

3rd Wednesday



Spring 2021

Third Wednesday Magazine
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Third Wednesday is a quarterly journal of literary and visual arts. Though we manage the magazine from Michigan, we welcome submissions from all over the world. Digital issues of the magazines are completely free to anyone and print issues can be purchased at Amazon.com.

Find us on the web at **thirdwednesdaymagazine.org**. There you can download free digital issues, read many of the fine poems we have published in the past and find the link to our portal at *Submittable* where you can submit your work and subscribe to the magazine. You can also find and follow us on Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr.

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Editor's Note for Spring 2021

This spring issue of 3rd Wednesday features the winning poems from our annual poetry contest along with honorable mentions and other contest poems that, though they didn't win prizes, are included with permission of the poets.

Our contest judge this year was Joy Gaines-Friedler. Joy has taught as a guest instructor at Wayne State, Michigan State and Frostburg State Universities, and at the Lapeer Correctional Facility for the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) through the University of Michigan. You can find Joy's complete bio and links to her books and individual work at <http://www.joYGainesFriedler.com/>.

Joy read over 200 entries (600 poems) to choose just 3 winning poems and a few honorable mentions, a monumental task. We hope you enjoy her selections.

This issue also features four pieces of short fiction and some filler art by one of our frequent contributors, Gary Wadley, of Louisville, Kentucky.

We're reading for the summer issue now, which will mark the return of the popular 50/50 contest. If you submit for the summer issue you can choose to enter your poems for a prize of half of the contest fees or \$50, whichever is greater.

Jack Ridl / *The Coffee Is Hot*

It has snowed all night. And it is still snowing.
And he is still there, over there on my desk
the only photograph of my great-grandfather,

Bohemian immigrant who spoke maybe five words
of English. He is sitting on his beer barrel wagon
holding the reins of his two tired old hairy-hoofed horses.

The barrels seem barely balanced. A dog looks up at him.
Will we have a normal summer? Not if this winter is a hint.
I am reading a New Yorker article by Adam Gopnik. He's

being critical and using "perhaps"—a lot. I don't believe him,
but my mind spoke up, said, "So what?" to the article and
The New Yorker, so I cut out a few cartoons. It's snowing.

The woods behind our old house are a haphazard clutch
of mostly oaks, many bending, many having fallen and leaning
against those still standing. The squirrels are eating the seed

fallen from the feeder holding a small frenzy of chickadees,
juncos, goldfinches, nuthatches. I was taught God is watching.
I'm watching. And it's snowing and suddenly a mourning dove

lands on a branch, sits still except for the way it bobs
its gentle head. I listen for its soft call. Soon my wife and
our dog will return from their morning romp and tromp

through the snow now surrounding each tree and stump.
I will watch for them to come into sight, the dog's nose
snow-packed, her tail still wagging. That will matter. And

my great-grandfather is wrapped in sweaters and a tattered
overcoat, the dog shivering, the slats on each barrel
iced over, great-grandfather just as frozen as Bohemia.

Jack Ridl / Saugatuck, Michigan

Robin Michel / *For Song and Her Mother*

Was it your mother who named you Song
and if so, how and when did she choose?

Was it during the nine months of gestation,
as she cradled you in the full moon of her womb,
smiling to herself as she traced the shape
of her blue-veined belly (your first home),
imagining what kind of creature you might be?

Or was it later, when you emerged, red-faced
and mewling, your tiny voice crying out its first protest
against the injustices in this cold, brittle world?

Or when she brought you to her milky breast,
and she gazed down upon your sweet strength
as you suckled for the first time? Did your
breathing remind her of the pause between notes
in a favorite lullaby – the one she sang to you,
her voice a whisper? How did she know –
how do mothers know – that one day,
your laughter and smile would fill dark spaces
with sunlight, and that your mosquito complaints,
your cacophonous music of crows, would spark
laughter? Daughter, now it is time for you
to hold your mother of song in your arms.
Sing her a lullaby. Sing her home.

Robin Michel

Marisa Clark / *What the Bird Saw*

Another thud. I hope to find the bird
stunned, concussed at most, but able to fly,
and not one injured that I'll have
to bundle in soft cloth and drive
to the wildlife rescue across town
or broken-necked and warm with life
just ended against the window.

Does the screen soften the blow?

Sometimes, after, I stand in the yard
and study the drawn blinds, the dark
screen smudging the reflection of the world
outside—and consider what more I might hang
to warn of the danger in flying toward
this illusion of trees and sky and a sure future
that looks quite like the recent past
the bird winged freely through. There's a lesson
here, if only I will take it. Best is when
I hear the thud and find no sign of strike—
no bird, no feathers, no dusty residue.
Whatever rammed its head against
a memory survived and flew away, fast.

Marisa Clark / Albuquerque, New Mexico

Dave Nielsen / *It's You*

The dog knows it's you
before I do,

before I can see
or even hear you.

You park the car
out on the street,

you step onto the evening lawn.
All this in what seems to me

like total silence.
I am only a split second

behind the dog,
however,

for as soon as the dog stands
and looks at the door,

then I, too,
know

that it's you.

Dave Nielsen / Salt Lake City, Utah

P.C. Scheponik / *The Becoming*

The swan rested upon the water along the edge of the pond,
its breast, pressing lightly against the cattails and reeds,
like a cloud come to earth, like an island of feathers and silk,
silent, floating, an image of perfect ease.

I could feel the poem taking shape in my mind--

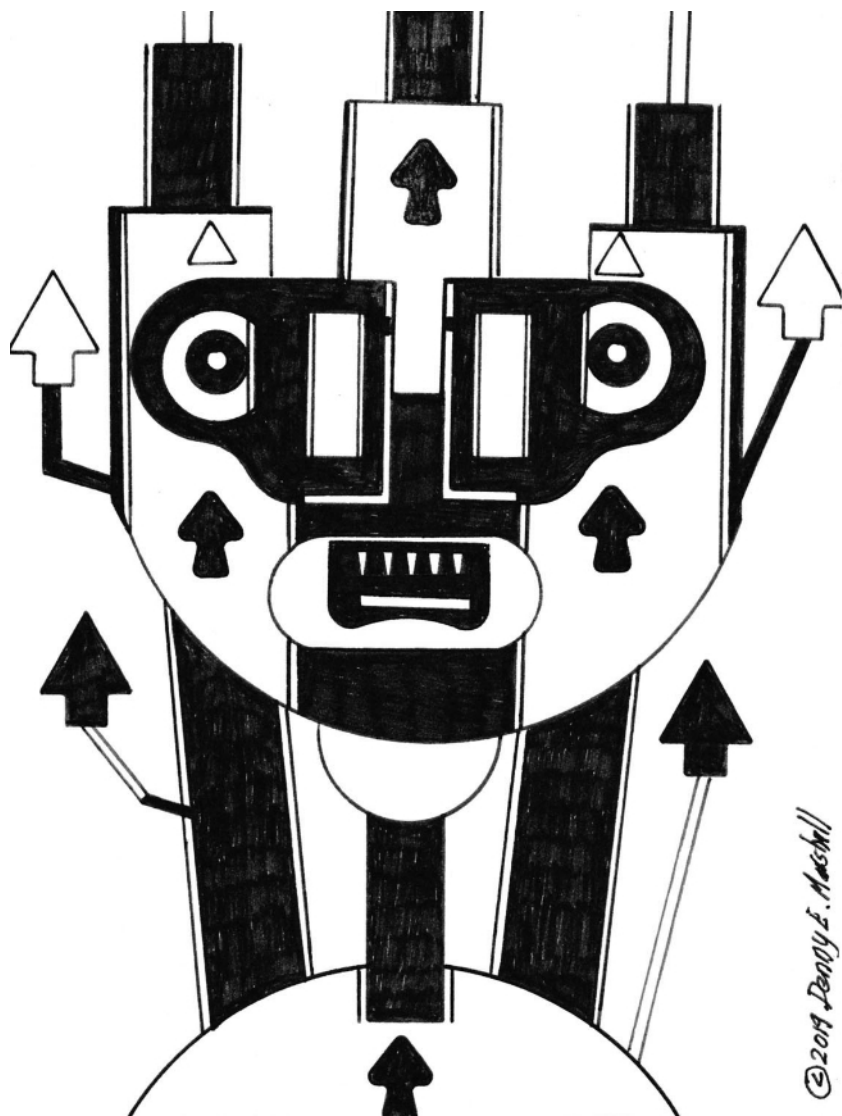
the flawless oval of blue-green egg,

the golden sun of yolk inside.

Feather by feather, the words came alive,
rivulet by rivulet rippling along the sides of the drifting swan
become island, become cloud.

Then the sudden song of wings ringing out in glorious gusts
as the swan rose to belong, once more, to the sky above,
as the swan's wings flapped, as the shell inside me cracked,
as I felt the poem begin to rise, as the words broke free in a dream
I could fly from the confines of this page.

