



RHYME ON 2022

Poetry Writing Contest

Loudoun County Public Library

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Free Verse

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Have They Seen the Roads?

Adam Stevenson

They say we live in a peaceful society,
but have they seen the roads?

Those concrete behemoths
and asphalt wastes
packed with cars and trucks
and no life.

I shudder with apprehension
when I see a strange shape
in the road ahead.

Steeling myself,
hoping it's only a cardboard box
or plastic sack.

For I have seen death on the highway
and death on the pavement,
and our callous indifference too,
passing by on the other side.

They talk of deaths of despair,
but have they seen the roads?
Littered with deaths of convenience.
The animals' lifeless bodies contorted
in great and terrible hieroglyphics.
And I hate how quickly
I forget them.

They praise our free society
but have they seen the roads?
The dead stares of a captive people,
the palpable frustration
emptying violently—
“road rage”—
as if that is the only event
of anger and discontent
on our roads,
and not the entire thing.

They say we live in an advanced society,
but have they seen the roads?
For every advancing there,
by some inviolable decree,
a few can advance no more.
Human sacrifices
on the altar of convenience
and ease.

They say you can live anywhere,
but have they seen the roads?
Reducing place to a parking strip
between freeway exits.
And most everywhere is the same
nowhere.

Mother's Day

Elena Capofari

In over 26 years

Still

I barely got to know her.

Week after week Saturday New York Times

Crossword complete under her fingertips

But I don't know any of her answers

To the questions I never knew to ask

Until

Today my hands look like hers

Some slight wrinkles

Oil of Olay

Laced gold wedding band

Remnants,

Her daily rebirthing my metaphysical mind

In stacks of dog eared paperbacks on linoleum

Of the nicotine yellow kitchen,

Boxed Chardonnay cradled on aqua Formica,

And reams of perforated computer paper

All zeros and ones.

(Was I ever her number one?)

Printed past eroded into

Potholes of memory

Clutter collected to distract from

Right now it seems like yesterday

Or

Yesterday's yesterday the last time we hugged

Decades ago

Achingly revisited trauma of being her in 1989

Or me when I was 8, turning 9

Both of us

Boiling eggs, accidentally cracked

Dancing feverishly in the water

Banging against each other

Oozing our insides out.

Never whole again,

Like that first day out of the womb,

Or ever in commune

With one another

The entirety of our relationship

Reflected in her coffee eyes

My own imperfect motherhood.

Honeysuckle Gift

Robert Hungate

What fragrance light from flowers white is floating on the air?
When May's soft rain soothes winter's pain with new life everywhere
No sweeter gift could the angels lift and bring to my delight,
Than this whispering scent that adorns my senses, as day turns into night
I've heard it told since times of old the best things of life are free
I must be true as amidst the dew, such Joy has come to me.

Before Her, After Her

Colleen Callahan Fitzgerald

How do you grieve yourself?

The you, you used to know.

Her life changed before you even had the
chance to tell her goodbye forever.

Before her body betrayed her.

Before her lungs struggled to breathe in air.

Before she had nightmares it would happen again.

You stand in the bathroom,

hands on either side of the sink,

cool marble underneath your palms.

You take a look in the mirror.

Maybe if you're lucky enough

you'll catch a quick glimpse of her.

Like flashes of light peeking through
the blinds at night as a car drives by.

But a year has changed too much.

You can't ever get her back,

no matter how hard you try.

All that remains are pieces of who she used to be.

But a year can change so much.

You continue to look in the mirror every day,

and slowly you see a new woman appear.

She's the woman you were supposed to be all along

After her body has healed.

After her lungs have filled back up with air.

After her nightmares returned to dreams.

Remnants of the old her and blooms of the new her,
are now forever muddled together.

And you realize maybe you didn't have to
say goodbye to her after all.

