the jukebox which someone had programmed to play Revolution #9 nine times. Somebody bought me a drink. Goldschlager and Curacao, I think. The obvious analogy is with music. It made me funny. I couldn't read a straight line of sober homoerotic poetry after that. Sometimes I wonder about you and all the people I have liked and if I'll see you again, about where I would want home to be and whom I would want there. I remember dumb fond things, like holding hands. I remember our last night, in fact. Someone had baked a pie with salt instead of sugar and my eyes watered, everything on the verge of adverbs. The sky was very blue today, like that painting. You should visit. We can go to my other favorite bar: The Office. That joint is humming, fluorescent, and divided into cubicles with typewriters and telephones. They just installed a network and a server and with twenty terminals. You have to fax in your drink orders. If they aren't busy you can use the intercom. Sometimes they've got the brass vacuum tubes working—very classy. Today I am going there and writing cocktail napkin ideas for a dying (again) resolution. My resolution to write a poem a day about the news this year, remember. I never wanted to be a hard worker. I just wanted to be that cartoon Tasmanian Devil from the Bugs-Bunny-Road-Runner-Show. I wanted my life to be a context I might enjoy stimulants in. I never wanted to come this far in this direction. I just wanted to stay up all night driving. I've been using fertilizer as fuel, drugs as nutrition, and food as a catalyst. I am interested in living differently. I don't see how it can happen in this society. I require alienation and excess and exhaustion. Don't get me wrong. Being an English major isn't all sex, drugs, and critical theory. I'll be frank: it has boring moments. Today I attended a seminar, wait it was a colloquium, given by the man who introduced the word pedagogically into the English language. I'm also in a technical writing class. I'm trying to write instruction manuals for poetry. We have one assignment which is to design a label for an imaginary food: I'm doing Milkshake-in-a-Can and Tater-Tot-on-a-Stick. Or the time I opened my mouth to tell you what I thought of you and couldn't, choked, and burst into song. You probably thought I was a dork, and you were probably on to something. If I were a newspaper I'd find a way to sign you up for a decade-long subscription. If, on the other hand, I was the TV news, I'd hope I was on. I do have idiosyncrasies. Sometimes I listen to the Beatles. I'm poor and, happily, have no career to take time away from writing you. I am not a rock, I am not an island, furthermore I am not even the blade of grass who bends in the winds that dismantle the oak. I am a hot air balloon, riding the winds that bend the grass and dismantle the oak. And my dad once said: If you're ever thrown through a windshield, go limp. Roll with punches, but don't turn the other cheek: pretend you're unconscious. He thought I should be a speechwriter and if I had listened, I might have someday penned: "Time and again Saddam had made clear his disdain for civilized behavior. He brutalized his own people, attacked his neighbors, supported terrorism, and sought to acquire instruments of mass destruction. Our policy is equally clear." When the Republican National Convention features men holding babies and hired African Americans. When the Democrats slash welfare so it can never again be a "political issue." When the left is betrayed by the left. When compassion is equated with police. These are the days. Getting someone else to notice the news is almost a revolution. Sorry. I teach English. It's fun, I'm reading L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poets, newspapers, books from Sun and Moon Press, poetry, theory, graphic design textbooks, and credit card offers. Did I mention newspapers? It is election day today, by the way. I just voted no on a bill that would privilege the rich and no on another bill that would privilege the rich. There were certain elections where only Republicans were running and I refused to vote. I asked the woman with the directory if it was okay if I didn't vote on certain items. She shrugged and said "you don't have to do anything." I walked out of the church laughing, thinking that that's what I love about this country. My house has fleas. They don't bite me: I'm poisonous and probably skinny. You should visit here. Champaign-Urbana is just large enough that you will be happy to finally leave. The few leaves left are being whistled thin by wind outside my windowpane. There are men across the street who are dismantling a house in order to move it a foot to the left. My left, not yours. I just got home from seeing the Kronos Quartet. They played Led Zeppelin's "The Song Remains the Same," Bach, recent arrangements of some ancient Greek music which was destroyed by Romans in 200 BC, arrangements of a few McDonald's commercials by John Zorn, Mahler's Ninth Symphony, and chopsticks. They are very eclectic, for a string quartet. I was there with my mom. She had a purple mohawk: it was embarrassing. Tomorrow night's concert features adaptations of the jazz of Miles Smokestack, a trombonist whose approach to music was so pure that some say he never blew a single note. This will be my own approach to music, I'm sure. I can't cook without a cookbook because I don't cook food, I cook text. Similarly with music: why memorize a song if it destroys the pleasure of reading it on the page? I walked home along the railroad tracks whistling Myxolidian. I had the blues, no question, and I walked beneath a ragged moth-eaten half-moon. I was halfway between home and somewhere else, where I'm sure you have been yourself. I have been trying to workout a new formal poetics in which I restrict myself to a single letter. And it can't be in the English alphabet. I haven't gotten very far. I had more luck