P.C. Scheponik / Ocean City, Maryland



Drawing / Denny Marshall / Lincoln, Nebraska

William Doeski / *Blizzard in Pandemic*

Bracing for heavy wet snow
that will topple beloved trees
and strangle the electric lines,

I try to maintain my personal
geometry by sitting upright
like a demigod on a throne.

You're more active, snuggling
cats
in their bolster beds, placing
flashlights to find in the dark.

Even at dawn the thickening
of everything outdoors feels
like a layer of wet felt applied

by a huge demented milliner.
We've been through this before
days without power, the dark

critiquing the usual Christmas.
If we survive to plow the snow
from the driveway and descend

to the post-storm village, we'll
find
the pandemic still in charge,
masks required despite the tears

of frustration streaking our
faces.
We need milk, butter, and eggs,
but who can trust the fridge

on such an uncertain morning?
Better stay home and recount
the dream lives that embarrass

without physically harming us.
We can lose ourselves in each
other's collage, plying image

upon image the way the snow
will, revising every surface
until the
falsehood is
complete.

William Doeski / Peterborough, New Hampshire

Bethany Reid / *Moving the Piano*

I have moved the piano from one side
of the room to the other. Now it sits
near the open door. I no longer have to make
my way to it around boxes and books.
The piano knows this, waits
like a patient beast for my attention,
for the weight of my hands on its spine.
I couldn't have moved it without my husband.
We had to work together and take rests.
He shouted at me when my end barely budged.
Our marriage, too, is a patient beast.
It gets stuck in dark rooms and sulks,
but when we offer it a little music,
it shuffles its feet, it waltzes.

Bethany Reid / Edmonds, Washington

Sarah Carleton / *Early Shift*

We are a string of café lights
that blink along the mothy humid streets.
We peeled back bed clothes like muscovite's
foil and now drive dazed, a string of café lights,
down black roads at the tail end of nights.
Every day, extracted from our sheets,
we fall in line, a string of café lights
at five a.m., and the groggy crawl repeats.

Sarah Carleton / Tampa, Florida

Leslie Schultz / *Energy Audit*

Our kitchen can seem gusty even
with the storms shut tight.
Old buildings leak. They just do.
Once a fierce rain drove water
into the vent above the light
on the ceiling of the little room
behind the kitchen. It dripped.
I feared shorted wires, set out
a bucket. The tiles are still browned out.

Sometimes I hear little skitterings,
and pretend I don't.

When we remodeled the upstairs
bathroom, we found a few walnuts,
wizened in their blackened shells, wedged
into channels between the floor joists.

There is more squeaking than sneaking
in this house. Every movement
is an announcement.
The hardwood is more
than one hundred years old, so
what do you expect?

And yet, despite wind, and woodpeckers, and wasps
demolishing and burrowing and building
in the front porch pillars, and every spring
a fresh invasion of ants, and occasional
winter ice dams that carve cavorting
cracks near the bedroom ceiling,

I am happy here, just as I am
in my body. Nothing yet
I can't handle, and most days
I feel like singing.

Leslie Schultz / Northfield, Minnesota

Laura Ann Reed / *Silence*

Fugitive from the night
the giant silk moth, Polyphemus
floats
among blood red leaves
with the focused calm
of a contemplative
who's taken vows.
But to vow one thing
is to be silent
about another;
fixed
on the single
kohl-rimmed golden owl's eye
painted on each hind wing—
ingenious deceit!—
my gaze
stretches a brief span of flight
a little longer.

Laura Ann Reed / Mill Creek, Washington

Jimmy Pappas / *The Three-Legged Deer*

She sits under the spruce tree in my backyard. When she stands, the bottom half of her left front leg dangles at the joint, an orchid waiting to bloom. I approach her and whisper, *Apples*. It becomes her name. *I dub thee, Apples*. Each day I go into the woods

like a mendicant friar and place a spread of fruit before her. She never displays any sign of pain, only strength and magnificence. In time she accepts my offerings. Now I ask her to accept my love. I cut up an apple on a platter. I set it down before her with a rose

on the side. I lower one knee and genuflect. I stretch out my arms and bow my head. *MLady*. I hope for one summer together before the bullet that is sure to come. She will bear me two spotted fawn children. Our daughter will be a long-legged beauty prancing

across fields. The smell of her in estrus will cause males to bash their heads together. Our son will have the largest antlers in school. In the fall when he is in rut, he will strut down the corridors with a herd of cartwheeling cheerleaders flashing their white tails behind them.

Jimmy Pappas / Chichester, New Hampshire

Jane Costain / *Not Quite Ready for Spring*

Clumps of grass gather on the lawn
while seed pods clutter the walk.
Hoses still coil in winter hibernation
and fallen blossoms dirty the birdbath's
water. Dandelions sprout in defiance,
while wary tulips clamp shut their buds
against the cold. And poor robin,
afraid of betraying a nest, refuses to sing.

Jane Costain / Denver, Colorado

Connie Post / *The Fire is Ten Percent Contained*

A crow flies
out of the smoke-filled sky

I've read
that they recognize faces
and for a moment
I wonder if this lonely bird sees mine

a crow cannot shelter in place
or find a face covering

they cannot wash their claws
in the polluted river near our house

they fly over us
not noticing the death toll

not able to pull us out
of our own ruined houses

I wash my hands
until they crack

I check air particulate readings
and listen for dry lightning
as evening descends

I wonder where the birds
sleep at night
while the grass burns
through the singed fields
for our sins

how far must they ascend
to forget our faces

Connie Post / Livermore, California

Douglas Cole / *Road of Bones*

Look, up ahead, black road going back
through the white hills, fields fading out
in a rolling mist...a dream, the buried past
sometimes surging to the surface:
broken hut planks of the mining camps,
barbed wire, the hump of a grave-site—
you can drive forever and never see
another soul, and eventually the road
itself disappears in a bank of snow.

Winter Vision

Sitting in a thin ray of sunlight
midwinter still neither warm nor cold
the blue bell of sky ringing
crow taking off with a crab in its mouth
crab seeing in a way it's never seen before

Tuesday's Purge

The white droning of a shredder truck
at someone's garage, box tops flipped open,
gloved hands shoveling documents
into the orange baleen, not a puff of dust,
and your stuff is gone. You stand there clean
as if you never existed, truck moving off
fiber-heavy with the debris of you.
Your head fills up with possibilities.

Douglas Cole / Seattle, Washington

Joe Cottonwood / *Alexandra*

Chasing a cheeky bullfrog
I trip over a giggly girl who says
Crawdads are tickling my toes.
From the mudbank a boy warns
If you touch her I'll kill you.

She's special, he tells me.
She hears fireflies
the sound when they light up
because she's blind you know.
She hears colors too.

So I say I'm special
because I can smell bullshit
and what color are my pants?
Blue she says. *Blue jeans.*

She talks to water striders
who don't seem to listen,
says an owl is watching us with one eye
and she hears clouds fluffing in the sky.

She touches my wrist
seems to know where it will be
runs a finger up my arm through the hairs
makes me shiver.
See you later she says. *Ha ha.*
Her brother leads her away.

Can love crackle in full color
just beyond our sight? Some nights
under quivering stars I listen.

Miss Nessie and Me

At my front door it's Corky the cop
with shoulder radio, holstered gun and he says
"Sorry but we had a report of suspicious behavior."
Doing what?
"Lurking in trees."
Sometimes I sit in my oak.
Yes, I can see Miss Nessie's bathroom window.
It's frosted glass and she's 85 years old.
I go up there to write poems.
Not about her.

Corky again.
"Sorry but she says your dog barks all day."
Laddie the old collie, shadow still curled on the rug,
died two months ago.

Corky, next day:
"She says you used to be so nice.
Now she hears hate speech."
Just screaming at God about cancer.

Corky, two days later:
"We're investigating Miss Nessie's mailbox.
Glued shut for the second time this week."
Did you get fingerprints?
"Stop this. Just stop."
Stop what?
"We'll be in touch. And hey."
What?
"I miss Laddie, too."

Uncle Chessie and the Gnomes

Uncle Chessie liberated gnomes
jailed in scraps of wood.
As a child I was in awe.
On the front porch glider his carver's blade
thrummed so fast, sometimes too fast
for fingers crusted with scars.
He whistled bird-songs gathering grosbeaks
while shavings whiffled over lap and floor.