Funniest Poems

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Runner-up: Cara Eisenberg & Evalynn Bogusz, "Ode to Gas"

Honorable Mention: Janice H. Walker, "Covid-19"

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I'm Not a Restaurant

Christine Grande

I'm not a restaurant nor a short-order cook
But my family is so hard to please!
The only thing they agree on for supper
Is macaroni and cheese.

My husband hates onions, garlic, spices, and herbs.
Oh! And no salt because his blood pressure's high.
Then he complains that his food is too bland
And fails to understand why.

My teenage son has eaten every junk food
Ever known to man.
So, I try to get him to eat healthfully
Any way that I can.

"Son, have some baked fish with broccoli
And a slice of avocado toast."
He rolls his eyes as he chomps on a donut,
"God, Mom, that sounds gross!"

My daughter insists that the food I feed her
Will give her pimples and make her fat.
"Sweetheart, it's tomato soup and a garden salad.
Where is the harm in that?"

The twins make suppertime so entertaining
As they pretend to vomit and gag.
But when it's take-out night from a fast food joint?
Well, they'll eat anything I bring home in a bag.

I'm not a restaurant nor a short-order cook
But heaven knows I've tried!
Still, the family is fed, my husband is snoozing,
And the kids are playing outside.
But the kitchen's a mess! There's crumbs on the floor
And dirty dishes are piled up high.

I'll deal with it later. Right now I'll relax
With a nice glass of cyanide.

Ode to Gas

Cara Eisenberg & Evalynn Bogusz

There once was a wee little lass,
who often expelled booming gas.
Amused by her stink,
she said, "Well I think
you always will know when I pass."

In time, the lass flowered and grew.
And wow! Holy cow! bloomed her peugh.
With such a great stench
would there be a mensch
this sweet, smelling lass could pursue?

Said she, "It is wisdom I seek.
For learning, who cares how I reek?
My path is all clear.
There's none at my rear
to stop my sure blast to my peak."

The lass, she achieved great success.
Content, she still had to confess:
though fine on her own,
it stinks being alone.
A man might be nice, nonetheless.

One day, when the lass cut the cheese,

a lad gasped and fell to his knees.
As most dropped or fled,
he laughed, then he pled,
“You knockout, may I court you, please?”

This prince, he was fun, smart, and kind.
A gem that was truly a find.
Yes, he was so rare -
a breath of fresh air.
Her smell? Well, he just didn't mind.

This lass, she shares all, floor to rafter:
whole fart, whole big heart, and whole laughter.
So soon they were wed,
and it must be said,
they both had a gas ever after.

You've learned of how much joy can start
with laughs at the drop of a fart.
So if someone thinks
your poetry stinks,
say thanks for the praise of your art.

In a world that's so troubled and torn.
We must laugh as we stress, yell, and mourn.
Revere almighty gas,
shared despite race or class.
So come join us and toot your own horn!

COVID-19

Janice H. Walker

Introducing COVID-19

What a nightmare is Covid 19!
It's the worst ordeal I've ever seen.
I'm tired of being stuck in my home
With nothing to do but write this poem.

What I want most is to cut my hair.
I'm tired of looking like a shaggy bear.
Actually this mask's not bad because
I'm getting older and it hides my flaws.

The only break I get from the gloom
Is when my grandchildren visit on Zoom.
But here is what really bugs me –
They can't actually kiss and hug me.

So, Covid, you think you've got us licked?
We're not happy that we've been picked.
We've had enough of your nasty attack.
We'll make a vaccine and fight you back!

Dealing with COVID-19

I'm counting the advantages of sheltering in place:
First, I haven't needed to fix up my face.
Since I'm always wearing a mask,

I'm saved from the makeup-applying task.
I won't need to buy lipstick for a while,
Since no one can tell when I give them a smile.

When I'm out walking and there's someone I see,
I think I know them and I think they know me.
But just to be sure, everyone smiles and waves.
It's just so nice to be out of our caves!

