

I SONNETIZE  
MY LIFE'S IAMBIC PRIME

by

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A NUMBER of years ago, a writer in the *London Times* called attention to the desirability of older, retired persons, continuing some kind of activity. He opined that the pursuit of an interesting and demanding hobby would be beneficial. Similar suggestions have been advanced by others, for different reasons. What made the Britisher's statement noteworthy was his suggestion that retired persons might well engage in more mental activity, especially by writing poetry.

This suggestion attracted the attention of Dr. Joseph Garland, the genial editor of our *New England Journal of Medicine* at the time. He immediately wrote an editorial for his publication, to call the matter to the attention of our American colleagues, and he went a step further. He emphasized the desirability of writing sonnets because, he said, he had found it an activity requiring considerable mental effort, which could be a deterrent to psychological changes from enforced intellectual inactivity, and the results of such writing were often pleasing.

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The title of his editorial statement was "Scorn Not the Sonnet" which, of course, is the opening phrase of one of Wordsworth's two sonnets about the form itself.

When the issue of the *New England Journal* containing this intelligence arrived in the midwest, I had just finished reading a derogatory article by a literary critic, in which he called the sonnet an archaic form that very properly, in his opinion, had become buried under spadefuls of good, fertile free verse. This critic gave the impression that it would be somewhat indecent for anyone to exhume the sonnet in these enlightened days.

Other hardly less vehement articles characterizing the sonnet as an old-fashioned form of versification have been published by others. I alluded to such views in some verses that I then wrote to comment on the suggestion that sonnets be written as a form of therapy in the management of older persons. Of course, my verses had to be cast in the mold of a sonnet. I used the traditional Shakespearean form, entitled my piece, appropriately I thought, "Scorn Not the Sonnet," and sent a copy to Doctor Garland. I had had earlier correspondence with Doctor Garland on other matters. He wanted to publish my piece, and in due time did so. The indexes of the *New England Journal of Medicine* will help interested parties to locate my piece; they will find it in an issue along with various items of Medical Miscellany and just before an interesting case report of a patient who presented what physicians sometimes call "beautiful symptoms" before he died in the Massachusetts General Hospital. The

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indexes to other issues of the New England Journal, which claims to be the oldest medical periodical in the United States, refer to articles on medical subjects by Bailey, O., and Bailey, P., by de Takats, G., and by other members of this Club, so my item is in good company. For the benefit of those members of the Club who might experience some difficulty in obtaining a copy of the Boston medical periodical, I reproduce my sonnet here. It contains a line of which I was inordinately proud at the time. It is the line which I have used almost verbatim as the title of the present paper.

'Scorn Not the Sonnet'

'Scorn not the sonnet,' mighty

Wordsworth said,

So when I heard some modern critics say,

'Why write in that old form from

which were bled

All possibilities for use today' —

And ridicule its regularity,

The pattern of its meter, use of rhyme —

I did not let their comments bother me,

But sonnetized my life's iambic prime.

Yet now I have real cause to be dismayed,

For from New England comes a distant

voice:

'The ravages of time might be allayed

If one writes sonnets,' giving me a choice:

To write as therapy no one has tried,

Or write for fun, and wonder what I hide.

I say that the writing of verse which I do is done for fun. When I think of the labor that goes into

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the production of some of my writing, however, I am not sure that "fun" is the right word. Different persons do different things, for fun or whatever. I have a brother, now retired, and living in Point Pleasant, New Jersey. He paints in water colors, and sells some of his compositions occasionally. If I had his ability with a brush, I should probably paint. The only pigments I can use are words.

There is a non-resident member of this Club, Dr. Bengt Hamilton, known for a lifetime of pediatric and biochemical research. Several years ago he presented a memorable paper before this Club, a paper which was written by him entirely in rhyming couplets. We did not see anything of Doctor Hamilton for a long time after he read that paper. When he did speak from this podium again, he explained that four years earlier he had retired from an active scientific career, and immediately enrolled as a regular full-time student at the Chicago Art Institute. He had been graduated, and he was on his way to New Mexico where he now resides. His paper, appropriately enough, was on art. It would be interesting to find out what Doctor Hamilton has been doing in his retirement, and what he thinks of the different creative arts, especially when pursued by so-called retired men.