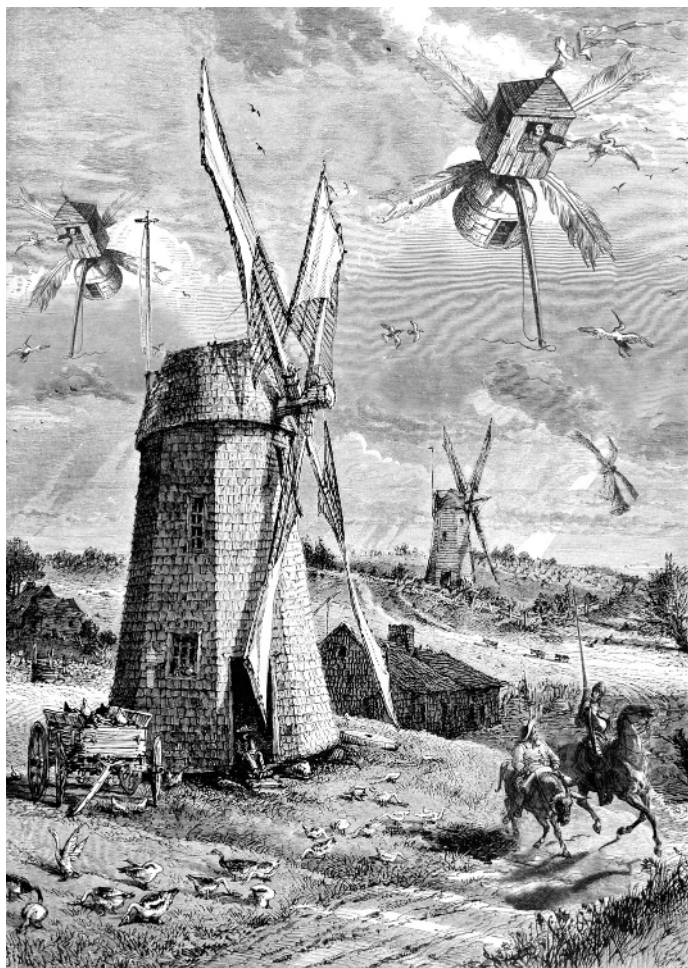
Weekends with Mom I'd go
to the swampy-smelling river house
bringing groceries and the purple pills or else
he'd wander. Grandma Gracie would call.

We'd find Uncle Chessie by the B&O tracks,
pockets stuffed with scraps to become—
each one different—naked lady gnomes
with intricate nipples, naked gentlemen
delicately circumcised, all funny faces
the color of maple, black walnut, yellow pine
with sometimes splashes of red
from his digits bringing life, bringing body
to homeless wandering oddly sexual spirits.

They line my shelves,
puzzle my guests until I explain.
He called them his blood, his kin.
And so, mine too.

Joe Cottonwood / La Honda, California

Lisa Yount / *Don Quixote's Nightmare*



Digital Collage / Lisa Yount / El Cerrito, California

Robert Lowes / *Rapture of the Field Mouse*

He was borne aloft, half dead, in hawk talons,
and bled, in hawk talons.

Soaring above the cornfield stubble,
he saw the horizon instead from hawk talons,

hill beyond hill, sky a blue pasture,
some vision for a mouse in dread of hawk talons,

which relaxed when crows mobbed the raptor.
The rodent fell to earth from reddened hawk talons.

and lived to squeak again in cornfield stubble,
gazing high overhead for hawk talons.

Robert Lowes / St. Louis, Missouri

Virginia Boudreau / **Ashes**

There were days I'd catch him
alone at the kitchen table
lost and careening inside
some unshared regret, his head
propped on shriveled fists.

Always, the room was chilled, and
a cigarette smoldered. Smoke wavered
like a long-held breath, slowly
exhaled; silence tested only
by the shuddering of his sighs.

I would like to say I clasped
thin bones 'til they eased, that
I framed his etched face in my hands,
kissed his sunken brow, that
I smiled at him.

But the truth is
my father was broken, and
I was unskilled
in the art of repair.

Virginia Boudreau / Yarmouth, Nova Scotia

Jude Dippold / *The Season Of Small Pleasures*

It's autumn.

Snow is creeping down
from the high peaks,
and juncos are back at the feeder
after a summer fending for themselves.

The gray winter is swirling
in from the Pacific.

Life,

already an isolated slog
through a difficult year,
is about to turn
sodden.

I look out the window
above the kitchen sink
watching black-capped chickadees
vie with the juncos
for sunflower seed
while a Steller's jay scolds
from a nearby tree.

A friend posts
harvest pictures,
which reminds me
to buy notecards
to keep in contact
with those I can't visit,
guitar strings and books
to keep me busy,
and more birdseed
for the grace of feathered things.

Jude Dippold / Concrete, Washington

Kelly Fordon / *Lake Erie 2020*

I have not aged well. My attitude--all ire
and aslant brows. I've let life seep in like
bunkum. It's not pretty, but the stew has
congealed, crusted to the pot. Everyone
I've ever loved had courage--faced straight
into the storm--even the one in the mirror.
Life takes its toll. We eat and drink and can't
quite believe humanity's chance rants.
Why not smoke? Why not stay up all night
clinging to our closest friends, be they
human or be they cheesecake? Now, outside
my window, poor old Lake Erie, that sad
hump-backed stepsister, is putting on quite
a show. The sun is setting, We're living
through a pandemic and isn't she rich,
consorting with this prize sky, sending up
this chorus call, just for me and whoever is
zooming past in that ramshackle motorboat.
We're still here.

Kelly Fordon / Grosse Pointe, Michigan

Carrie Vaccaro Nelkin / *Foresight and Hindsight*

At the length of ten men, the thicket leans toward us
in a cant as subtle as air stirred by a wing
or the sun's blush after rain.
So peaceful the first day—
wind brushing through thatch, the sound of earth breathing.
But each morning we sense the soil moving.
Do the palms grow more sentient, the tamarind wary?
Is it grumbling that grazes our skin?
Do the shoots creep forward an inch,
maybe three and a sliver, made bolder by night?
The scrub is resentful, the grasses complicit.
We step back, regarding the shadows,
we humans, not to be trusted,
soaked in the censure of cunning green things.
We wait, take our measure while held to account,
inspecting our hearts
for the remnants and stench
of stunted intentions and rotting results,
the frazzle of progress, the clang of possibilities
we should have foreseen.

Carrie Vaccaro Nelkin / Mamaroneck, New York



Encounter

I always thought that meeting you
would take my breath away, suck the air of substance,

strip the sound of every synapse from the universe
except the pulse

on which we ride. But then I saw you
up the hill that night,

a hulking shape, disruptor of ions,
a shifting adumbration. I could not move.

You watched me watching. We weighed
the space that linked us, an eternal

pause, before you turned away, the prudent wild thing,
the wary judge of humans who tremble

in your shadow
and those who do not know enough to tremble.

You stretched to thicker cover, folded
back into the silence, the musk of earth.

The dark moved with you.
I stumbled back, my breath a stammer.

I still smell you on the wind.

Carrie Vaccaro Nelkin / Mamaroneck, New York

SEIGAR / *My Plastic People*



Photograph / SEIGAR / Islas Canarias, Spain

Stephan Finlay / *This Lethal Practice*

And here, a poet in a forgotten state. Caucasian Albania, we call it, though it was in what is now Azerbaijan. We don't even know what they called it. And yet, there the poet. He's brute forcing a piece as we watch. The trappings are familiar. A cat on a windowsill by candlelight. A half-eaten plate of figs and bread and onion forgotten beside the scrolls. His country has existed for several hundred years. It will exist for perhaps fifty more. He does not know this. He does not know that the name of the state will be lost. Or that even the language will be lost, save for the alphabet on several stone inscriptions. That the cairn he builds will point to no road. This work continues forever. He sweats through his hair on this hot mid-year night. Nearby, a fisherman celebrates the catch of the largest beluga sturgeon anyone had ever seen pulled from the Caspian Sea. He is a great fisherman. The stuff of legend. He shares the caviar freely with his guests, who toast him. How they feast upon this lethal practice, and tell the story until they all have it. Cobblers, farmers, a wine merchant. Man versus sea: a universal translation.

Stephan Finlay, Tishomingo, Oklahoma

Pfeilstorches

Migration was difficult to know. It's not surprising. Who could say why birds leave for a time, where they go? Aristotle thought that birds just transmuted into a different species when the weather changed. Later, it was assumed that birds hibernated. Charles Morton believed they flew to the moon. Even in the 19th century naturalists agreed that swallows spent the winter sleeping in the mud at the bottom of lakes. The first clue of migration was a dead stork, shot by a German nobleman, found to have an African arrow embedded in its neck. They're called *pfeilstorches*, and 25 were later documented. Shot in Africa, they still obeyed the call and went home. Thanks to the spears we finally understood them. We've long known this, that violence is a path to knowledge. The shattered faces of the Great War gave us reconstructive surgery. The V2 gave way to the Apollo program. I've been having less luck, stabbing a volume of Jack Gilbert in the dark, burning my own poems, burning my hands. The word doesn't come any easier.

