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Not all local poems deserve Willy Street immortality

Verse beneath your feet

by Dean Robbins

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Contemporary poetry is often printed in journals that few people see. But the Poetry in Sidewalks public art project on Williamson Street gives four local poets a shot at a mass audience, not to mention immortality.

The Marquette Neighborhood Association chose poems by Andrea Musher, Fabu, the late Joel Gersmann and the late John Tuschen to stamp into the sidewalk, at a cost of about \$700 apiece. Do these works deserve to be under our feet forever? Do they reflect well on Madison poets? Let's kneel down and take a closer look.

Fabu, Musher and Tuschen have all served as Madison's poet laureate, and of their contributions I'd choose Musher's, at 1441 Williamson St., as the strongest. "The War's First Sunday March 23, 2003" situates itself on a "small sunlit midwest street/studded with signs/that say: WAR IS NOT THE WAY." You steel yourself for a blast of political self-righteousness, but Musher zooms in on ordinary details ("the bookseller rakes her garden," "the teacher breaks bread") that register as extraordinary in the charged context. In the last line, an everyday image takes on inordinate significance: "a young boy in a tree-hung swing/is the turning point/of this still spinning kaleidoscopic earth."

Fabu's "Southern Love," at 1201 Williamson St., is not exactly inspired in comparing love to "a good pot of greens." It begins with pleasing imagery about picking "the tenderest parts" and "rinsing over and over and over/with the clear, clean water of forgiveness." But Fabu loses me at the end when she describes seasoning the dish "with savory meat, herbs and spices." That sounds more like a literal recipe for greens than an apt metaphor for love.

Speaking of metaphors, Tuschen's "Angela's Cello," at 853 Williamson St., begins with an egregiously mixed one, as music is both "pouring" and "shuffling." The poem is just a mess in terms of rhythm, sound, sense and — well, I could go on. I'd tell you what it's about if I had the slightest idea. "With intensity/admired by the bloodied./desired by/those she meets,/and by/a ghost of notes/long forgotten/but emerging now/from bed/time or music/sheets..." Say what?

Just as you're having your doubts about Madison poetry, you stumble across Gersmann's "Suicide Letter" at 1119 Williamson St. Gersmann established himself as a provocative wit during his playwriting career at Broom Street Theater, and his mordant sensibility is encapsulated in the poem's two short sentences:

*Last night
I almost died
Of an overdose
Of life.
P.S.
I'm ready
For my next fix.*

Too much of life can kill you, but the addict keeps coming back for more in a kind of sweet suicide. Fellow hopeful cynic Dorothy Parker would surely have smiled at that idea.

"Suicide Letter" may be more a clever novelty than a good poem, but it's a sublimely clever novelty — one worth stepping on from here to eternity.