

Doug Moe

Poetry in motion along Monroe Street

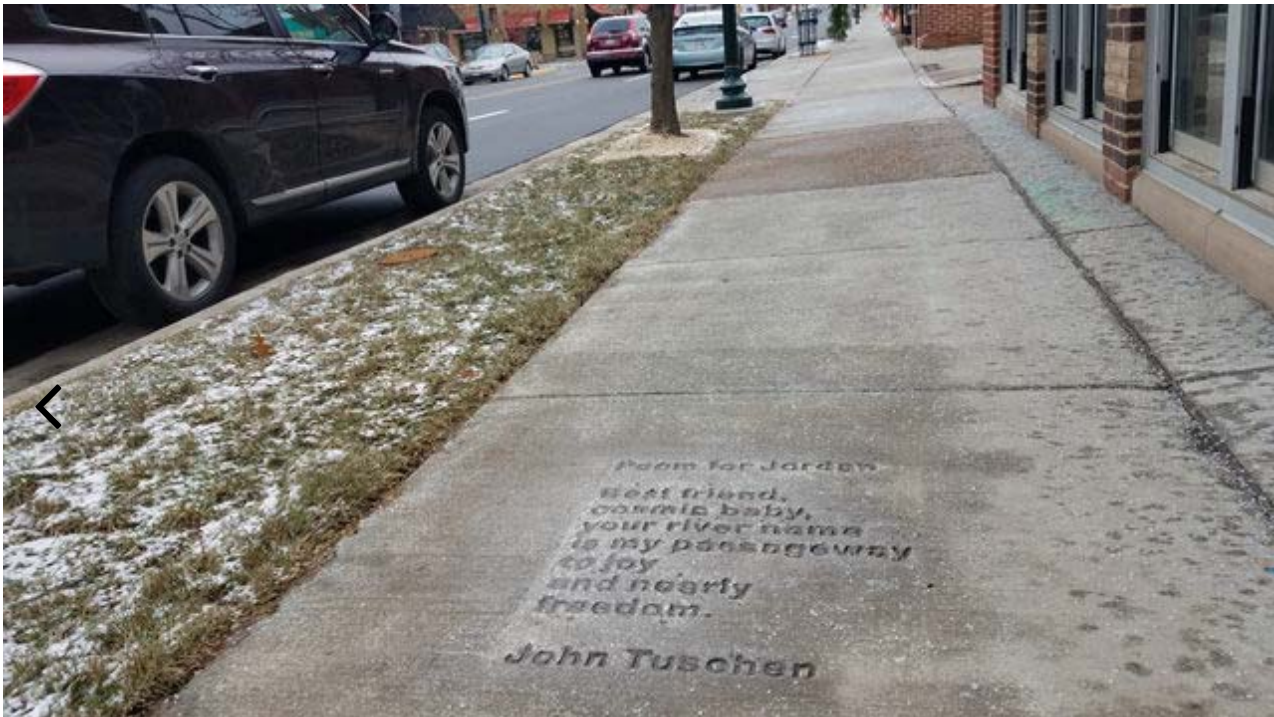
See city poets' stanzas etched into sidewalks

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Joel Patenaude

Photo by Joel Patena



Madison's first poet laureate, John Tuschen, was a bit of a contrarian, so in his spirit, allow me a suggestion. Now that Monroe Street has finally — finally! — reopened to two-way car traffic, try walking it.

The sidewalks will speak to you.

In fact, you will find Tuschen there, even though my old friend died in 2005. He really died. I feel compelled to say "really" because Tuschen once walked into a used bookstore in Madison and was stunned to see one of his books of poetry for sale for \$250.

"Why so much?" he asked.

The reply from behind the counter: "The author was a local poet who died."

Before he died (for real), Tuschen passed the city's poet laureate title to Andrea Musher. Subsequently the poets Fabu, Sarah Sadie Busse, Wendy Vardaman and Oscar Mireles (the current laureate) have filled that role.

All six are represented in a Madison Arts Commission project that has embedded 12 poems, two from each poet, in the sidewalks along Monroe Street. [Channel 3 reported on the project in September](#). An official dedication of the embedded poems is tentatively planned for April.

I laughed when Madison arts program administrator Karin Wolf told me last week it wasn't necessarily easy to find two poems of Tuschen's that would make suitable reading for "little kids walking to class" along Monroe Street, but the ones chosen, "Poem for Jordan" and an excerpt from "Paris Morning" work just fine.

The "Jordan" of the poem's title is Tuschen's son, Jordan Caylor. Anyone interested in experiencing an earthier Tuschen poem can check out the terrific short film Jordan made from his dad reading "[Uncle Harry's Tombstone](#)."

From the Monroe Street sidewalk, here is Tuschen's "Poem for Jordan":

Best friend,

cosmic baby,

your river name

is my passageway

to joy

and nearly

freedom.

The Monroe Street poems are the second iteration of sidewalk poetry in Madison. In 2011, poems by Tuschen, Musher, Fabu and Broom Street Theater impresario Joel Gersmann were embedded in the Williamson Street sidewalks during construction. The Madison works were inspired by a [similar public art project in St. Paul](#).

Owing to our friendship, I am familiar with Tuschen's poetry. We often met at Nick's Restaurant for a beer when he had a new edition of his State Street Poetry Sheet to hand out, which he did to passersby on the Capitol Square.

But I've enjoyed getting to read work by the other poets, too. I haven't seen them all on the sidewalk — and one of the 12 won't be done until spring — but I've read them on the page.

I liked them all, but given the Monroe Street construction link I was grabbed by Wendy Vardaman's "neighborhood repair":

*failure risks include settlement,
root damage, insufficient slab thickness,
inadequate expansion gaps, lack
of drainage, cycles of freeze
& thaw, heavy loads, ask me
to map the patched cracks
in my concrete. tell me about yours.*

I love that the two sidewalk poems by current city poet laureate Mireles deal directly with Monroe Street. (Somehow I have missed meeting Mireles, even though I see from [his website bio](#) that he has been executive director of the Omega School, providing GED preparation, in Dane County for more than two decades.)

Here are Mireles's Monroe Street sidewalk poems:

"Monroe Street 900 years ago":

*walking towards the direction
of Lake Wingra,
it was a sea of reeds and wild rice
one had to bypass several effigy mounds*

that not only celebrated death, but life

a reminder that history never gets lost

as often as it seems

we try to bury it with progress.

And "Monroe Street History":

Kenn Kopp's grocery store

Dardanelles Restaurant

Edgefest

Monroe Street Fire Station

Dudgeon Elementary School

Mallatt's Pharmacy

The past ... sometimes ...

no other words are needed.

Count me as a new fan. See you on the Monroe Street sidewalks.

Doug Moe is a Madison writer. Read his monthly column, Person of Interest, in Madison Magazine.