Stephan Finlay / Tishomingo, Oklahoma

Mark Mitchell / **Starting From César Vallejo**

Me moriré en París con aguacer,,,

—*César Vallejo*

Piedra negra dobre una Piedra blanco

Thursday. San Francisco. Market Street's still.
Light rain drips. A man approaches. His face
lowered, watching steps. He tilts towards you.
His slightly crooked glasses echo yours.
The eyebrows arch—a little—then they fill
with joy at chance meeting. You can't quite place
him, retrieve the name. He looks shiny, new.
His glasses reflect your face, they're a door
that swings wide. You knew he'd arrive one day.
You knew it would be in San Francisco.
You were certain it would be in the rain.
You don't try to turn. There's nowhere to go.
This is your last place. His eyes say no pain.
You knew death would greet you on a Thursday

Mark Mitchell / San Francisco, California



Nancy Shih-Knodel / *Woodturning*

In their latest incarnations,
these vessels of wood
still bear the vestiges of life once
lived in the wind and the wild,
survivors of drought or bounty
dictated by the sun,
their intricate bodies penetrated
by a bird's beak or by larval incisions.
In their burnished formality,
cultivated and tool-embellished,
there is nostalgia for the days of
leafy ostentation, of showy spring blossoms,
the lovely, edible fruit.
In their rough informality
are visible the historical wounds
uncured by human touch,
accidental vesicles stamped
into the flesh of buckeye burl,
fine-lined scratches
inky on spalted sycamore,
a bloody gash across
the skin of ashleaf maple.
In their silent monumentality,
apparitions loom, startling
in their strange, unfathomable beauty,
a golden glow blurring the
sinuous contours of Osage orange,
bulging owls' eyes staring out
of oval rims in goldfield burl,
ornate pyrographies
tattooed into sanded birch.
And in the fissures and scars
piercing the center
of bloodwood or purpleheart,
in the dull, black luster
of Gabon ebony, in the barely

perceptible veining of wood,
we can hear the haunting songs
that still beat in the heart of the forest.

Nancy Shih-Knodel / Maple Grove, Minnesota

Nancy White / *Now She's*

the sand the shift the tip
the plover the wing the
door the air could fling open

the shrill the grains the scratch
the rust the sour fringe the
sound the hem the silence

the light the scuffs the gully
the clean the red the drop
the hands the into the earth

Nancy White / Cambridge, New York

Marsha Foss / *Just Before*

the light comes into the sun room
you take the first sip
you say hello to the stranger

you unwrap the gift
you step off the curb
the contractions begin

just before

you get the diagnosis
the pitcher on the mound winds up
you open the envelope

the conductor raises his baton
the soufflé is nearly finished
you drop the letter in the mail slot

just before

you dive into the water
you catch the wave
the curtain rises

the shot sounds at the start of the race
you approach the microphone
the climax

just before

you set off going north
there is that flickering moment
just before

Marsha Foss / St. Paul, Minnesota

SEIGAR / *Old Times in Lisbon*



Photograph / SEIGAR / Islas Canarias, Spain

Debbie Gilbert / *Rambling*

I've rambled through this village in the bright noon sun,
storefront windows packed—
 gold and diamond wristwatches spotlighted
 on black velvet pedestals behind safety glass,
 amber liquor in a crystal bottle
 with a silver filigreed label,
 a stack of seed-grained bread cooling beside an empty
 wicker basket, calico-clothed and waiting.

But tonight, I walk with only
 the moon, some distant clouds, and streetlights.
I'm weary of virtual travels. Zoom exhausted.
I crave the stink of dumpster rot in the carpark,
 displays of Warty Goblin pumpkins and maize,
 and the call of new boots and woolen sweaters,
 cable-knit and chunky-warm like hugs.

An alley cat skitters off. We scared each other.
But, the sidewalk is concrete and mirror-smooth,
and it's a long way to the curb at the intersection.

The stores are closed at this hour.
The security lights are on.
 Some an eerie blue—
And I can peer deep into the back,
 see the spare stock,
 the invoices
 stacked for shipping.

Then, naked mannequins catch my eye. Headless. Paralyzed.
I jump because they're almost real. Lifelike.
 I'll keep moving.
I can stop or I can walk while
traffic lights blink yellow. Caution signals say it's up to me.

Debbie Gilbert / Farmington, Connecticut

Patricia Hamilton / *Imagination*

Every day I pored over the Christmas catalog,
my annual ritual, memorizing each doll I coveted,
each board game I required, each sleek bicycle
with rainbow streamers summoning me
to the open road. But what captivated me
were the party dresses with stiff, lacy skirts
any Shirley Temple votary would be proud to wear.

Then one night: magic.
After my mother turned out my bedroom light,
I snuggled under the covers, trying to picture
the dresses I admired. Inexplicably
my mind began fashioning new ones—

out of air, out of nothing!—

red velvet paired with rich plaid,
white satin whirled with snowflake blue,
deep emerald trimmed with shiny gold ribbon.
The next night, I squeezed my eyes shut, fearful
the colors and patterns would no longer kaleidoscope
through my mind. But conjuring them
required only a tiny “what if?”

As my new power dazzled me off to dreamland,
I wondered why no one
had ever hinted at such a gift,
better than any other
I could wish for.

Patricia Hamilton / Jackson, Tennessee

Terry Allen / *Pull the Other One*

If the ancient Greeks
developed tragedy
on a dreary Monday morning,
then by Friday afternoon,
after the factory whistle
blew, they developed
comedy, just for a little
relief. After all, tragedies
dealt with the big themes
of pride and loss,
often with bodies
piling up by the time
the last lines were spoken,
but the comedies...
the comedies were...
well funny. They
mocked men in power
for the fools that they were,
and they could get away
with ridiculing absolute
monarchs. They could tell
the truth and utter words
of wisdom because
they were not taken seriously.

They were the royal buffoons
in baggy pants, swinging
rubber chickens
and using them for several
good phallus jokes,
after all, theater in ancient
Greece was performed
to honor Dionysus,
the god of wine and fertility
and so, a good comedy
could sneak up on
authority and pull
its pants down
or give it a good wedgie.
It's like Bertolt Brecht
said...one
shouldn't fight
dictators, one should
ridicule them...
but then again,
perhaps, the Greeks
understood that we
should do both.

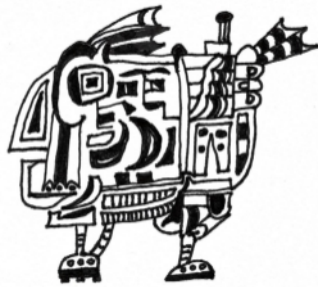
Terry Allen / Columbia Missouri

Jacob Marley

Performed by a local character actor
who specializes in playing
the wrinkled and the dead
and directed by our postmistress
who is known for her scenes
of spectacular crowd control
and soaring language,
sung more than spoken,
by actors who alarmingly
cross down center
and intone their lines directly
to the audience with grand leaps
of vocal gymnastics,
the character of poor Jacob Marley
is there before us to frighten Scrooge
and the children in the audience
with strange moans,
contorted facial expressions
punctuated by the rattling of chains,
without the slightest bit
of understand as to why
he is haunting his old partner
seven years after his death,
except to say that Scrooge
will be visited by three spirits
which for the audience
is enough, never mind
that the lines have been drastically cut
to bring the production in under
sixty minutes, lest the audience's
attention is strained,
never mind that we never quite
learn that the common welfare
of mankind is the business of everyone,
never mind that Marley fails to tell us

that charity, mercy, forbearance
and benevolence should be the business
of Ebenezer Scrooge and the business
of each one of us
sitting in the dark auditorium
and when the play is over
and Tiny Tim asks for God's blessing,
the audience leaps to its feet
and the woman next to me
asks above the roar of the crowd,
how did they learn all those lines?

Terry Allen / Columbia, Missouri



Two Old Friends on Their Early Morning Constitutional

A bit chilly today.
No rain though.
Oh no.
We've had enough of that.
I'd say so.

My word.
What?
Is this new?
I don't believe I've seen it before.
It looks as if it sprang up overnight.
Someone's been busy.

I rather like it.
Do you?
There's something about it.
Well, metal art works can stir the imagination.

It reminds me of my first wife.
Does it?
Yes.
Did I ever meet her? I don't recall.
It was a long time ago.

What was her name?
It doesn't come to me at the moment.
Think of something else. That usually works.

You know, I did a bit of welding when I was younger.
Did you? So did I.

Oh yes. Nothing big. Just puttering about.
It's amazing what people have in common.

It's the tools that I recall most.

Do you? That's funny.

There's the three-inch offset sheet metal bender with forged blades.

Oh my. That takes me back.

And the tinner's hammer with shock reduction grip.

And the good ol' duct ripper.

You treat them right and they treat you right.

They'll never let you down.

Do you recall the dogleg reamer?

Oh yes and what about the stork beak pliers?

Did you ever see a spud wrench?

I did.

Well, I had two.

Really?

