

# IOWA BIRD OF MOUTH

Keeping a 12-month crowdsourced poetry project in the air

JENNIFER L. KNOX

## I HATE CROWDS

I'm an introvert. Most poets are. I'm terrible at chit-chat and networking. In group work situations, my ideas are usually too far out, so I've learned to keep my mouth shut. The only "team" sport I ever played in high school was swimming. Are you technically part of "a team" if you can't make eye contact or talk because your head's underwater?

My aversion to groups may be why I deeply distrusted the premise of crowdsourcing—especially creative crowdsourcing, like people writing a poem together. How does it cohere? Isn't a poem about capturing one person's point of view? Who has the ultimate authority to edit it? Is it "mean" to delete terrible lines, as poets do to their own work every day? How about terrible lines written by a four-year-old, which is why they're terrible? Bottom line: why bother? Aren't there enough fabulous poems in the world, waiting to be read? Why add to the noise?

But crowdsourcing grew on me slowly, until it took over an entire year of my life. Iowa Bird of Mouth (IBOM) was an online crowdsourced poetry project that ran from September 2016 to August 2017. With support from the Iowa Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts over 750 people around the world contributed to the project—from Girl Scouts to Guggenheim fellows.

The seed for the project was planted in 2012. I lived in a tiny, mouse-infested Brooklyn apartment. I was single, and lonely, and my downstairs neighbors hollered at me like a pack of soccer hooligans whenever I walked across the floor. One night, I met with an old friend travelling through NYC for work who was very successful doing something which involved math. She looked terrific, and had two lovely grown daughters back home in California, where she lived in a big house near the beach.

So imagine my surprise when she said, "I'd do anything to have what you have."

"You want to be taller?" I asked, having no idea what she was talking about, but knowing I was a full head taller than her.

"No, your poetry and your creativity," she said. "I'd love to have those in my life."

My old friend was not prone to exaggeration. I was—big time—but I'm a poet. I didn't know how to respond, but I'd heard this before. "How can I be more creative?" was a question I always brushed off in post-reading Q & As. I had no idea why I've always been a "creative person," eschewing criticism and even welcoming the (often public) failure of writing and publishing poems.

But I do know that writing immeasurably enriches my life. What would I do without poetry? How would I live without access to art's spiritual dimension? I wanted my friend to have what I have. Heck, I even want total strangers to have it.

So I started thinking about ways to bring art and creativity to people who felt left off the gift list—that they were somehow not entitled to the very things that made my life lively.

## FAMILY DAY

I moved to Central Iowa in 2013 after falling in love with a man from a tiny town. I started teaching again, which I'd given up in New York, where adjunct pay wouldn't even cover my rent. I missed my New York friends, but I loved my man, Collin, my dog, and the house, under which no hollering neighbors lurked.

One of the first things I noticed about the Central Iowa culture was an affinity for wild birds. Why, my normally super-stoic in-laws got downright giddy recalling encounters with crows, goldfinches, and redwing blackbirds.

A manicurist confided that whenever she saw a cardinal, she knew it was her deceased grandmother. "She's just checking on me."

A colleague complained that her backyard had been overrun by birdwatchers seeking a rare tanager. "They're trampling my pampas grass!" she griped. "That'd be me," muttered an ashamed colleague in the corner. "They're very rare," he said and slunk out the door.

Iowa filmmaker Colleen Krantz told me, "I grew up on a cattle farm in western Iowa. There was absolutely nothing to look at and nothing to hear. But birds were a treat for the eyes and the ears. Birds were the bling on our farm."

The Iowan wild bird love was *everywhere*. I shared my observations with New York friends.

"Yeah, I love to look at birds in Central Park, too. Maria, remember that one bird?"

"What bird?" Maria asked.

They didn't get it, and I didn't either entirely until one frigid winter day, when Collin and I were driving around the lake. He loves long drives when the permafrosted farm roads glow and sun dogs hang in the sky like spaceships. After cresting a hill into glaring sun, he stomped on the brake and skidded sideways to a stop. In front of us were three bald eagles, two deer carcasses, and lots and lots of blood.

We stared silently until he said, "Look behind us." Two more eagles, about 300 feet away.

"They're the babies," he gestured low to the three in front of our car.