I haven't been to a store except to buy food.
When it comes to shopping, I'm just not in the mood.
Since I don't go places, I don't need new clothes.
Are styles changing? Who the heck knows?

While I miss in-person communicating,
The savings I'm reaping are accumulating.
I don't need to buy much gasoline.
Instead I'm consuming lots more caffeine.

Are we in this together when we're really apart?
Boredom and loneliness are breaking my heart.
Will a new normal ever occur?
Will we ever be what we once were?

The future is scary; it's just not clear.
Some day in the future will a new normal appear?
Till then I'll wipe the tears from my face.
I'll be a good girl and shelter in place.

Defeating COVID-19

Tell me, is it true?

Is that really you

Without a mask upon your face?

It's been such a long while

Since I saw your smile.

Who thought this would finally take place?

Did you ever think the day would come

When we could go back to the way things were done?

We can go out without a mask

To anyplace we want --

Even eat in a restaurant!

Every pursuit or task!

What have we learned

From the two years that just burned?

What's the hidden truth?

Did it teach us life's worth

As it scorched the whole earth?

Can I live life as I did in my youth?

Special Delivery

Noel J. Doyle, Jr.

On a cloudless morn, one day at dawn,
A long-billed stork was seen airborne,
Soaring oe'r homes and neighborhood trees
With a special delivery, sure to please.

The stork checked his watch, couldn't be late
For this major event---an important date.
A commitment, firm booking made nine months before...
By fulfilling his part, perhaps there'd be more.

"This is Stork Central---Arrival on time?"
(Why do they call now---'specially when I'm
On final approach to meet the deadline...)
"Roger, Stork Central! Everything's fine!"

"Slowing my air speed, wing flaps are down.
I can see smiling mommy there in a gown.
My manifest dispatch reads "Bundle of Joy"...
From the size and the weight I'd say girl and boy.

Ah! Safe delivery! An adorable pair!
Proud parents beaming, true love everywhere.
Please call us again if you ever have need---
Small packs a specialty! Service guaranteed!"

Poems of Loudoun

Winner: Kara L. Laughlin, "The Best Time to Shop at Target"

Runner-up: Susan Reese, "Gray Heron"

Honorable Mention: Michael Berman, "Walking on Destiny"

Honorable Mention: Kieran Paulsen, "Summer Evening on Telegraph Springs"

The Best Time to Shop at Target

Kara L. Laughlin

The best time to shop at Target,
Depending, of course, on the season,
And how much shopping you have to do,
Is late in the day, So late
You'll probably have dinner delivered
As you put away your things. It's busy then.
There's always at least one child
Crying from a cart somewhere, and half a dozen
Tired twenty-somethings stopping on their way
From work to home, including the clearly
Single guy who resents that you arrived in line
Before him, with your family-full cart, while he only
Has his own needs filling his, who keeps eyeing you,
Not-so-secretly thinking you really ought to let him go
Before you, like he's so special with his Men's Health
Magazine and his organic almond milk, like you don't have
Places to be too—like you don't have a houseful of humans
Waiting with their needs at home.
The cashier by this time
Will have filled her shift with hours on her feet,
Thinking of the three angry customers whose ghosts blot out
The hundred other pleasant interactions of the day:
The six different mothers with their cake mix & candles,
The five guys stocking up on beer and guacamole,
The one man she thinks might pick her line on purpose

Because he always fills out the online form
And calls her service 'splendid,' which is nice but also
Kind of creepy if you think too long about it.

You will pile your items on the belt, add a box of mints
For the car, and try to balance friendly with efficient,
Mindful of the dude behind you,
Who has already reached across and grabbed
The bar that separates his order
From your own. By the time you've loaded your bags in your cart,
The girl will be ringing up his paleo bars and vitamin water,
Will barely glance your way when you say "Thanks,"
And push the cart to the exit, people passing you
Left and right with lighter loads as you labor out the door.