A few writers of verse file their poems away, in the manner of Emily Dickinson. This secretiveness is not customary, for a principal purpose of writing is to communicate. Most part-time writers of verse, whom Stuart Bradley, a member of this Club, once characterized as "week-end poets," like at least to show their products to their friends. There is con-

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siderable satisfaction that can be obtained by doing so.

I tried to express this satisfaction, or at least some of the rewards of sending poems to one's friends, in a piece which I titled "The Thoughtful Writer." Even our greatest poets have indulged in the practice of enclosing a few lines of verse with their letters, to the delight of biographers later who obtain access to these unpublished items. A member of this Club, Dr. Carl A. Dragstedt, whom I think of as our latter-day Horace, gladdens the hearts of his friends by sharing his gifts in this manner. I should add that Doctor Dragstedt has had considerable verse published, and some of his poems have been widely quoted by others.

### The Thoughtful Writer

I learned to write a pure iambic line,  
And when I got to five beats, write  
another,  
Selecting ending rhymes by fixed design,  
According to some sonnet plan or other.  
I mastered consonance, and mid-line  
pause,  
And introduced a spondee on occasion,  
But in the main I followed classic laws  
And wrote down what I thought, without  
evasion.  
My readers did not think my writings trite,  
They even sometimes said that they  
enjoyed them,  
They never charged my work with  
being slight,

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Nor did they say its prosiness annoyed  
them.

Of course, the verses are the ones I send  
And only send, in letters to a friend.

Some of my verses have gained wider circulation, from having been set in type, but whenever I write in verse — or should I refer to what I do as “metric prose?” — I do it as though I were talking to a friend who is sitting nearby. The subjects of my verses are little things within my experience. I do not confine myself to the writing of sonnets, and for that reason the title of this paper may not be fully correct. The quicker pace induced by the use of tetrameters, and the swinging force of rhyme and near-rhyme in other arrangements were required, it seemed to me, for a little piece I did entitled “New York to Washington.” For a number of years, business required me to make frequent trips from Chicago to both New York and Washington. As these verses indicate, there was a reason why I liked to make the trip between the two Eastern cities by train, in addition to the fact that the schedules favored the trains for some purposes.

### New York to Washington

(With particular reference to a place near Kneedler's Mill in Frankford, between the Wissinoming and Bridesburg Stations of the Pennsylvania Railroad)

When I go down to Washington  
I like to ride the early train,  
And order breakfast served for one  
Who takes the sunny side again,  
And raises up the shades drawn there



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To peer through sun-drenched windows  
where  
A dozen years of my life stare  
Around the Wissinoming bend  
Towards one who fumbles with his eyes  
To catch the sparks of memories  
That come, and come, and never end,  
As we race by that golden place  
That was our family home, and once  
A heaven, Mother, by your grace.

I sent a copy of that piece to my mother. She wrote that it brought back many memories of her life in that great industrial district in Philadelphia, with my father, and with my four brothers and me. After she died, there came into my hand a little notebook kept by my mother during one or two of those years, a brief record of her many dental appointments, notations about purchasing shoes and their cost, and that sort of thing. One item goes as follows:

"Fr. taken sick  
Tues. morn Mch 23-1915.  
Downstairs Thurs. noon  
May 6."

This was all she recorded of her devoted care of me when I was ill with rheumatic fever and in bed for six weeks. Mother's four lines carry more meaning in them than any quatrain I have ever written.

As a boy I naturally ran errands for my parents. The pieces entitled "The Hardware Man" and "The Butcher" deal with one errand performed occasionally for my father, and sometimes other men

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in our neighborhood, and another performed regularly for my mother.