"How do you know?" All I could see was that they were covered in blood, their beaks were comically yellow, and they were absolutely gigantic. I couldn't imagine their huge bodies lifting into the air.

"The feathers on their heads."

The three had ropey head feathers, like rag mops. The pair behind us: smooth and white. The kids resumed their gory, awkward disassembly—flinging tendons and gulping down ribbons of fat while making goofy *bawk bawk bawk* sounds.

"Those two are teaching the kids how to eat," he explained, and as if it heard us, one of the parents spreads its wings as if to say: "Yes, we are." Collin knew this because Central Iowans know stuff about birds.

"So it's like Family Day?"

"Better than a trip to Disneyland, if you're an eagle."

This is where I fell in love with wild birds. Not in a romantic way. More like how one falls in love



American robin (illustration by Polyphony Bruna; photo by Norbert Sarsfield)

with power and the indifference of a thing like a mountain or a meteor shower. More like falling in awe than in love.

As I was telling an old friend from Muscatine, Iowa, about the Iowa wild bird love phenomenon, his cell phone rang. His ringtone was the meadowlark call. We smiled, but didn't feel the need to put our feelings into words, because we were in Iowa. We saw the feathers floating on the updraft. This was real.

## THE PROJECT

After a poetry reading in Des Moines, I met two fabulous visual artists who encouraged me to apply for an Iowa Arts Council fellowship.

"But I've never won a fellowship or grant or award or prize in my life," I blurted out, because I'm an over-sharer.

"You'd be perfect for it," they assured me.

The application emphasized that the artist's work should connect to people. I felt an epiphany burbling. "Iowans are deeply connected to wild birds," I thought, "I could write poems about wild Iowa birds! No... that's too clichéd. And



how would those poems connect to lowans in a unique way? You can't force people to read poetry. Wait . . . I could *force* people to read poetry about birds! No one's ever done that!"

As I was working out the details, I began to notice excellent examples of crowdsourced poetry everywhere. In David Lehman's long-running "Next Line, Please" project at *American Scholar*, participants send in dazzling poems, often with imposed formal restraints, based on his brilliant prompts: poems triggered by the name of a chess opening, poems utilizing lines from *Hamlet*, poems inspired by Napoleon's infamous letter to Josephine: "Home in three days. Don't bathe."

Kwame Dawes launched an inaugural crowdsourced poem for WNYC's *The Takeaway* with these powerful words: "Say 'nation.' In the wake of quarrels, say 'hope.'" Hundreds of respondents sent in their suggestions for lines through social media to write "A People's Poem for the Inauguration."

Then I found "La Familia," Juan Felipe Herrera's epic crowdsourced poem on the Library of Congress' website. Anyone, anywhere could contribute up to 400 words per day. Even when the words clashed—and they often did—all the voices seemed to be part of one song. Contributors' names were listed on a different page to give the authors anonymity and reinforce the concept of the crowd as author. Unlike other projects I'd seen, "La Familia" appeared to be unedited, but I liked the resulting roughness. It resembled a flock of birds in flight—dividing and converging, squawking and bawking.

Suddenly, it fell into place. My project description was surprisingly easy to write because I actually understood what I was saying.

*I will build and curate an online crowdsourced poem honoring twelve wild Iowa birds, structurally based on "La Familia." The goal will be to increase our sense of collective connection to the environment through creative convergence. Beyond personal connections, birds occupy a unique space in our collective consciousness—living in every community, grabbing our eyes and ears.*

Finally, I needed a catchy name, so I crowdsourced my friends. Barbara suggested, "Bird of Mouth," then "Iowa Bird of Mouth." Crowdsourcing was already paying off.

In July, I received the email announcing that I was a 2016 Iowa Arts Council Fellow. My goal was to launch the site by September, so I hit the ground running.

## FLEDGE

Building an interactive website was so hard! Especially because I had no idea what I was doing. So I posted an SOS on Facebook. "Can anyone help me with a little website work? Should take about a week."

Vaughan Fielder, owner of the Field Office Literary Agency in Lexington, Kentucky, a literary speaking agency for poets, messaged me: "I can do it!" I emailed her my site map ideas, lists, and drawings, and then I waited. Vaughan's extremely thorough, so I knew she was carefully reading the materials I sent, which is exactly what I was afraid of. I wanted someone impulsive who bit off more than they could chew. Like me.

