A poem for an empty week

North Country Notebook

By George Vukelich

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I had it figured for this week's column.

I would head down to the lake, hook up with Vince Colletti and do a little serious icefishing. Colletti would listen to his muse. I would listen to Colletti. And from all this activity, a piece of poetry would emerge, snowborn and so crackling with cold that even Steady Eddy would put down his brandy, nod his head wisely and agree that Colletti spoke truly in the voice of the shaman all the while he was limiting out on bluegills.

The empty landing should have warned me.

The empty lake should have warned me.

And the empty place in my head should have confirmed those early warnings.

There was not a Colletti to be seen. There was not even an Olson.

I mushed out to our favorite bass bottoms.

The wind howled out of Manchuria across the bay. The snow drifted deep as Chicago's. The heart went pitty-pat. I realized suddenly that if I died out here, they wouldn't find me until Spring. Of some future year.

I drilled only two holes within walking distance, sat on my can—the gray plastic one—and jigged the large Swedish Pimple.

"The only reason you don't see anybody out here, not even Colletti," I told myself without moving my lips, "is that everybody is smarter than your are. Even Colletti."

I didn't stay long. Two hours. I could have gone three. But the feet were going and the visions were coming.

"Well, you learned something," Colletti would have said. "You learned that you are stupid."

It was one of those days. Saw no fish. No fisherpersons. No crows even. Just two cross-country skiers following the shoreline. They avoided me like the plague.

So, I mushed back from our favorite bass bottoms with not much to show for it. Certainly not a column.

I bumped into Bill Hart at Mickie's Dairy Bar. Bill was reading The Press Connection at the counter and that's not a column either, although Lord knows, it could be an item.

And that was about the size of my week outdoors. I didn't encounter too much wildlife unless you count the night I read poetry with Johnnie B. Tuschen at The Cardinal Bar one night. Tuschen did his usual fine performance, as befitting Madison's Poet Laureate.

When he finished, I came on and the room emptied like our winter lake.

"It's not really an outdoorsy crowd," Tuschen consoled. "They're into Fat Richard and all that jazz."

He did say that the poem, "Drop Out," was pretty Footloose for an Older Fellow. If you left early, this is what you missed:

They are screaming at me
to buy myself a New Car
a Candidate
or drink a Coca Cola
I am not thirsty
and there is No Place
want to go
where they could take me.
I wonder what I am doing Here
listenening to all that crap
coming out of their loud-speakers

There are Ways of Leaving, the Old Ones said
There are Places that can be reached
and Nothing can touch you There

If This turns worse than This
You can always find an Old One
Better yet, an Old One can find you if you want

For Now, when the Others start screaming at you
You can just be smiling
so Nobody knows you're still there
Inside.
Inside, you can be saying
To hell with you, you crazy bastards

Just be saying that
And Watching.

It's a strange column, I know, but next week will be different. Tuschen will do the fishing. And Colletti will do the poems.