### The Hardware Man

The hardware man was just a man  
who'd take  
A nail my father gave me as a sample,  
And go from keg to keg to find its  
match —  
Until I learned the man had been a  
soldier.  
My father told me that and how to tell,  
From seeing a small strip of dark red  
ribbon  
The man would wear on Sundays on  
his coat  
That he had fought the Indians out west.  
But when this man on weekdays slouched  
in shirtsleeves,  
He did not look like drawings I had seen  
Of soldiers riding madly after redskins,  
And I thought Father wrong, and felt  
ashamed  
To think such thoughts. Henceforth,  
when at this chore,  
I'd fetch back nails, but from another  
store.

### The Butcher

To the butcher's shop I would ride my  
bike  
On Saturdays to buy our Sunday meat,  
And though at first a chore I did not like,  
I'd follow my instructions, and repeat

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My mother's caution: 'Don't grind pork  
with round,'  
Say, 'Put a piece of suet with the beef  
For pot-roast, please,' and ask the price  
per pound,  
Then, like my mother, stare in disbelief.  
I liked it when I learned to recognize  
A tender steak, and meat you'd have  
to stew,  
And how to judge a fish by gills and eyes,  
And why, with chicken, cleavers would  
not do.  
I did not mind, but sometimes wondered  
why,  
The butcher scowled when I came to buy.

Thinking back on it, I am sure that Mr. Metzler, the butcher, put up with a lot from me. I asked questions such as why he trimmed a cut of meat after weighing it and establishing its price. I argued that he should at least give me the trimmings, but he angrily declared that they belonged to him. He put all his trimmings in a big galvanized metal can which, when filled, would be taken out and the contents sold. I told Mr. Metzler that our dog would be glad to get the trimmings I had paid for, and that would make him more angry. My mother was thrifty. She and I shared a secret. Father had the idea that he could not digest fried pork, and Mother used to have me buy two veal chops, which she breaded and fried for Father, while the rest of us had plain pork chops. One day, disturbed by the higher cost of veal, she tried an experiment. She

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breaded two pork chops, which my Father consumed, thinking they were veal. I still remember my stealing glances at Father at dinner that evening. Nothing untoward happened, so I was told to buy only pork chops henceforth, and to say nothing about it.

Memory serves to mingle recollections of fifty and more years past with observations of the present day. The sonnet entitled "A Boy From Up the Street," describes the behavior of a young boy of today from the point of view of an older man, not altogether unsympathetic toward the lad. Unfortunately, there is an invisible wall between generations, a wall not easily breached.

### A Boy From Up the Street

That rascal, limping, throwing rocks to  
break

The glass in street lamps now, with no-  
one here

To see him — so he thinks — was just a  
cute

First-grader, not too many years ago.

He limps because he has a deformed foot,  
Which could, I'm told, be fixed up by a  
surgeon.

His folks will tell you that they don't  
believe

In doctors, so only the neighbors grieve.

The boy's home is the finest one around,

But he is too much in it, on his own.

I've never seen him in a game of ball;

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The rocks he throws now seldom hit  
their mark.

He hobbles off. How will he ever know  
I'd like at least to show him how to  
throw?

One of the advantages to living in a suburban town is the opportunity it affords of becoming better acquainted with our native American birds, that are either residents of the area or that fly through on their annual migrations, spring and fall. One bird of which I have but a single visit recorded is the bluebird. It is an old favorite of my boyhood but was always a rarity. We have a neighbor, a retired school teacher, who persists in calling our bluejays "bluebirds." It annoys me when I hear her say that there is a nest of bluebirds in the tree outside her window, for I prick up my ears like an old bird-dog before remembering her idiosyncrasy. I have had two experiences with bluebirds and their nesting habits; I do not seem to forget little incidents such as these. They may be worth the telling.