When Vaughan replied at the end of the day, I knew:

- She'd make the site (!).
- I'd write the text, create the graphics, and handle PR.
- She'd read everything I sent and knew I was clueless.
- The site would take one *month*, not one *week*, to complete.

"What if someone writes a bunch of dirty words?" I asked Vaughan because most people I had told about the project—especially administrative types—had asked me questions like that.

"What if someone uses profanity?" "What if someone writes something disgusting?" "What if someone writes too much? You have to be able to control it!"

Fear of poetry trolls made IBOM seem scarier than a personal ad on Craigslist.

Vaughan said, "I can put a high profanity filter on the submission window . . . then, maybe, just ask them not to use profanity?"

And that's what we did: "Please avoid using profanity as we hope this site will be used by all ages."

Vaughan and I worked (and worked and worked), but one loose end remained. I loved

birds, but I didn't technically know anything about them. Where do they go in winter, for example? I had no idea. I'd planned to spotlight a different bird each month to match the actual birds' numbers in the environment, but all I knew was January = eagles, because that's when Collin and I had seen them on the road. I briefly considered Wikipedia-ing my way through it but visualized sacks of Audubon Society hate mail.

Here's a sentence I've never said: I needed an ornithologist.

At the local farmers' market, I watched a woman and a man pull a little boy around in a wagon. The man's brown baseball cap said, "Iowa Young Birders." "I like your hat," I said. We chatted. He was Tyler Harms, President of Iowa Young Birders, a local non-profit organization that encourages young lowans ages 8–18 to study and enjoy birds and birding. Kismet! I told him about IBOM and he agreed to choose the spotlight birds. Just like that! Afterwards, he confessed that it was the toughest professional call in his life—a real *Sophie's Choice*.

September: American goldfinch

October: ring-necked pheasant

November: American crow

December: eastern screech-owl

January: bald eagle

February: northern cardinal

March: red-winged blackbird

April: trumpeter swan

May: American robin

June: eastern bluebird

July: eastern meadowlark

August: great blue heron

As September drew near, I emailed press releases to K–12 school districts, newspapers, TV stations, outdoor journalists, art and conservation organizations, writing programs, ornithology departments, bookstores, writing groups, birding groups, *Audubon Magazine*, every single person at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and all my fabulous poet friends who were besieged for free work every single day (forgive me). Then I waited.

## WHERE DID MY LINE BREAKS GO?

The first verse in "Poem for the Goldfinch" was posted on September 1.

*A goldfinch buzzed by us on our bikes, dipping and lifting and hanging strong in the air like a note from a trombone. This must mean the end of summer.*

Then . . . nothing for a few days. I watched people glaze over at my pitch: "I just launched a crowdsourced poetry website honoring twelve Iowa birds." People couldn't picture what IBOM was, but it "seemed" boring.

It occurred to me that a launch party might demystify the submission process. Even though they, too, weren't sure what IBOM was, the Ames Public Library stepped up and donated their auditorium for the event. The librarian even brought seed cookies and other bird-oriented snacks. Local poets Heather Derr-Smith, Meg Johnson, Claire Kruesel, and Molly McDonald read bird poems to warm up the crowd of 80+ attendees—everyone from artsy types with pink hair to seniors and little kids.

Tyler took the mic and spoke eloquently on wild birds and the environment. During the Q & A, Richard, a Whitmanesque local celebrity who wears skirts but would prefer to be naked, asked Tyler why an aggressive band of crows once

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Ring-necked pheasant (illustration by Polyphony Bruna)

drove him out of a California campground. "I did nothing to them!" Richard lamented.

"Well, birds have their own personalities, just like people," Tyler explained, which satisfied Richard, and us all.

This is the poem we wrote together that night. People shouted out lines while I typed them into the submission field on the site, which was projected onto the screen in the library auditorium. When I read it now, I can hear the different voices vying for dominance, but in the end, they unite in soft surprise.