with single-syllable poetry. Still poetry is nothing if it isn't something other than discipline. Or not. So these are the assignments I give myself. It is like opening tiny windows hoping to find something that wasn't put there in order to be found. I remember the time I was your advent calendar. I had a window behind which were printed the words I'm sure would have driven you to revolution. You never opened me. Like last summer I remember a tangle of smoke rings and marijuana bringing the stars into focus like a celestial acupuncture of clarity whistled deserted midnight mountain highways between whistling cilantro and purple coneflower and a desperate future we were blind to. If I didn't have a shred of your handwriting kissed in my mailbox upon returning from there, from then, from that dreamtime place, it wouldn't have been a home anymore, just an origami anchor and a ghost of a paperweight. So I know too well the paralysis you describe when dawn is screaming at you midafternoon when, your own toxic spirits flooding your veins, you lie on the grass framed beneath the heavy blue glass sky, sketched butterfly or something else, whose dream are you



now? And believe me, the wind from the west presses against my windowpane at night and whispers urgent promises of a new topography upon which to chart these memories which have made this country a scribbled mess that doesn't separate into shapes anymore. I can be an address for you, anyway. Is it scary because you are afraid that after a certain point what you'll be falling in won't be love anymore but something else? You think that will be the final insult but even then are secretly afraid there will be more to come. So you let your heart out only when it's safe, when there's one other person there and they live somewhere else or are leaving in a few days or you are so... I wish I knew how to sleep with people. I have too many safety devices and I tell myself they're there for their safety, not mine. There has been this strange cat hanging around my back porch. Sebastian went after it, a blaze of Halloween fang. I don't get out much. I think I was meant to be a housewife or on home electronic detention. I think I was meant to be a butterfly or fixture. According to legend, I was born with a typewriter correction ribbon in my hand. I gotta figure out some way of getting more money. Marijuana doesn't grow on trees you know. Wait a minute-it does grow on trees. Right now I'm drinking a saki screwdriver sans orange juice. I'm trying to grade thirty-four six-page papers which is like trying to read 204 pages three times each which is a lot like trying to read 612 pages. Nothing political usually, nobody is going to touch East Timor or Iran-Contra or even the Mitsubishi Plant right there in their hometown. Remember that time we were drinking in that weird bar-the Aviary-and were served gin and tonics in coconuts along a birdshit-splattered bar. Shrieking cockatiels fought for your cocktail onion. A family of mallards wandered past our ashtray and plunged flapping into the bar sink. I was poor then but now I'm just textual. I don't get old I just get more predictable. Getting along with people is at least as difficult as grading their papers. Like sometimes someone will ask you to drain a swamp, and you try but maybe they're hurt by your failure to drain the swamp, and you're digging and digging but the hole keeps filling up with sludge and they're getting angrier and angrier. Or when someone asks you to build a house of cards in a revolving door. Did I mention that that was my hobby? Most people don't appreciate the politics of such futile undertaking. It is the politics of hope and sunflowers. The sound of your poetry hitting my desktop was like a starter's pistol being fired in a dark alley. That day I felt empty, worse than my checking account. I finally got a poem published-in E, America's only edible literary journal. The average reader doesn't, but everybody with a future tense eats. I had too many modifiers last night and got sick. Give me a recipe like "spinach and strawberries." I saw a book of recipes by famous authors. It was pretty disappointing. Whiskey soup. Marinated toast. Raw carrots. Strong coffee. Did I ever tell you the one about the time I got a job working as a bartender at Hooligan's the Happy Horse: a restaurant with a cartoon-Western motif? The specialty of the house was a drink called The Soggy Dungaree-gin and croutons, served in a real cactus. After two or more your hand feels worse than your head. Last night I came home drunk with two boxes full of illegitimate books. I wish I could be more outraged at the university, but it is hard for me to get around the fact that teaching a boring English class in exchange for enough money to pay rent fifteen days late and go out once a month to a restaurant to have soda crackers and ice water may be the best job I will ever have. Writing a thousand-page book is a great way to avoid looking like an idiot. Nobody will ever read the thing closely enough to discover that halfway through you forgot who the main character was. If they do they will say it is postmodern: meaning flat, nonlinear, decentered, and without a foundation. Like an elliptical Frisbee that doesn't work very well. I wonder what it's like to be a really famous writer, though-like Raymond Queneau. Queneau is so famous that an incredibly dedicated researcher, working for months in one of the top-three largest university libraries in America, might be able to find an entire book: a hundred-page novel that leaves them mildly dissatisfied-the mark of a true experimentalist. That's why I always hated when the tape ran out in the middle of a song: all those broken songs oozing guitar solos into the atmosphere will eventually condense as permanent Muzak. Clouds like headlines in the sky. Oh gross, I just had an epiphany. I'd better go clean it up. I am going to design the envelope for