Once, in a forest preserve near Cleveland, Ohio where we then lived, I walked up to a newly painted birdhouse that had been fastened to a small tree about five feet above the ground by, as I learned later, a troop of boy scouts. I walked up to it, pointed, and said with an exaggerated gesture, something like, "Just look at this prime example of the ignorance of urban dwellers. What self-respecting bird would think of nesting so close to the ground." I was going to add, "and in such an open location,"

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but my speech was interrupted by the sudden emergence from the birdhouse of a pair of bluebirds. Quick examination showed that the family was already started. Later, I learned that a Mr. T. E. Musselman of Quincy, Illinois, had made a study of the preferences of the bluebird for kinds of nesting boxes, sizes of openings into them, and so on. He had also studied what nesting sites they would accept which at the same time would not encourage occupancy of the boxes by sparrows and starlings. His findings were, in part, that bluebirds prefer a nest only a few feet above the ground, and in the open; complete details may be obtained in various Audubon Society publications. Mr. Musselman succeeded in bringing back the bluebird in appreciable numbers to Adams County, Illinois, where it had not been observed nesting for the previous forty years.

The other little experience emphasizes the validity of the findings of Mr. Musselman. My wife and I were driving through Canada, along the St. Lawrence River. One noontime we happened to stop for a short rest in a tiny park, which seemed isolated, not far from the river. There was a flagpole there, bearing the Canadian flag of course, and there was a cannon from the War of 1812 and a pyramid of cannonballs. A sign nearby told about a skirmish there, called I think, the Battle of Lundy's Lane, at which the Americans had been defeated. I read the words, and they irritated me because of what I took to be a smug feeling of superiority. I looked at the cannon, saw that it was aimed towards New York State, and said to Catherine, "How about

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taking a picture of me muzzling this gun?" I struck a suitable pose, and held my hat over the open mouth of the gun. I did not hold the pose long. First one and then another of the bluebirds nesting there came blasting out, knocking my hat to the ground. While faint chirps told us that the nest was well down the barrel of the gun, the excited parents circled overhead, so we retreated. I wrote some lines about the second battle of Lundy's Lane, and the second defeat of the Americans, but I think that a German writer expressed my thoughts better in the words which one of his characters uttered, apropos of what I forget. He said, "Meine Mutter hat gewollt," or "My mother wished it," which can be rendered freely, I think, as "My mother always warned me not to fool around with guns that might be loaded." But I do have some verses about bluebirds to bring to your attention. The title of the piece is "Five Hundred Bluebirds."

### Five Hundred Bluebirds

I don't remember much about the  
match  
When Lawson Little won a championship  
In golf, years back. About three up  
and two  
To go, I think, is how it ended. Then  
The crowd around the sixteenth hole  
broke up  
And, led by those who seemed to know  
the way,  
It streamed like water let out from a tub,

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Swirling towards the entrance to the  
Club.  
My friend, however, had insisted that  
We try a shortcut straight across the  
links.  
We strode along alone, we two, and —  
suddenly,  
Into a grove between two fairways — oh,  
I never shall forget — how in the  
twilight,  
Five hundred bluebirds settled for the  
night.

My companion of that day, Dr. Ramon F. Hanzal, later of Herndon, Virginia, never would verify my count of the number of bluebirds in that migratory flock. He would admit it was "a lot."

Another piece which says something about migratory birds I titled "Golden Crowned Kinglets." These small birds nest in the high conifers of Canada. They pass through the Chicago area each spring and fall, usually accompanied by their close relatives, the ruby crowned kinglets. I saw the birds described in my poem on the grounds of Northwestern University, School of Medicine, many years ago. I was walking towards the school with Dr. Robert Pilcher, who was then with the research department of the American Can Company. I had arranged for him to visit us to talk over the possibility of what his Company might do to help two of my colleagues with experiments on the possible use of tin containers for solutions intended for intravenous administration at front battle lines in



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World War II, which was then in progress. The experiments I might add showed promise, but I don't think that the matter was pursued much beyond the preliminary experimental stage.

Golden Crowned Kinglets

'Hey, look at them,' I said, 'They're quite a sight.'

'What?' said my friend. 'All those birds,' I replied,

'Don't you see them there? Kinglets, golden crowned.'

'Where?' cried my friend, as if I'd said a gem

Was dangling from each bush — and there was.

'They're everywhere,' I said, 'Just look around.'