*I have never seen a goldfinch. That's sad but true. He's never seen a purple cow. But I have seen goldfinches though. Several in fact. In flight in feather. I would like to be as naked as a bird. Who doesn't have something with the word "naked" in it? I asked our mayor to let me speak at the end of the meeting. I was sitting in the back and tried to take off my clothes. They put me in the Story County Jail. Were there any birds in there? I'm somewhat of a nudist. Coneflower seeds are a delicious treat for the goldfinch. Goldfinches are a lovely yellow. They are. Perfect. I don't understand why I've been all over the world and never seen them. Come to my backyard. Plant coneflowers. When I was a child I thought goldfinches were escaped canaries, like canaries were born indoors. To escape. When they sing, they're outdoors.*

After the last line was spoken, I felt the crowd understand that the poem was finished. We'd come full circle. It was a magic moment. "That sounds like a wrap," I said. The crowd nodded and laughed. "What just happened?" someone asked.

The next day, more poems appeared on the site. Funny ones. The asterisks represent where a new writer enters.

99 problems and a finch ain't one.

\*

*When it sings, it sings something.  
When it flies, it flies somewhere.  
When it coaches youth volleyball  
it focus on defense. "That's how to  
win championships," it whistles.*

\*

*Rob Lowe fells goldfinch  
in charity golf tourney  
quits the game for good*

Followed by unsentimental ones that challenged the notion of what a poem was.

*Nancy texted me a few months ago, on a late spring morning, "I've got something for you." When I arrived at her house for coffee, she handed me a small bundle wrapped in paper towels. "It hit the sun room window this morning. I heard the thud and found it on the deck. I thought you might like it." I thanked her and when I got home, unsure about what to do with the small, still body, I zipped it into a sandwich baggie and put it in the freezer. I'm not a taxidermist myself. Though I felt bad about it, I finally threw it away last week. I needed the space for my leftover roasted chicken.*

And fabulous feminist ones.

*The golden girl broods over all these flings of joy  
In nests we never see, on eggs unrobably drab!  
Painters and states claim the noisy garish male  
But the leaps of joy, darts to the sky—  
knows no sex but yes yes yes!*

The poets began emailing me: "Where did my line breaks go?" Oh no. I hadn't considered how the HTML format and the skinny column width would chew up the breaks.

"How do I make a title?" Aw, crud. I hadn't thought about that either. Hard returns were propelling first lines away from their titles.

I asked Vaughan if the formatting issues could be fixed. "Not without redesigning the whole site." We added some instructional text on how to make titles and key commands, which I suspected no one would read. I worried that, when poets saw their submissions mangled by HTML, they'd never post again. Perhaps I was right.

#### DEAD ALBATROSSES

From "Poem for the Ring-necked Pheasant"

*The reporter stands in the hurricane chamber.  
"This is . . . a category three," he wheezes,  
skin pulling from his face.  
I am in Iowa where there are no hurricanes,  
but where a windstorm brought us  
the Ring-necked Pheasant.  
I'm waiting for a windfall of money;  
I don't care where it blows in from.*

*Some of my neighbors say they'd never  
take Illinois money, but how would they know?*

Some spotlight birds were far more popular than others; as Billy Bob Thornton in *Bad Santa* says, "They can't all be winners." The ring-necked pheasant was introduced to Iowa around 1900 during a windstorm that blew over pens of captive game birds. I suggested to Tyler that we include a game bird to encourage all those poet/hunters out there to submit. Turns out, the Venn diagram intersection of hunters and poets is mighty slim, folks. While none of the October poems read as pro-hunting, many were definitely anti-hunter.

#### Bird Song

*Ring-necked, I ring with color  
above and below my priestless collar,  
green head, masked for your red death.  
Don't shoot, go home, cook up your meth.*

*Kill yourself, leave my wild speckled body alone;  
Iowa, O Iowa, my accidental home.  
Poisoned streams, rivers, lakes, ferti-laced fields,  
Thanks, wind, for blowing me free, unconcealed.*

In the beginning, I spent from 5 to 10 hours a week on increasing submissions to the project. To me, the most surprising response was from poets.

"You should submit a verse to IBOM. This month's bird is the ring-necked pheasant."

"Oh, I don't have any poems about those," the poet thinks, "but I have a poem about a dead albatross."

"Oh—how sad! Uh, dead albatrosses aren't on the spotlight bird list, but if you ever get inspired . . ."