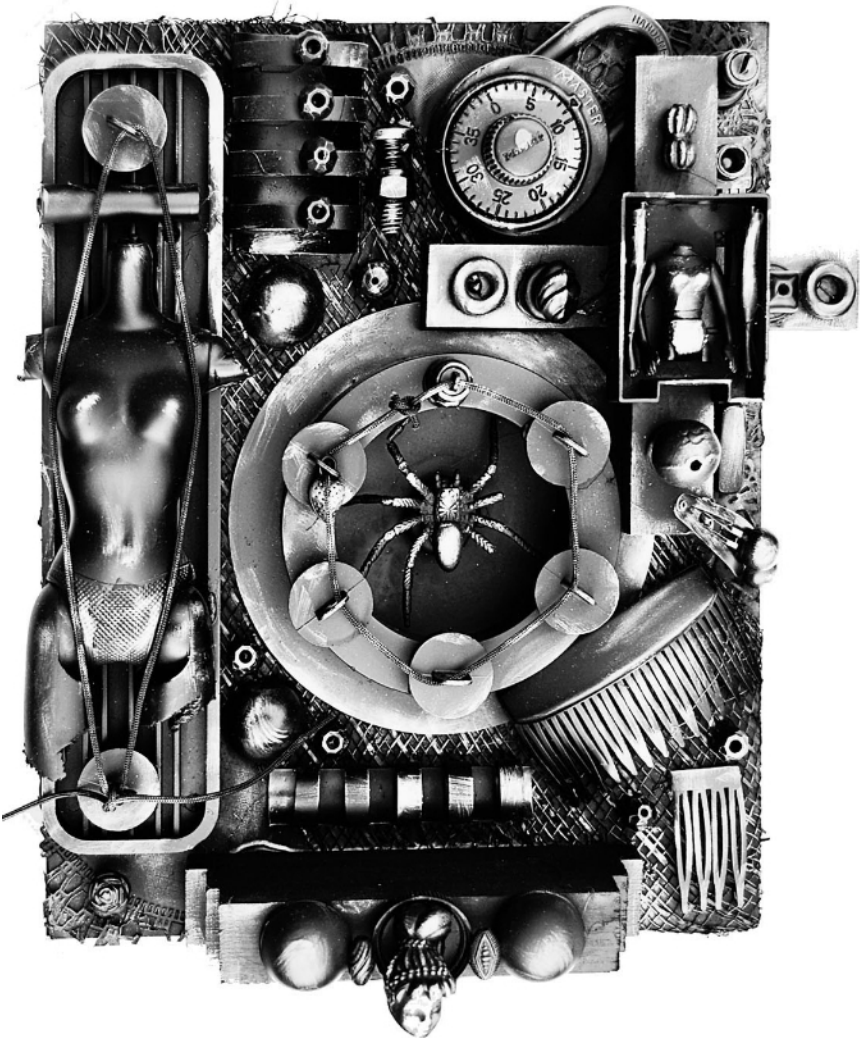
Oh, my. Oh, my.

The memories.

Helen.

Terry Allen / Columbia, Missouri

Jacqueline Wu / *Reflections of Humanity*



Mixed Media Sculpture / Jacqueline Wu / Stony Brook, New York

Brad Shurmantine / *The NASA Scientist at Muir Trail Ranch*

There is infinite hope, but not for us.— Kafka

In this, the second summer
of Trump's pillage,
we hike one morning
to Piute Creek and sit
beneath the bridge, eat lunch,
plunge our bare feet
into the frigid, roaring, crystal water,
so cold it makes our bones ache
almost immediately--
suspiciously cold
that senator would argue
if the planet is truly heating
like the eggheads claim.

At dinner we sat
with one of those eggheads
and learned:
a hundred billion stars
in the Milky Way
and every star
has a planet or more.
Twenty-five billion
goldilocks planets,
right size and place,
in our galaxy alone:
twenty-five billion orbs
that could be as green
and blue as ours,
that we can't ruin.
I'm hopeful, he said.

I come here for hope, and truth,
clamber across polished granite,
lean my forehead against
dying trees, remind myself
nothing can kill this.
In a hundred million years
it will all come back.
Right size. Right place.

Brad Shurmantine / Napa, California

David Chorlton / *After the Mockingbird*

As a late mockingbird picks light
off the backyard wall, a golden drop
is balanced on the mountain
and when the sun blinks
mystery makes a down payment
on night.

 This is the hour
in the world's mind
that borders pull free of the ground
and the all-night gas stations
dispense hope and mercy.

 The gods
break stones and bread
together in the clouds
and the moon's
a muffled bell ringing for them all.

David Chorlton / Phoenix, Arizona

W. Joseph Lutz / *What I Expect*

A full box of blueberries
With none squashed, soft or broken.
That my new jacket will keep me warm.
That there will always be something
Worth watching on television.
That I can still walk the hills
With joy, albeit a little slower,
Stopping more often to catch my breath.
That friendships, not as many,
Not as deeply warm as before
Will continue to be the light of my days.
That I'll be able to put sounds,
Textures, words and meaning together
In intriguing ways, not having completely lost it all.
That there will be a few good years,
And then a few after that,
Then something after.

W. Joseph Lutz / Monona, Wisconsin



Thomas Moore / *The Red Shed*

South of two aboriginal oaks, the red shed
once had a level-eye view of Gregory Hill.

We played pick-up ball on the hayfield, base-
lines etched into rough turf. The red shed

was in deep right, a tough shot even for lefties
in a groove. A maple by third offered shade

when you were on deck. Sweat-shirts for
bases. A rusted metal screen for a backstop.

Short-stop was the dodgy position with
grounders careening off tufts and humps.

A horse cart was backed into the shed for
hauling farm tools, hay, feed, croquet mallets,

long enough for two eighth graders to lie
down in and make out. Brownie the horse

used to pull it. I have a photo of my
mother standing on Brownie's back, at ten

maybe, right foot raised high, left hand
holding the reins. *Pure showing off*, she said.

Back for a funeral I can't find the shed.
It's gone, erased like a carnival trick—

whooshed up some conjurer's sleeve. I have
the feeling the red shed is hunting for me.

Thomas Moore / Belfast, Maine

Occurrence On Mortland Hill

*All memorable events . . . transpire
in morning time and in a morning
atmosphere.*

Thoreau, "Where I lived"

At seven the doors of the houses
are still shut for TV news

and crispy bacon. A scurry of grey
squirrels livens an oak. Near

the glass-eye maker the fields
without stones or stone walls

dazzle after the last mowing.
Seven cars and trucks abide

outside a regal single wide.
The American flag hangs limp.

An ancient boom truck grows
a meadow on its bed. Here on

glassy-eyed Mortland, all's idyllic.
On these meadows atop the hill

no avenues blink with stoplights.
Down below masked students

jostle in the high school corridors
and a Chevy pickup hisses

climbing *terre de mort*. In the noose
of winter the north wind will

twist across these fields leaving
tirades of morning snow.

Thomas Moore / Belfast, Maine

Richard Douglass / ***Nine Months Gone***

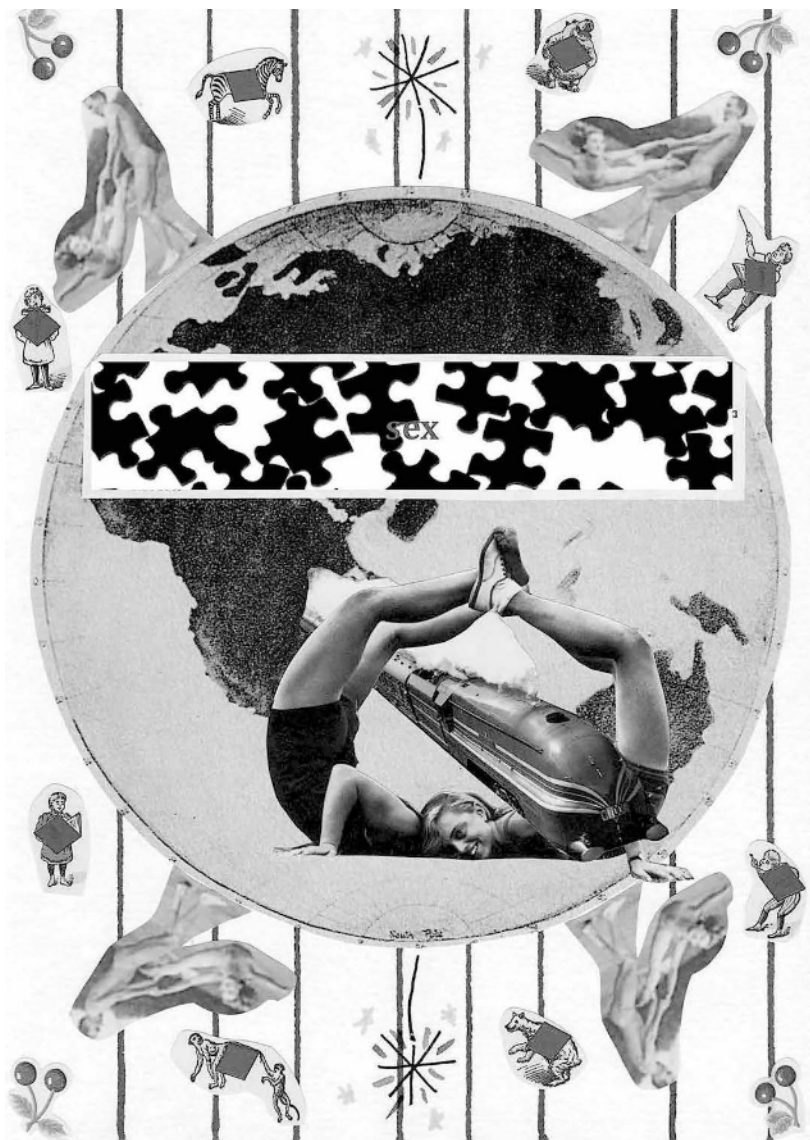
I want to be embraced,
to feel another's tears upon my face.