'You mean those little birds?' and I could sense

A note of disappointment in his voice,

'Why they are even smaller than a wren.'

'Of course they're small.' 'What did you say they're called?'

'They're kinglets, golden crowned. Some rubies, too.'

He smiled and said that, hearing names like those,

He had expected something like a pheasant.

So I smiled too, for thinking big is pleasant.

This Club has several members who are knowl-

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edgeable about birds. I am sure they would agree that the way to learn to know the birds is to study them in the field. One afternoon in Washington, years ago while World War II was on, I was attending a meeting in the building of the National Academy of Sciences at 2101 Constitution Avenue where, along with others, I had lunch. There was some free time available before our afternoon session would begin, so I went outdoors to stroll around the grounds. It was a bright spring day. The grounds around the building there are landscaped with numerous attractive trees and shrubs. I was watching a pair of mocking birds, when I became aware of another bird watcher. He was a tall young man, very striking looking, in the uniform of a British naval officer. "There, did you hear that?" he exclaimed excitedly, and apparently to me for I was the only other person there. A great flock of white throated sparrows was about the grounds, in bushes, in trees, seemingly always on the move. Guided by my chance acquaintance, I heard for the first time the call of the male. The white throat is a neat but not spectacularly beautiful bird. It migrates through the Chicago area each spring and fall, but few people pay much attention to it. The bird does not sing during its migrations. But on this day in Washington, some of the males did sing, snatches of melody now and then, as if they could no longer confine their desire to sing as they would in northern New England and in Canada a little later. The officer sang the words, "Pea-body, Peabody," to the song. That, he explained, is what the New Englanders call the bird, the Pea-

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body bird. In Canada, my informant added, the people say that he sings "Canada, Canada." He could look at these birds and tell you that this one was a yearling, that one a two-year old male, and still another was a mature female. He told me that it was his hobby to study the birds wherever he was stationed. He was currently assigned to the temporary buildings on the other side of Constitution Avenue, a couple of blocks away. Those buildings were built hastily for emergency use during World War I. They were torn down rather recently. Soon my new acquaintance and I had to leave. I did not ask his name, nor he mine. If we should meet again, I hope it is in a meadow on a sunny day during the migration season. I should like to hear him tell me some more about our American birds.

It is fun to try to put words to the music of bird song. I have a piece which mentions the song of the Baltimore oriole. I can assure you that he sings exactly as represented in these verses, which I addressed to our son, John, when he had been in Africa for almost three years.

To Our Son, John, Too Long in Africa

I wonder where the orioles are now.

Sharp winter winds are flicking snow-  
flakes on

Their old nest in the cottonwood, and at

The windows of your empty room,

dear John.

The birds are far away, that's all I know,

But they'll come back some sunny day,

and you,

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You too will come, won't you? Remem-  
ber words  
We used to sing to music by these birds?  
Yes, that was long ago, back when this  
block  
Was realm enough for fledglings, who  
well knew  
What they should do when old birds  
loudly sang,  
As I would, 'Johnny, Johnny, come home  
— quick-ly.'  
But now I must sing softly, lest I flat.  
Be my accompanist! Can you hear that?

Not as pretty, maybe, but interesting for other reasons are the persons we meet in our daily lives. The late Dr. Warren S. McCulloch once told us from this very podium how the poet, E. A. Robinson, delighted in portraying a person's character within the confines of a sonnet. I have also tried to portray persons in 14 lines, but am satisfied if I can produce a rounded picture of a person as I see him under particular circumstances. I caught a friend and associate of mine, Arthur P. O'Callaghan, at the County Building one noontime, when I met him for lunch. He was serving as Number 363 of a jury panel, but never was selected to serve on a jury that heard a case. He was more patient, certainly, than most of us would have been under the circumstances.