It was an early "Aha" moment: poets I knew who wrote books were busy writing poetry about subjects they chose to write about. Wading into the creative river of humanity was not necessarily motivating to them. Perhaps "the creative river of humanity" reminded them of the public pool they swam in as children—and the horrible case of plantar warts that ensued.

I reminded myself that IBOM was not for poets—it was for people who yearned to write a poem. So instead of shaking the poet tree branches again, I set up a Facebook group and a Twitter account, and connected to every bird, conservation, and nature group I could find.

Tyler and I began appearing on the "Local Talk" show at Ames' KHOI. He was the brain on birds, dishing out the science facts. Did you know the ring-necked pheasant is a member of the grouse family? I was the bird brain, reading beautiful, strange, funny, mysterious poems that strangers posted on the site, like this one, recalling Pope's "Windsor Forest."

From "Poem for the Ring-necked Pheasant"

*See! from the brake the whirring pheasant springs,  
And mounts exulting on triumphant wings:  
Short is his joy; he feels the fiery wound,  
Flutters in blood, and panting beats the ground.  
Ah! what avail his glossy, varying dyes,  
His purple crest, and scarlet-circled eyes,  
The vivid green his shining plumes un-fold,  
His painted wings, and breast that flames with gold?*

#### CROW-D KILLER

Nothing can kill interest in a crowdsourced poetry project like the 2016 presidential election. People could barely lift their heads off the couch. Poetry wasn't making anyone's to-do list. We were all going to die. At least with its omi-



nous associations, the American crow reflected a glooming, looming sense of doom. Some used the site to vent their angst.

### From "Poem for the American Crow"

*Swan-lake white, Cardinal red, Blue-Jay blue: the demagogue crushes of birds; oh, you're sick of it—*

*red and blue like the flashing hands of sirens. Your apologists jumped all over explaining your croaky finesse—*

*and I read about it, how you're clever: how you drop shiny turds in the path of bulldozers: the running-*

*over exposes their silver linings—but honestly, Crow I don't think it'll be*

*enough. Evil doesn't dress itself up in black; I trust you now more than ever.*

### I WAS LIKE, "YEAH, RIGHT"

The Iowa Arts Council organized several fellow project presentations across the state. In Osceola, members of the Clarke County Arts Council presented their work first: a carver who turned to woodworking after he was injured at his construction job; an abstract painter and retired high school art teacher; a stained glass window maker in his 90s! A presenter in her 80s said, though she hadn't painted in years, she still considered herself a painter. Everyone said how much art had enriched their lives.

Then it was my turn, and together we wrote this.

*Do I hear a "hello" or a warning? The caw pierces the cold night air. His dark beady eyes pierce through the day. These are some of the smartest animals on the planet. Their circling masses hover from above. Screeching shrews. Chatty Cathys. A battle-scarred beak, says the dentist. Toothless. A feeling of peace when I see them hovering above. "Is it an eagle?" I ask hopefully. "Aw, no." Oh, to fly effortlessly above the earth, says the pilot. Dark reflections of their cousins, the blue jays. Good thieves. Black magic. West Nile, says the pharmacist. Third time's a charm. Roadkill feast. Black phoenix. A black shining monarch surveying his kingdom.*

Afterwards, the attendees marveled at their accomplishment. A woman in a rhinestone-bedazzled

tunic confessed, "When you said we were going to write a verse together, I was like, 'Yeah, right . . .'" she rolled her eyes, ". . . but we did it!"

Another woman said, "Even Paul spoke up!" referring to the wispy man in the far corner who had suddenly shouted, "Their circling masses hover from above!" causing the Osceolans around him to leap about a foot in the air.

Tunic whispered, "Paul never says anything."

"Well, he nailed it today," I shrugged.

"He sure did," they nodded.

The crow was one of the most popular birds in the project. I know this because I could sneak in through the site's backdoor and count the submissions. People began including their names within their verses as a work-around to the anonymity of the submission window. I liked it. It meant they felt that the site belonged to them, too, which it did. It also gave me a chance to connect with people using the site—like Steve Rose.