I want that life of laughs and sighs
that pace my days and light the race of time.

I want that life returned before such days
are no longer mine.

I want together again, braced by rain and wind.

Richard Douglass / Tawas City, Michigan

C.R. Resetarits / *Sex*

Collage / C.R. Resetarits / Oxford, Mississippi

John Grey / *All Is Not Lost*

It's a coffeehouse –
a strange town
but a coffee house,
as familiar as it is different,
people crowded together,
table to table,
elbow to elbow,
breathing in the fumes
of Brazil or Hawaii or Turkey,
while some guy up front
cradles a beat-up guitar,
or is it some young woman
on a makeshift stage
opens up her manila folder of poems,
and he plays or she reads
and we listen,
with our ears of course,
but sometimes with our hands and feet
and, when he's done,
the air is thick
with clouds of conversation
and, when she's done,
a few gladly purchase her signed chapbook,
and finally, come midnight,
the coffeehouse closes,
but not really,
not when I'm squinting
at the outside street lights,
humming my way back
to my hotel,
immersing myself
in the coffeehouse of the mind,
where, in a world where it seems as if
there are no more like-minded people
to me,
like-minded people
still gather.

Goodbye To All This

The park. The bandstand.
The Main Street sidewalks.
The café. The lumber store.
There is no much to say goodbye to.

In a world of packed suitcases,
car loaded,
and wind blowing at my back,
I feel more like I'm bleeding than waving.

But wounds will heal.
Even these.
In the place I'm headed for,
I'll seek out people who appreciate the scars.

Driving slowly out of town.
Twenty miles an hour.
That's thirty going forward
minus the ten I'm looking back.

John Grey / Johnston, Rhode Island



Anna Bernstein / *Thousands of Horseshoe Crabs
Wash Up on a Long Island Beach*

the ocean still too unconquered
for us to know why. All currents

should be explicable, every
tide pool now mapped. A sudden

misplaced wave of life
should come not as a surprise,

but as a song heard frequently
and composed of specific notes:

rising water temperatures,
krill populations, vibrations

made by freight ships
along their routes,

groaning far over coral
as if busy with the hymns

of someone else's gods.
Otherwise the ocean merely

throws up its hands and squanders
itself on shorelines, presenting scenes

of mass beachings with no way
to justify suddenly un-shouldering

its burden, just a baby left
on a stone step somewhere

far from home. I want to know
what stirs the enormous pot,

buries islands, changes this history for
even the smallest riders on its back. But

it is like this: sometimes the owner
simply takes the dog off the leash

and walks away. Nothing illuminates
certain abandonments; there is left only
a cold night outside a
daycare, a car ride in silence

home along highways,
a wandering dog, a beach

of upturned crabs like a
roomful of needy students

waving their briny little legs
in question to the sky

Anna Bernstein / Brooklyn, New York

Phillip Sterling / *The Fancy of Cultivated Trees*

There was a girl from our village who so loved the orchards we named her for them. Cherry, we called her. And told stories about her. How her parents despaired to find her naked among the saplings, her garments scattered like prunings about the rows. For years we teased her at school, sang “Cherry, Cherry, bo-berry.”; she wore the same white pinafore every spring.

When she left girlhood, she left the village as well. To the city, said some, to further her education. Overseas, said others, to practice a foreign tongue. To give birth out of wedlock, claimed a few. To marry a corporate lawyer. A politician. A bum.

“Cherry, Cherry, bo-berry,” we sang, who stayed behind to tend the orchards. We limed and fertilized; we sprayed insecticide; we harvested the ripe fruit and shipped it to the city.

“She was ripe,” some said. *Cherry, Cherry, bo-berry.* “She was sweet.”

“She was sad,” claimed the wise ones, the jealous. “She fell in love stupidly. Trees are like celebrities in the city; they are few and far between. City dwellers scoff at white pinafores. They arrest you if you are unclothed.”

I am old now and have lived my whole life in this village. And sometimes—when the wind churrs among the branches that beg to be pruned—I have thought about this girl. I have seen her in the orchard, as when we were young. She is beautiful in her white pinafore, and I wonder if what they say is true. I wonder if I am to blame.

Phillip Sterling / Ada, Michigan

Kurt Olsson / *What I've Learned Living on Other Planets*

Some places look better on calendars.

*

You're never really alone in a forest.

*

Avoid destinations where even the clouds lack character.

*

A bed is only for sex and sleep.

*

Dogs are universal; cat's not so much.

*

Universal rarely really applies.

*

Don't pee in bathtubs, no matter how tempted.

*

Magic is ultimately about death and faith.

*

Heliotrope is a word only poets or archfiends use.

*

Never travel with anyone who says, "Wake me when we get there."

*

Alphabetize your socks and pack a spare water bottle.

*

Remember: all mathematics are subjective.

*

Nowhere is it good form to begin a sentence, "Where I come from . . ."

*

Remember: what holds us together are the weak forces.

*

At some point, you will thank God whether you believe or not.

Kurt Olsson / Bethesda, Maryland

Raymond Byrnes / *Echo*

That fall, I lingered on the water one more
time before ice sealed the lake for months.

I rowed, drifted, and cast along the quiet shore.
Nothing chased my flashing brass spinner, so

like a fallen leaf floating on the season's ebb
I set aside my rod and left the oars untended.

Empty cabins seemed asleep under empty trees.
Roll-out docks littered yards like broken wagons.

POCK...POCK came across the bay as a man
landed his ax a second before its sound arrived.

When he paused, a low voice carried clear
in windless air, "Almost done. I'll be right in."

While Metro wheels clatter in a tunnel under city
streets, I summon that still Wisconsin afternoon.

Raymond Byrnes / Leesburg, Virginia

Kurt Luchs / *The New World*

I was about halfway through my morning coffee when I realized that something was different. It took me a couple of moments to understand precisely what had changed: everything. At some point during the night the entire universe had been replaced by a very clever replica that was nearly indistinguishable from the original. Only a highly aware observer like myself would ever have noticed, which is how I concluded that this elaborate charade was all for my benefit. I had to smile. Don't go to such trouble on my account, Mr. Mystery Man, or Woman, or Thing, I thought to myself. When I glanced over at Sheryl, still snoring on the couch where she had fallen asleep last night watching *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, I grasped immediately that it was not my girlfriend, not my couch, and that last night was countless dimensions and centuries away. In the valley outside my window, a broad, lazy-looking river was doing an excellent impersonation of the real Mississippi, not that I was fooled for an instant, mind you, but a person has to make the best of things no matter what situation they may find themselves in, and I was never one for whining. A bird feeder that looked almost exactly like mine was being attacked with gusto by a cardinal the color of a Hawaiian sunset. He was practically the spitting image of the bird that used to visit me at the crack of dawn, but why bring that up now? It was a new world. I might as well get used to it. Every morning is like this.

Kurt Luchs / Redwing, Minnesota

Laura Remington / *The Chaperone*

“I binge on crime podcasts,” Viv said in their second phone conversation. “When a man’s too good to be true, you’re supposed to run away screaming.”

“I’m just the right amount of good.” Colin wasn’t lying.

“The more psycho, the smoother. You’re only podcast material if you’re convincing.”

“What do your two best friends say?”

“Split,” she said. “The never-been-married thing is worrisome. How do you make it past 50 unless something’s off?”

“Waiting for the right one.” Again, he thought.

Colin had always scoffed at online dating. “Look around,” he’d say. “Just takes a good eye and a little guts.” Didn’t hurt that he smiled and conversed easily or that he owned a popular bar. But after the virus closed everything down, he’d concluded online was the only option. Dating drought wasn’t high on his Covid problems list, but aloneness was. A people person without people.

Of the half-dozen profiles he’d picked, Vivian seemed most genuine, but the virtual world unnerved him. For Facetime cocktails, he changed three times, landing on a plain blue t-shirt. For his drink, he went with a showy favorite—a bottle of Pliny the Elder.