Jury Panel Member Number 363  
With folded overcoat upon his lap,  
His hat in hand — there was no place to  
hang them —

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He waits each day with men he does not  
know,  
And wonders if he'll serve upon a jury.  
The seats are hard, and two men on his  
panel  
Prefer to stand around — he notes of course  
They move about, while he and all the  
rest  
Can neither stretch their legs or sit in  
comfort.  
At times, some numbers are called out  
by bailiffs,  
And other panel members answer,  
"Here,"  
And then are grouped and led away by  
sheriffs —  
And so — two weeks — his number? —  
never called.  
The Judge thanked all for serving Court  
and State,  
And did not show he knew some only  
wait.

The sonnet entitled "The Miss" is concerned with the very first color photograph I ever saw. Nobody today who has grown up in easy familiarity with color photography, instant pictures in true colors and all that, can possibly realize the impact of seeing his first color photograph when all photographs had been in black and white, with minor variations. The event described in the poem occurred in late 1929 or early 1930. Color film, though technically developed years earlier, was not yet on

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the consumer market generally. The film was made available to laboratories first for scientific purposes. I remember, some time after the incident to be described took place, that I attended a lecture with about 800 other persons in Cleveland at Severance Hall. The lecturer was an officer of the National Geographic Society. He told us about color photography, announced that his magazine planned to have practically all colored illustrations in the near future, and he illustrated his lecture with many lantern slides. We watched in fascination as he told us, among other things, that artists were correct when they painted the shadows on snow in purple instead of black, for did he not have colored slides to prove they were correct? His pictures, as Dr. Carl Wiggers, the physiologist, said afterwards, were excellent but so small that they looked like postage stamps on the screen. It would be unthinkable to use such small pictures today.

The locale of my sonnet was the hallway entrance to the photography department at the Lakeside Hospital, presided over by a Mr. Brownlow. I had gone there to pick up some lantern slides of my own, in black and white of course, and saw an acquaintance peering through some color transparencies, which he allowed me to examine, one of them in particular, which I write about.

### The Miss

(A case of general septicemia showing facial erythema is the way this color slide was cataloged)

It's almost fifty years since I first saw  
A color photograph. I saw it at

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The hospital. It showed a pretty girl,  
A patient in her bed. Her eyes were  
blue.

'It's beautiful,' I said, 'but what is this?  
This rose-red butterfly perched on the  
bridge

Of her uptilted nose, with outspread  
wings?'

My friend said, 'That is why I got this  
slide.

I'll use it in my teaching. It shows well  
A fatal case of gas bacillus poisoning.'

'But how could that have happened here?'  
I asked.

'She was admitted when it was too late,  
And though she would not talk, we'll  
caption this,

I think, "From an Abortionist, a Miss." "

That piece was written long after the event. I have wondered what it might have been like if I had written it at the time when the event occurred. I still have a copy of the Cleveland Medical Society's *Bulletin* of about that time, which contains a sonnet by one of the Cleveland doctors, a sonnet which I liked. It presents a picture of a blood transfusion as carried out at the time. This used to be regarded as a complicated procedure. It was usually performed in the surgical amphitheater. The draped patient would lie on one cot and the draped donor on another. Tubing ran from an artery of the donor to a vein of the patient. A nurse or two and usually an intern would be standing by and the transfusion

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required appreciable time. The writer of the sonnet, which was well written, told about the glow of health returning to the skin of the recipient, and alluded to the great progress of medical science in its effort to save human lives. The poem is now sadly dated, and when I read it again it did not produce a sense of awesomeness which it had once evoked.

The two sonnets entitled "Needling Bread" and "Women Commuters" describe quite different types of persons. "Needling Bread" tells about a form of cheating which was talked about more, probably, than it was ever performed by commercial bread bakers during the depression days of the 1930's, and it may well be unheard of today. There are styles in forms of cheating as well as in clothes. "Women Commuters" deals with women who compete for a livelihood in a man's world.

### Needling Bread

There used to be two ways of needling  
bread

To keep competitors from getting  
stronger.

One was to have a slick delivery man  
Take hypodermic needle and syringe,  
And fill it with a little kerosene.

He'd keep this palmed while putting  
bread in stores,

Then surreptitiously inject a drop  
Right through the wrappers of competing loaves.