### Three Crows

*Three crows flew herd on a broad-tailed hawk east of Albert Lea, black beaks talking trash then driven into the hawk's grey back.*

*One flies point while the other two harass from the wings. You've seen this in Korea, three MIG's shooting down our bomber; or coyotes on a sick cow.*

*Two hours later across the Iowa border, a new pecking order: two red-winged blackbirds, clever as card players, harassing a passing crow.*

*The crow's wings, lumbering like sails on a dingy, drag against the current, while the blackbird sharks slice the breeze into splinters.*

*The crow tries a barrel roll to the blackbirds' delight. Tufts of coal feathers flutter from his belly. A lone cedar offers comfort and into its arms the crow falls.*

*Black feathers, onyx beak and talons sheathed in royal green. This crow: terrorist, target, stowaway, scavenger, and for a moment, on that rough branch, King.*

by Steve Rose

### RAPTOR PEOPLE

A volunteer at the Iowa Raptor Center outside Iowa City sent in this crystalline haiku.

### Haiku for the Iowa Screech Owl

*Small rapture in the fracture  
That blessed Burr oak Ents and Baxoje.  
The prairie ghosts honor you.*

It struck me as remarkably empathetic to care for a species so indifferent to us.

My friend's uncle raises falcons. He told me about the leash around the bird's ankle, and the windowless box in which the falcon sleeps with a leather hood over its eyes as he drives it out to hunt for rabbits, ducks, and anything else it can carry in its talons.

"Do your falcons . . . like you?" I asked.

"No," he laughed and shook his head.

### IS THIS GOING TO BE ON THE TEST?

Another surprising response was from schools and teachers. They didn't engage with IBOM like I thought they would. Here's an exception, written by a group of junior high school students in Ouzinkie, Alaska.

### From "Poem for the American Eagle"

*Dumb bird, sitting on a wire,  
my dad saw one get shocked.  
Favorite bird, wings spread,  
my papa likes them too.  
You say Eagle, I say no. No eagles.  
I don't know. They're birds.  
They make a nest in my yard.  
Every spring they have babies  
and you can hear them screeching.  
I like the way they sound.  
We see eagles everywhere.  
They are like flies around here.*

Less than 5% of IBOM submission were from schools. I thought it would be such a "no-brainer" for teachers. I wrote a lesson plan and posted it on the site. Collin, a former junior high school teacher, agreed. "It's a great way to kill an hour. I'd be hitting that thing once a week."

I sent emails to K-12 school administrators and teachers as well as university programs. I peeked to see if the recipients had opened my emails, and they did—every month—throughout the entire project. They were interested, so why didn't they bite?

In March, rangers at the local conservation area asked me to operate a poetry station for hundreds of field-tripping K-3rd grade students. What I observed on that sunny hill with my easel, giant pad of paper, and sack of multicolored markers—as well as in the auditorium with my laptop, when rain waylaid our outdoor sessions—gave me valuable insight as to why teachers were not using IBOM in their classrooms.

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They thought it was totally stupid. At least that's what their folded arms, cocked heads, sneering lips suggested. Yet another "Aha" moment: no aspect of collective poetry writing prepares students for standardized tests: not the writing, not an increased sense of connection to birds or the environment, not collaboration, not shouting out answers. So why would a teacher engage?

I was like a babysitter, and a goofy one at that. I'm a terrible typist, and whenever I hit the wrong key on the big PC the nature center had lent me (which was often—I'm a Mac gal), the students corrected me, loudly—"Wrong letter!" or "No comma!" This was what was important to them. The older the students were, the louder they shouted, i.e. the more unsettled they were by the presence of errors. The whole exercise raised their collective blood pressure.

Of course, the teachers were unsettled, too, as they no doubt considered students' errors reflections of their own teaching skills. I was posting online (where everyone could see it) a collaboratively written poem, over which the instructors had no editorial control, written on a subject with which the students had no expertise. This scenario was a nightmare for teachers. Why invite the scrutiny?

I also learned that if there's *anything* else to do—like make a pine cone bird feeder, or go on a nature walk, or touch an eagle's feathers, or pet Tootsie, an elderly blind falcon, or wash your hands in the restroom for 10 minutes—people will pick that over writing a poem. For IBOM's most successful crowdsourcing sessions, the audience had nothing else to do and nowhere else to go.

At the 2017 Iowa Youth Writing Project conference in Iowa City, the middle school students spotted the typos, but they didn't obsess. In fact, they went with it and made poetry out of the mistakes. But these students and their teachers already loved creative writing, poetry, and—it turned out—YouTube videos of trumpeter swans stealing graham crackers from toddlers.