Viv was more attractive in virtual-person than in her photos. Animated. Natural. He imagined she smelled like lemon blossoms. Conversation flowed. Thirty minutes in, he said, “Let’s meet. Covid is the best chaperone any father could dream up. Six feet apart, outdoors. Doesn’t get safer.”

After a second cappuccino with no word, he accepted she wasn't coming. Disappointment poked its way into every cell. Was Viv afraid he was a podcast-level psycho? A commitment-phobe? Or did neediness emanate from his virtual-self in cartoon fumes?

He drove to Mom's for his daily "visit"—these days, a wave and phone chat at her window. (Luckily, first floor). A caregiver answered. "She's confused now, but she was lucid this morning. Wanted to tell you to go see the comet." Both astronomy fans, Colin's mom had dragged him to view Hale-Bopp after his fiancé died of lung cancer. He chatted briefly with the version of Mom that wasn't really Mom, and left her with a virtual hug.

That night, he drove up the highest hill and parked in a makeshift lot. Couples and small groups stood apart, silhouetted against a darkening sky. Clouds obscured the stars and moved on. Questions and answers crossed groups. Where? Under the Big Dipper. Do you see it? Not yet. \

"There it is," someone said. A wave of excitement swept the pop-up community.

Headlights interrupted.

"Turn off your lights," Colin shouted.

They snapped off. "Sorry." A woman's voice. Ten feet away.

"Wrong knob. It's not my car."

"No problem," he said.

"Neowise." She spoke to the sky. "Where are you?"

"To the right of the tallest pine." He pointed. "Give your eyes a minute to adjust."

“I know. Just impatient. I never miss a comet,” she said. “This is the most exciting thing I’ve done in months.”

“Me too,” he said. “Me too.”

Laura Remington / Orinda, California

Ryan Brennan / *Late On a Sunday Morning*

Two axe blades rest
wedged in a stump face.
Yellow handles
resting
side by side.
Between certain clouds
 light drips down
Like snow melt
 off the blue-green
needles
of pine.

Ryan Brennan / Woodstock, New York

Lisa Yount / *Shadows and Feathers*



Digital Collage / Lisa Yount / El Cerrito, California

Diana Raab / *Listen to Me*

(In Response To: “Don’t Go Far Off” by Pablo Neruda)

Listen to me
when I speak to you.
Listen to me tell you
that I will never leave
what we call us.
What I fear most
is that you’ll leave me

in the cold of a night
when I least expect or want it
because ennui
meandered through you,

and I fear: will you run from me
when trains sleep at their stations,
dogs bark at coyotes,
and owls share their wisdoms?

If you leave me,
I will turn to stone—
as clouds pass over our house
as they did during our fine mornings.

May you appear one more time
at our window
and hear me.

Diana Raab / Santa Barbara, California

David Rogers / *Luck*

“We need to find the shoebox,” said Max. “We need it now.”

“What’s special about a shoebox?” I asked. “Don’t we have bigger issues to worry about, what with the world about to end?”

“It’s not just any shoebox,” he said. “It’s the one Cinderella’s glass slippers came in. It’s also the door to the other world. The one that’s not ending.” Max is a bard. He usually knows what he’s talking about, but I needed assurance this wasn’t just a wild phoenix chase.

“You and I are a little big to fit through a shoebox,” I said.

“Don’t be daft. It’s magic. The box expands. Or we shrink. No matter. It’s a way out of here.”

“How do you know all that?”

“The sorcerer told me,” he said.

“Jeremiah, the Learned?”

“Yes. If he doesn’t know, who would?”

“Not me. I’m just a knight for hire,” I said. We went to look for the box.

#

The box was supposed to be in Rita Mae’s lair. Rita Mae is a dragon, which meant we had to fight her for it. Unlike many dragons, she’s a vegan. Too polite to breathe fire on anyone who doesn’t have it coming. Very easy to get along with, except, of course, if you try to take her treasure. Nobody expects a dragon to give up treasure without a struggle, though, no matter how many

pumpkin pies and bushels of turnips you offer.

The box was encrusted with diamonds, rubies, emeralds and gold trim. Rita fought hard, but at last she lay defeated on the floor of her cave, exhausted, barely enough fire left in her to light a candle.

Max held his blade against her throat. For a bard, he's handy with a sword. "Get the box and run," he shouted at me, so I did, not looking Rita in the eye. It's supposed to be bad luck to look a dragon in the eye, but I also felt bad for her. She'd guarded the village against invaders as long as anyone could remember and never burned the pumpkin fields, unless someone tried to skimp on the number of pies she got as tribute.

Max scrambled up the passage right behind me, followed by a blast of dragon fire. Dragons recover remarkably fast. Part of the key to their longevity. "Should have killed the beast," Max growled.

"No," I said, "it's the worst luck in the world to kill a dragon. Don't you bards know anything useful?"

He didn't answer. Too busy putting out the sparks igniting his robe.

#

We made it back to the Narrows, the bottom of the canyon, where the walls are too close together for Rita's wingspan, without further incident. I opened the box.

A whole troop of pilgrims came tumbling out. "Thank you," the head monk said. "We thought we were doomed." She slammed the door behind her. Max was right--the box had expanded enough for full-sized pilgrims to bound through.

"What made you think you were doomed?" I asked.

"Our world was coming apart at the seams. The sorcerer told us this one would be better," the monk said. "I'm Joan, by the way." She straightened her robe and brushed the hair out of her eyes.

“Sorry to disappoint you, Joan, but this world is about to end, too,” Max said. “We were just on our way to yours.”

Joan and the pilgrims conferred and decided, as long as they were here, they might as well do some exploring. The pilgrims wandered off in groups of two or three, in different directions. All except Joan.

Max and I decided to go back and see the sorcerer, Jeremiah the Learned. He had some explaining to do.

“Mind if I tag along?” Joan said. “I find sorcerers fascinating. Even dishonest ones.”

“Which is pretty much all of them,” I said. “But you’re welcome to come with. It would be nice to have someone who can discuss more than iambic pentameter and the best way to tune a lute.”

#

Jeremiah’s keep was abandoned. We found on a note on the dining hall table: *Sorry about the mix-up with the boxes and worlds, but Rita Mae traded me the good box in return for sending you to her lair. She said last year’s pumpkin tribute was totally inadequate, and she’s decided to go on an all-protein diet. Thought she would kick it off with some human jerky and bacon. So if you somehow lived to read this, looks like we all had it rough lately. Except me, of course. According to reports I’ve gotten, the world I’m going to is a real paradise.*

“See, Max,” I said, “Told you it was good luck to let the dragon live. She’s probably still got the good box, the one that goes to the world that is not about to end. If you’d killed her, we’d have had no chance of finding it.”

“I get along great with dragons,” Joan said. “I also speak fluent Draconian. Dragons love being addressed in their native language.

Makes them feel special. Honored. I bet I can persuade her to tell us where the good box is.”

“Or maybe they’re all Pandora’s boxes,” said Max. “I’ll never trust a dragon or a sorcerer again.”

The earthquakes began just then. A cloud of locusts darkened the horizon. There would be no pumpkin harvest this year.

“They may be all Pandora’s boxes, but any world in a pinch,” I said. “Once more to the dragon’s lair. I’m feeling lucky tonight.”

Joan had read over the note again while Max and I talked. “Your wizard--this Jeremiah--he was a scrawny little guy, red hair, birthmark shaped like a weasel on his face?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, “How did you know?”

“He showed up in our world, just before we left,” she said “Didn’t much like his looks. As a parting gift, we fed him to our dragon.”

David Rogers / Cave City, Kentucky



Wei Zheng / *Variation of The Steam Whistle*

My father used to be a boatman on the Yangtze River.
Every morning he would blow the steam whistle and wake me up.
He often told me that the whistle tunes inscribed in his skin
had become his wrinkles, scars and age spots.

Later on some of the tunes became my birthmarks;
Some became gardenia seeds and I planted them in the garden;
Some became metaphors grinning in my poetic lines.
Now in the dead of night, they often ride a paper boat
from my childhood, heading for my home by the lake.

The other day I left the window closed. Early in the morning
I saw the lake opening her watery big blue eyes.
The whistle had woken up the lake instead of me!

Wei Zheng / Jingzhou City, China

Bethany Brengan / *Mid-Spring*
(*Even Your Bones Are 31% Water*)

After a week without rain,
the mud stinks of decay,
and the creek runs steady,
without the desperate hunger
of early March. What is not green or blue
is enticingly yellow: sun; dandelions
waxing to full gold pieces
on the banks; big burrowing bumbles,
seeking stamen; and everywhere,
a gilding of allergens.

The human heart is a wet,
squishy beast. But we
get drier over time,
closer to dust.

The buzz
of nearby traffic is dampened
by this thinning wall of wet
and tree. In the street,
every driver becomes a Midas, cars splashing up
the sifting powder like puddles.