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The other way required a loud-mouthed  
woman  
To go around to busy grocery stores,  
And there complain, so everyone could  
hear her,  
About the other company's brand of  
bread.  
The best results, I'm told, came from  
the use  
Of coal oil first, then next day,  
loud abuse.

### Women Commuters

Four women ride the smoker of the  
train  
We take each day, all going to the city;  
The four just swarm into our car,  
come rain,  
Or sleet, or snow — and none of them  
is pretty.  
I watch them sit together, as they can  
Upon our train, and talk — ah, how they  
sputter!  
And I suppose that I'm the only man  
Who, sitting near them, does not glare  
or mutter.  
But then, I overheard one tell about  
The details of a meal she made, saw looks,  
Sheer envy I would say, that then came  
out  
On faces of the other part-time cooks.  
So I won't fuss, like my commuting  
brothers,

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At chit-chat by four dream-world wives  
and mothers.

I come now to a sampling of sonnets which I like to regard as photomicrographs, because they provide a slice through a subject, and a more detailed picture of one's thoughts. They are meditations, and statements of opinions and points of view. One of these pieces mentions the Indians who, under their great chief, Black Hawk, lived in the Fox River Valley of Illinois. Professor Arno B. Luckhardt, who was my sponsor for membership in this Club, was much interested in the history of this area. He and I talked many times — with me doing most of the listening — about what a remarkable man Black Hawk was, and how infamous was the behavior of the whites in taking their lands and driving them into the hands of their enemies, the Sioux across the Mississippi River. Thoughts of many things flooded my mind when I saw some picnickers in a meadow by the Fox River one day.

Fox River, Black Hawk, and His Men  
Small children feed the ducks upon the  
Fox,  
But my thoughts go to that Algonquian  
tribe  
Which one-time called the river here  
their own.  
A half-tame mallard on the water mocks  
The pattern of my thoughts as, with  
a gibe,  
She turns to reach a piece of ice-cream  
cone.

## I SONNETIZE MY LIFE'S IAMBIC PRIME

We tossed four drunken braves just such  
a bone,  
And when they caught it, took these lands  
away,  
But Black Hawk fought, that Sacs and  
Fox might stay.  
We burned their crops, shot women,  
children too,  
And chased them to the Mississippi,  
then  
Turned cannon on them, swimming —  
so, I say,  
Pipe down, you kids, and you, duck,  
moocher you!  
We pause to honor Black Hawk and  
his men.

A sonnet which I called "Self Incrimination" represents an attempt to describe the feelings of many of us on the day of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. I think many of us tried that day to think of something we may have done, or not have done, that could have contributed to the moral climate that would permit such a crime to happen. The piece was written on the evening of that sad day in our nation's history.

Self-Incrimination  
At Lunch, in a Restaurant  
(Friday, November 22, 1963)  
We sipped ice water scraped our feet  
spread knees  
Said who will win the football game  
tomorrow

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This rain may make a difference it won't  
matter  
Hey let me see the luncheon menu  
please  
Clam chowder is it good say let me  
borrow  
I'd like to have a match the sea-food  
platter —  
And who turned up the radio such  
chatter!  
We interrupt I think it was it said  
Our regular program later he is dead.  
We walked back to the office silently  
And occupied our minds with chores  
that may  
Be done routinely, and by eyes that  
dread  
To look within, or out, lest they might  
see  
The lesions we so clearly feel this day.

I have a piece called "Thoughts About the Origin of Life." There were several other pieces on philosophical subjects, meditations on life and death, and I intended to include them in this sampling. The critics at my home, who looked over the selection at my request, did not think these pieces were too interesting. So I have omitted all but this one item, which I include because the reports of scientific studies that some of our colleagues make in this field I find so fascinating.

Thoughts About the Origin of Life  
When I consider all the places where

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Some form of living creature lurks about,  
Showing itself by functions it performs,  
I do not wonder that Life came to be —  
I think the wonder would be had it not.  
We know that some bacteria will thrive  
In frigid waters, hot springs, and in salt;  
We know how hard it is to keep things  
sterile.