#### My Way or the Highway

*Big, strong, loud!*

*One who is not outspoken.*

*You see its white feathers just like a cloud.*

*If you see my big white feathers, get outta my way!*

*You better listen to what I say.*

*If you make me mad, get away.*

*I know it's repetitive, but I blow my own horn.*

*I'm the only one in my band.*

*I am literally called the trumpeter swan.*

*My trumpet doesn't need a mute.*

*I use my neck to call you, "Pay attention!" with.*

*I know it's crazy, but trust me, it's not a myth.*

*If you see me, I'm not someone you wanna mess with.*

*My horns sounds in its own riff.*

**I'M THE MOST MAJESTIC!!**

*Forget red and black. Black and white are my colors.*

*I am an anarchist swan. No queen owns me.*

*When I honk, I make the other side panicky.*

*I am beautiful my own way, no matter what other people say.*

*I am the trumpeter swan so get outta my way!*

*If you don't, I'll make you pay, because at the end of the day, it's my way, or the highway.*

by the Swans of Anarchy

#### CAN I WRITE IT?

At six months in, IBOM was breathing on its own—beyond my social media posts and email pleas. Like-minded local media and non-profit organizations were essential in spreading the word. Visual artists sent photographs, paintings, and drawings. A local band even wrote a theme

song. While both bird people and poetry people contributed, I'll say the love of birds drove more people to the site. Several renowned poets pitched in, but the majority of the contributors would be considered "amateurs"—which was precisely the intended result.

The real surprise was the poems themselves. My crowdsourced-doubting brain would never have dreamed up the inspired beauty gifted by (mostly) complete strangers. Even though I know it happened, I still find it stunning that people from all over the world (1) discovered the project, and (2) wrote *wonderful* poems about crows, eastern screech owls, and robins that danced with the words of hundreds of other people. Every morning, I awoke to find new surprises, like someone had planted flowers around my house in the middle of the night.

#### One Letter, One Word

*It's spring, and the peacocks  
are in heat, again.*

*The male chases peahens  
as quickly as he can dragging  
his fan of fanciful feathers  
with eyes of gold, blue and green.*

*He screams, he rages down the street  
after the peahens who seek  
refuge in my neighbor's lawn  
and, sometimes, our doorway.*

*For as loud as its call can be,  
for as singular and solitary,  
it's surprising this bird isn't named  
for its high-pitched honk, its moo,  
its meow like a ball deflating,  
like an old car horn. Some birds  
are named for their symphonic  
parts. Take the trumpeter swan,  
its sound is a muted trumpet*

*call, a thing of beauty, Dizzy  
Gillespie at the mouthpiece,  
its beauty, obvious—a graceful  
long neck, shadowed eyes,  
a sleek, snow-white coat  
worthy muse of ballets and fairytales.  
Like all the pretty birds—peacocks,  
flamingoes, snowy egrets, roseate  
spoonbills, great herons—  
the trumpeter swan was once  
hunted for its plumage to adorn,  
to decorate women's hats and quills.  
Shot in springtime, rookeries robbed.  
In the Everglades, nesting birds  
were hunted almost to extinction.  
It's easy for humans to mythologize,  
to control what they cannot ever  
fully understand. Take women. Take Eve.  
Once endangered, today the birds  
are thriving. Once adorned, now adored—  
one letter makes all the difference.*

by Catherine Esposito Prescott

\*

#### Goodbye

*(Postcard from an Eastern Meadowlark)  
you find my beak too sharp  
my song too sad and slow  
you keep your acres neat  
those grasses have to go  
they love me in Brazil  
they covet yellow so  
along the verge there's grass  
they let the edges grow*

\*

#### From "Poem for the Northern Cardinal"

*I'm talking about you, Northern Cardinal.  
You've got this striking vest*

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Vieve Francis





Northern cardinal (illustration by Polyphony Bruna)

of red and, as far as I know, whatever  
else you've got, that vest is the best.  
Who's got the best vest? You do!  
Who looks like a red pupil in the white  
eye of winter? You do! Who questions  
the world with feathers? Who could sit  
on my head like a flaming fist?

