We Were Here poems appeared in slightly different forms as follows. “Johnnie Mudd,” an imaginary character, was published in *ArtWord Quarterly*, Summer 2000. “Lost in the Stars,” prompted by a building on Wisconsin Highway 35, appeared online in *Jerseyworks*, 2005. “Bad Poems” appeared in *Wolf Head Quarterly* in print and online, Summer 1998, and was reprinted as “Not Emily Dickinson” in *Lost Lake Folk Opera*, Fall & Winter 2017. “Scandinavian White on Black*”* is based on a family photograph and appeared in *Wolf Head Quarterly*, Winter 1998 and in *Lost Lake Folk Opera*, Fall & Winter 2017.

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**Johnnie Mudd**

The snow flew till May that year,

then melted; everything

was oversoft and grey,

no firm in firmament.

The ground could bear no weight.

Muddled tracks appeared, then

filled with rain, vanished back to ruts.

Field animals got mired; nothing

held, including Johnnie,

the idler and imbiber,

preferring pleasures to the farm.

Digging his grave

was an exercise in endurance.

Walls caved in twice,

almost trapped one digger,

who swore hell was mud,

not fire, as he rose

gasping from the earth.

At graveside, rain came anew,

and preacher rushing "dust to dust,"

almost joined the dear departed

when one side caved in again.

Johnnie ended buried on a slant, still sinking,

a fitting end to his sins, some said,

as they trailed away knee deep in muck,

blaming Johnnie for sucking 'em down

and the sky with no promise of blue.

**Lost in the Stars**

The Satellite Cafe was never added on

to the Sonic Motel, because he never

got the liquor license for the Boom Bar.

Now, he figured it was just as well.

After James Dean and Buddy Holly crashed,

the future didn’t look so bright.

So, the neon jet on his vacancy sign

whizzes along leaving a permanent vapor trail,

The rooms’ blonde dressers still

match the glass-topped bed stands.

The molded blue plastic chairs

complement wall-to-wall red shag.

He couldn’t explain the connection he saw

between the way Elvis moved on stage

and the way Rosa Parks refused to stand up.

It made him doubt progress was always good.

When quiz shows turned out to be fixed

and Marilyn died, he decided to stay put.

Besides, since he wasn’t close enough

to where they built interstates

to lose or gain any business,

there was never any reason to up-date.

He never got over or out of the 50s,

simply sat silently watching his sign blink,

lost in the stars.

**Bad Poems**

**(or Not Emily Dickinson)**

She read her poem,

a bad poem,

and followed it with another.

It was a cool Sunday afternoon.

She was dressed in her Midwest best,

fuzzy design sweater, polyester pants.

Her smiling husband, in brand new shirt,

had driven her two-and-a-half hours,

all the way from Saint somewhere,

so she could join this open class

to read her poems in a wheezy voice,

the pages rattling in her quaking hands.

At the end of the last cliché, she looked

to the instructor with such desperation,

we were embarrassed by her naked need.

We all knew her poems weren't very good,

knew the devastation of her knowing

was a brink she could not cross.

Her husband sat there proud and happy,

believing in his wife, unaware

of the judgments swirling about her,

and the instructor smiled stiffly,

thanked her very much for reading,

and said everything expected,

except the truth.

**Scandinavian White on Black *(Betsy Moen, Mary Bohn, Julia Bergen, Nettie Moen, Emma Severson, Inger Peterson, Anna Johnson)***

Seven sisters,

a string of paper dolls,

gaze at distant mystery.

Seven stoic faces

framed by swept-back hair,

pinned in proper place.

Seven floor-length dresses,

long-sleeved, cinch-waisted,

scant on lace and ruffles.

Seven prim high collars,

three held by ribbons,

two closed by cameos.

One mouth, pinch-lipped,

set and sour. One head

tilted at a jaunty angle.

Another’s chin held high.

One face, moon-round, sparkles.

The next one draws back, wary.

One set of eyes

writ soft with sorrow,

one timid set, downcast.

Seven sisters'

passings held

in silver silence.

One camera’s eye

can’t show their paths

to seven separate graves.