Bethany Brengan / Port Hadlock, Washington

Roy White / *Selfies With the Angels*

A slant pillar of rain
holds up the oculus; the gods
have moved out, leaving only
a puddle on the temple floor
and some bones by the wall.
The late-night stoplight blinks
on the homeless men who gather round
the minor poet. The minor poet
doesn't mind; being dead is an art
the Romans do exceptionally well.
The night she says *Yes*, we walk home
across the Ponte Sant'Angelo, taking
out-of-focus selfies with the angels.
Over the slow river, over our flesh
and the cold but flowing marble, stands
the fortress with its cells and torture chambers
and whatever window Tosca jumped from.
It's seen our kind before.

Roy White / St. Paul, Minnesota

Susan McLean / *Encampment*

At Bassae, in a tent, the god camps out.
Apollo the Helper, he whose powers healed
in plague time, like a classical boy scout
in a temple with a plastic big-top shield,
shelters from lashing weather. Once, in a war
that both sides lost, knocked legless by disease,
he rescued them from wasting rot before
they could succumb to their antipathies.

Outside our hospitals, the tent rows spread,
and morgues on wheels proliferate. The stricken
die gasping and alone, and are stacked, dead,
like cordwood; nurses and physicians sicken.
So, who will save us now, as we rave on
and hope death's host will magically be gone?

Susan McLean / Iowa City, Iowa

Rana Williams / *The Observation Tower*



Photograph / Rana Williams / Hayesville, North Carolina

Third Wednesday Poetry Contest 2021 Winners

— Joy Gaines-Friedler

This is the year of the pandemic. I've read over 650 poems submitted to this contest, some alluding to the pain of isolation, others to discoveries of "self" or inspired by nature. There were hundreds of poems worthy of "wins." These selections are poems that I found myself returning to. And returning to again.

Reading Brodsky (in English) While Stirring Soup. The juxtaposition of the world inside the home with the world of the outside – a world fraught with persecution, forced emigration, and a poetry that reflects that life, matched with the heartiness of a slow simmering soup is absolutely delightful.

The Sower reads as a parable. The metaphor, the image of a bitter man salting the fields feels so dangerous. The man himself delighted in this act of evil. But then, the image of the "multitudes" who come to negate, to repair the damage he has done, is redemption. This is a poem of triumph.

Driving Test is a wonderfully crafted poem written in couplets; a form that informs the connection of two. In this case the anxious balance of love between father and son.

The four Honorable Mentions, are honorable indeed:

Notes for Wedding Vows - is absolutely charming.

Torrential – is an excellent example of the extended metaphor.

Peanuts – utilizes object and gestures, memories that brings back the lost father.

American Topography With Insurrection – is an expertly constructed political poem through the lens of a Chinese American.

Zoe Robles / *The Sower*

I saw him before full sunrise
while most people still sleep, salting

the fields, muttering under his breath.
The wind didn't bother to carry

his grievances, but that's all right,
I already knew the pettiness that held together

the gravel of his heart. He had one hand
coming in and out the salt bag and he swayed it

with the care of one who gives out blessings,
the little granules sometimes catching a speck

of sunlight. His other hand clutched his chest as if it were
the only thing keeping him from toppling over. He was being

forced off the land. After years of looking the other way, after
years of making excuses for his behavior, the neighbors had

had enough. Everyone was done with him. He tossed the empty
salt bag triumphantly and walked away. That is when a multitude

appeared in shadows with the full sun behind them and descended
on the field, like crows, to pick up the salt one grain at a time.

Zoe Robles / Los Alamos, New Mexico

Shutta Crum / *Reading Brodsky (in English) While Stirring Soup*

—for Joseph Brodsky

At almost 600 pages
it's hard to hold the heavy volume
and stir the soup—root vegetables and beans.
15 varieties it says on the package.
Now, one nation of bean.

Joseph's poems
(I feel I can call him that),
are visual and intimate.
I stop often to stare out the window
past the palms to Russian winters
with their wool-clad women scissoring
homeward on horizons.

I stir only when recalled
by the hubbub of the beans.
The soup, on its last hour,
is mushroomy, thick, fragrant
of salt, of earthiness—
hugging the pot.
I'm fearful of its burning,

like Joseph bursting
from the café in Yalta his heart afire.
Joseph, hurtling into that unrelenting future,
into that blustering cold
which will rattle the shafts of horses
and fill the wind-bucketed
shawls of women.

His poems are hearty.
Thickened by root and want,
they've simmered in dimly lit rooms
that one is always entering or leaving.
Tonight, I've invited him to sit at my table
where there is beer, brown bread, and this soup
I've mothered all day.

Shutta Crum / St. Augustine, Florida

Ken Hines / *Driving Test*

Not my dad's new Mustang with the short throw shifter
but a rusty old pickup he borrowed with three-on-the-tree

to see if his kid could handle a clutch, one last crucible
before my reckoning at the DMV.

The way leaves weren't raked, snow wasn't shoveled,
and gutters weren't clean until my dad said so, I had to ace

his test before taking theirs. He points me to a hill, roller
coaster steep, like a whaler setting course for his crew.

My hands white-knuckling the Hula Hoop wheel, I feel the truck
shake then surge to the top, feel it stop, then free-fall back

until I ease out the clutch, letting it grab and hold us in place.
Like a guy on a tightrope afraid to look down, I am balancing

the pickup on the hill, balancing between gravity and torque,
fear and strength, between boyhood and man,

the same unnerving act I still perform sometimes, with other eyes
watching me and no clutch to hold off the unknown.

Ken Hines / Richmond, Virginia

Contest Honorable Mentions

Naomi Ling / *American Topography With Insurrection*

TW: recent political events

(1)

Mid-January,
 the land frozen over & shivering.
A flag & a man,
 or maybe two or three or more,
wing-walking. Here
 the men apologize over & over.
Here they are tongue-in-
 cheek: Democracy is the kneel
before the flag. The bullet
 before the body. *When the bullets*
come, we strike. When the
 words come, we cry. History—
Such a small, fragile thing.
 Mama, I held it in my hands
that day. I held it the moment
 before it burned everything
but the ground.

(2)

Later, I am trying to
 grow the wound out of my
girlhood. I am trying
 to forgive my own mother-

land. Later, we ask
 who would do such a thing.
The root of insurrection
 plants itself in our loosened
snarl—maul & mouth.
 At the television, my *po po*
clicks her tongue. *The*
 unchained bird always topples
its nest. For what does
 the body turn on itself?
They say men were made
 out of hunger—no. We were
made from everything
 we weren't meant to become.

(3)

When I look myself
 in the eye next time, I won't
cry, I promise. Mother,
 let us slacken our guns from our
hands. Let us learn
 what we preach best. Democracy:
the footsteps of
 another country's deliverance.

Naomi Ling / Columbia, Maryland

Pete Mackey / *Peanuts*

When I crack peanuts, he rises, inevitably, my father,
dust and skins slipping off, indulging the feel
and taste, hands cupped against the papery surface,
the shells swelling in the bowl, the sip from a Schlitz
to wash down the tang of salt, the two-step of dry-
roast and suds, impossible as it is to eat only one,
as when I bow my laces and find his fingers
tightening, tie my tie and see his twisting
the knot, laugh or answer and hear the sound
of him, look in the mirror and see the posed question
of his eyes—the lives the smallest gestures hold
and leave behind, worlds that break in halves.

Pete Mackey / Amherst, Massachusetts

Jayne Marek / *Torrential*

Why not admit you expect to see the power
of a flash flood that pours toward you
out of the literal blue, a clear desert day
as you hike along a dry creekbed? The water's
arrival like an annunciation
not of future salvation but of imminent
inundation? Think of the wet fists
pummeling your ankles and calves
as you look down in surprise, how fast it's coming,
at your knees already, this water
heated by the sand's frying pan
as rivulets found each other, swam together
and toward your feet. You can't outrun
the water that burps up
at the base of saguaros,
splatters gray droplets across leather
cactus skin, the hooked thorns,
as you catch a last glimpse
of cloudless sky. You'll close your eyes,
at the sting of minerals, the dirt
shoved up your nose. You'll think
that at last your unmoored feet will actually
carry you somewhere that answers
this moment, the hammer of water against you
as when you did not see your mother's
saucepot in hand swinging
toward your head that day in your youth
for something you did that you wouldn't
take back, and won't even now, despite
the evidence of the distant thunderstorm
up in the hills that you'd ignored,
the blaze of lightning that spelled your name.

Jayne Marek / Port Townsend, Washington

Peter Schireson / *Notes for Wedding Vows*

I vow to be a green mountain,
to be the spy novel that keeps you awake,
to be an ear pressed to your melodious door.
Furthermore, I promise to stop talking about what I dreamt last
night.
I will also be a box of doughnuts.
We will assess our predicament,
look the future in the eye,
and go forward with plenty of bandages.
We will find the right spot.
We will take off our shoes and wade in.
There will be Roy Orbison.
It will be mesmerizing.

Peter Schireson / Stanford, California