by the Cedar Rapids  
Facebook Writers

\*  
**Wild Blue Heron**

Skinny old man in a shaggy cape  
unhinged his bobby elbows,  
wobbled up on knobby knees  
and blew his blue underneath  
as we passed his marsh stump  
on I-80. "Get a load of this!"  
he trumpeted. We said: "A heron!  
But what's in his mouth . . . ?"  
A squirrel's tail twirled  
like a sputtering propeller.  
Tinkertoy spine winds up to spear fish at its feet  
He bends with grace and ease of a yogi. . . .  
Just two lines like kneeless legs  
Legless knees, fish-head punctuation.  
Or is that a pelican?  
Drop it my way.

Those "Aha" moments continued until the end,  
when I was still learning new ways to connect  
people to poetry. In June, I visited Goldie's Kids  
Club, an after-school summer program directed  
by the Iowa Historical Society, to crowdsource  
some eastern bluebird poems.

"Do you want to tell me a poem about a blue-  
bird?" I asked a tired little girl with lots of curly  
hair, slumped over in a chair.

She suddenly perked up. "Can I write it?"  
"Oh . . . sure," I said, surprised, and handed her  
a brown marker. This was the first time anyone  
had asked to write their own verse on the easel.

"I want the blue one," she said, pointing to the  
marker in my other hand.

"Of course!" I said, handing it to her. She  
stretched as high as she could on her tiptoes in  
front of the easel and wrote this.

Bluebirds are  
beautiful teach a  
bluebird how  
to teach a little  
math and a  
little science

It wasn't the last lesson, but it was a doozy. How  
selfish I'd been for ten months: the sole enjoyer  
of the tactile pleasure of writing—of drawing big  
blue Bs, round as a bluebird's loop-de-loop.

She handed me the marker, then the cap.

"Nice job!" I said.

"I know," she said, then proudly read her poem  
aloud, several times, touching each line she'd  
written—in touch with creativity, her words, and  
birds.

My old friend never submitted a verse to  
IBOM—I think she's mad at me for something  
liberalish I said on Facebook. It's OK. I'll take the  
heat. Only one profane word ever made it into a  
poem—it was written by a different dear friend of

mine who was using a red-winged blackbird as a  
metaphor for her jerkface ex-boyfriend.

Work-wise, IBOM was a part-time job. Why  
did I keep doing it? Obviously, I fell in love—with  
everything I learned about birds (which was a lot,  
though I still don't know where they go in win-  
ter) and with all the people who interacted with  
the poems. Cheerleaders were everywhere. Some  
preferred to watch it evolve from the sidelines, but  
that, I learned, didn't diminish their pleasure. Peo-  
ple I didn't even know would ask me, "How's the  
IBOM thing going? I heard about it on the radio.  
Very cool." When we open a window, we can  
never be sure of who will fly through. Or where  
they will land.

Note: The text, art, and website code of IBOM (<http://www.iowabirdofmouth.com/>) are open source and avail-  
able for use in noncommercial projects.

Jennifer L. Knox's nonfiction writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, "Press Play," "The Best American Poetry Blog," *The Mycophile*, and "The Inquisitive Eater." She is the author of four books of poems. Her work has appeared four times in the *Best American Poetry* series as well as in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *The American Poetry Review*. She teaches poetry writing and communications at Iowa State University and is currently at work on a culinary memoir.

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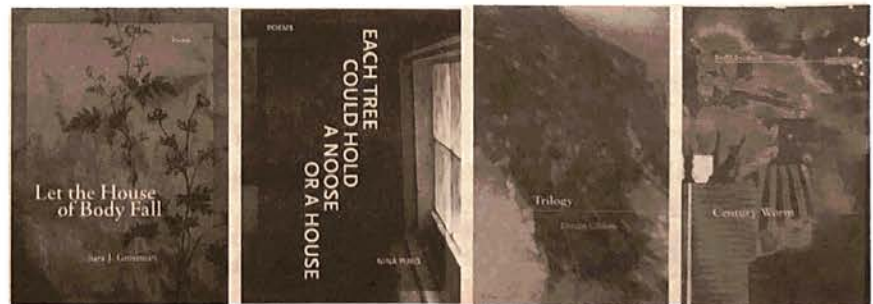
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