Once started, life persists — but —  
simpler forms  
Just are — and do — so many complex  
things —

I want more evidence before I'll say  
That shapeless blobs of simple chemicals,  
In time, once prodded by electric sparks,  
Are changed to — meadow mice — or  
meadow larks.

Truly, the mechanists in the life sciences have tackled a big subject when they attempt to build an explanation of all life on the results of studies of the physics and chemistry of simple systems. I am confused. Man is a complex organism. That's what Frederic Jung and Howard Carter and I seemed to conclude many times in our philosophical discussions while driving home together from Monday night meetings of this Club.

How can I explain my self to myself? Why should memories of little things, of inconsequential events, stay in our minds for so many years? And how is memory accomplished, what is its mechanism? Why should a gush of thoughts surge up when I take a reflective look at a little Erlenmeyer flask, a simple

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piece of laboratory glassware named after the German chemist who designed it, beautiful with a kind of Grecian simplicity, yet admirably suited for performing what are called titrations in the chemical laboratory. Why should I retain a vivid memory of the time when I, a lad in high school, rode the trolley cars to downtown Philadelphia, and purchased from a sympathetic clerk — how truly helpful and kind that man was — at the Arthur H. Thomas Company a small parcel of insect pins, a handful of test tubes and other items, and — oh, so precious, so lovely, so scientific — a small Erlenmeyer flask to be my very own.

I mention these matters to help prepare you for the shock described in a little piece which I wrote, and called "The Titration." Dr. Dwight J. Ingle, a member of this Club, published it in an issue of that intriguing publication which he founded and edited, *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*." My excuse for reproducing it lies in the fact that verses published in *Perspectives* are not indexed, and are therefore hard to find.

### The Titration

There are occasions when I do not  
know

Just what to say, such as the time I  
strolled

Into the lab, where I now seldom go,  
A penalty of course for growing old.

There was a new technician we had  
hired,

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Who wore a dress too short to swish  
or swirl  
The way that old-time poets once  
admired,  
But when she walked, she seemed to make  
things whirl.  
She wore a white coat here, but I have  
eyes,  
And like an old fool, thought I might  
start taking  
A moment then to stop and fraternize.  
She smiled and said, "Now this, that  
I am shaking" —  
"Oh, wait," I thought, "you did not hear  
me ask" —  
"We call," she said, "an Erlenmeyer  
flask."

The last piece in this sampling presents a picture of myself in the final stages of perfecting a poem. I usually begin with pen and paper, and spend agonizing moments — I'll not tell you how many — putting down words while planning the piece. Always there comes a time when the words must be spoken, if only silently, and turned over and over in the mind, while listening. At last, and usually with a suddenness, a smooth poem emerges from the ball mill of the mind, and the ear recognizes it, and there is your poem. Nothing really happens in the piece entitled "A Quiet Sunday Morning," and yet something does, and for a moment it seems that it is the most important thing in the world.

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### A Quiet Sunday Morning

I hummed some meters, put aside  
my pen,  
Took the house trash outside, and I  
walked  
To Keefer's drugstore for the Sunday  
paper.  
I came back slowly, mouthing on a line  
Which needed working over, and I  
picked  
Up plants thrown in the alley by a  
neighbor.  
I scanned the headlines, read the comic  
strips,  
And took the seed pods off each salvaged  
plant.  
And all the while I tested lines for  
rhythm.  
I dressed and went to church, and thought  
of tropes  
Until we had the Holy Sacrament  
When — suddenly — I felt a poem  
blossom.

I wrote a number of rhyming couplets to complete this poem, which I had thought of as a 14-liner. I discarded all of these couplets, for it came to me that the piece was really completed at the end of line 12. So my poem did not turn out to be a sonnet after all!

No matter. Sometimes poems end up in a form that differs from what had been planned. Even when this is not the case, it usually happens that



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the language of lines needs polishing, phrases must be altered and transposed or eliminated. But it is always a good day, even at times an exciting day, when a poem bursts into bloom. As long as I feel like that, I shall know that I am living in my iambic prime.

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