this letter with desktop publishing technology so that all your friends will think I am a large corporation and gradually come to treat you with a certain amount of care, fear, & new respect. The obvious analogy is with music. Sometimes you aren't sure if you've found a new tense or wandered off the edge of grammar, groping, groping. Most of my life I have been a screen door slam in the night. I lived in seven different places in two years. After I lost my gerbils I was rootless. I don't mind having an address. I don't mind having a phone number either, except when I have to answer it. Learning to talk. I never told you that I am opposed to New York City on principle: I don't even like the idea of a New York City. I think most would agree that human contact or even affection is a biological necessity as much as food. But I'm not sure I would. I'm not sure what else to add right now. If I knew what to say I would and we could breathe in a miracle tangle of one another's good intentions, and pave something more certain than stone. For now I am a paper-airplane errant, one of the last scholars of poverty among the emerging software-literati. If I missed you could I file a complaint with Scotland Yard? Never mind. I regret saying all those things I never had the guts to, even though I didn't. This violin concerto sounds like a moist corpse being dragged down soft cellar stairs. I am drinking Hindenberg Stout, Ein Schwartzbier. Give me a beer with rotten chunks of wood and rusty nails floating in it. Give me a beer I can stick a toothpick in and pull it out clean. I get that craving sometimes and there is no brain to stop me. I'm listening to Perez Prado, and this record I would keep even after a global nuclear holocaust. Even if there was no chance of electricity again in my lifetime, I would carry this melting slice of vinyl everywhere. I have no idea where it came from. A neglected shelf at WCAT where I interned as a jazz poser? Or the record store the Analog Anachronism? This beer is so dark that no light can escape: it absorbs all wavelengths. The temperature in this room is dropping fast-I'd better drink up. This is much worse than you deserve. Lucky you to get a letter from me in my peeling-the-label-off period. Heccup. This letter isn't going quite as planned. I've finally figured out how to make money with my masters degree. Remember Lucy from the comic strip Peanuts and her Psychiatric Help stand? I'm going to sit in my front yard with a sign reading "READINGS-\$2, or 3 for \$5." People will bring me a text and say, "Yeah, I need a Marxist and a Feminist reading of this by tomorrow." And I'll say, "I'll throw in a New Historicist reading for \$5." And they'll say, "I don't need that. But do you do punctuation?" I'm superstitious. Instead of balancing my checkbook, I burn all my financial records-ATM receipts, checkbooks, monthly statements, bills-in an urn. If I bounce a check I'll slaughter a goat. My love for you is fiery, like your stomach after eating rotten catfish. And recently a doctor gave me a word which stood in for more than forty words, most of which hadn't yet been penned. Anyway, this word was nothing. Pneumonia. It wasn't even a scary word like mononucleosis. It had a silent P, like "Pfangs." There were times I saw your hair in my room, fluttering around a red lamp. I knew my seconds were numbered like mile markers, green, reflective, deadly, an affront to safety. I heard the light switch in the wall, it was clicking by itself as a ghost struggled with the power. Power. A five-letter word meaning hospital bills. Oceans have passed beneath our bridge and still I feel like there's work we could do. Like build a working marzipan piano and then give an edible concert. Or build a hospital. Now I am spastic and in search of flavor-that pan-searing quality. But still gutted and gillless. After about three seconds, the muscles tense up to protect themselves. It's not like I can't type with no particular agenda, but I have one, which makes things difficult. About community, friends, the people who inspire you, the people you live near, and your hope that they should, for a second, click into alignment and then your life may extend in a single deliberate direction, sharper than a laserbeam, lighter than a pencil but less erasable. The click in this record is on cassette. The dream of living deliberately. It's their community to your communities. Their pane of glass to your spiderweb of cracks. Their gem to your facets. Keith told me that community was the unattainable dream, and those who strive for it should do so as if astronauts who, knowing they will never return, take careful notes so that others might be edified by their martyrdom. To splash in infinity and make the rest of the species a hapless control subject by comparison, the dream of any freak. Like us. Like that mango dissected reluctantly under the stress of an evening gone thin. I went apefire. Why don't you spend Xmas here, or any portion of the next month and a half, because time as anesthetized me and made its first incision. Because I can only do three things at once, no less. I just got off work at Slothrop's-East Central Illinois's only 24-hour bookstore and tavern. I worked thirteen hours today, and spent most of the day serving gin and tonics with gin instead of tonic to a book dealer from Akron. He would alternately read Jean Stafford and burst into tears. He kept trying to sell me these Time-Life books about early American furriers bound in genuine hand-tooled mink and otter pelt but I just wasn't that interested. Okay, I'm joking. Okay, I'm serious. Let's start a stonemason publishing company and etch all our poetry in stone. Let's smoke all of literature starting with Gertrude Stein and moving in any direction that seems necessary. Gertrude Stein-the endpoint of a plane. Go figure. The modern poetic ear must be trained to hear noise as music. Come visit. Love William.