And you will stop right there, a yard outside the entrance,
People swimming past you as you gasp:
The sky alive in tangerine and mandarin,
With pale lemon and maybe a little lime
Down by the horizon, Catocin Mountain
In the distance, showing off its solitary silhouette
and up above, the deepest blue
The heavens have to offer; all of it splayed out
Around the Target parking lot.

A smile will have taken over your face
Without your thinking to put it there for someone,
And you'll see the people passing you, glancing, curious,

As if they wonder what is wrong with you, like
Maybe you've forgotten where you parked your car
Or had a stroke, or lost your caretaker; as if their jobs
Or schedules or child's tantrum mattered in a night like this,
As if they had somewhere better to be, as if
Anything could justify not noticing a sky like that.

Gray Heron

Susan Reese

Some days when I walk around the pond,
You are there.

It always makes me happy to see you,
But sad to see you always
Alone.

The geese come from Canada in flocks.
The ducks are in pairs, and soon in families,
But there is one, single you,
Except for the day a small bird, a red-winged blackbird I think,
Landed on your back.

I had never seen anything like that,
But you continued your slow, slow, inch-by-inch walk along the shore,
And he stayed, that little bird upon your back.
I searched through my file of feelings and found one marked friendship.
Whether I was right or not, that is what I chose.

One day a large white bird was at the pond,
But he was on the opposite shore from you and didn't stay long.
He was the color of snow.

You are the color of storm clouds.
I know he is thought by most to be the more beautiful,
But not to me.

Our pond may be too humble for him,
And he may not welcome a small bird along for a ride.
I think he is that kind of bird.
He is not like my gray heron.

So as I stand

Alone

On the shore

And watch you spread your storm cloud wings that will take you to other ponds,

I send with you a wish,

A wish that at one of those ponds,

Waiting among the reeds and grasses,

There is someone for you,

Someone to come home to,

So that you

Will not be

Alone.

Walking on Destiny

Michael Berman

As we walk the blazing black asphalt,
manicured and graded for modern passage,
we can scarcely imagine these same footsteps,
trod by General McClellan and traversed
by the very fugitives that he fought to free.

The civil peace was broken when the machinery came,
ripping railroad ties and spikes from her gut,
erasing and smothering the Confederate footsteps,
gentrifying the mud for our convenience,
replaced by the smooth tar of unification.

This new Mason-Dixon did not divide peoples;
it connected communities.

Now on our bikes we don our spandex and lycra in Alexandria -
no shoveling of coal for this engine -
with a sip of our energy elixir,
whizzing over the Sycolin bridge and past Tuscarora Creek,
quickly turning around in Purcellville for the return trip.

Summer Evening on Telegraph Springs

Kieran Paulsen

The deer only emerge

Once the people are gone

You watch from the window

And wonder

If they waited in the forest and listened for your retreat

Or if they know the rhythm of the world so well

That they could feel the quiet growing under their hooves

Love Poems

Winner: Natasha Stith, "Augustina"

Runner-up: Megan McMurrin, "In Love with a Sound on the Stairs"

Honorable Mention: Shruti Sekar, "A Proof of Prime Passion"

Honorable Mention: MB Gayle, "Mr. Fix-It"

Augustina

Natasha Stith

She married in the Fall of 1937
at the age of eighteen.

I imagine she met him on the shore of the Medveditsa
Gathering herbs or berries in a basket,
The breeze gently tugging at her hair,
Beckoning her to turn and see his sun-kissed face
Staring back at her,
Ignoring the fish nibbling at his bait.

I imagine he was enraptured by her beauty
and then charmed by her wit,
and she was mesmerized by his sparkling blue eyes
and then dazzled by his humor and kindness.

But more likely they were simply neighbors
Who deemed marriage convenient
Or even necessary for survival in the USSR.

I imagine her mother pinning up her auburn hair,
Embellishing it with wildflowers or pearled hairpins,
Smiling proudly at her lovely daughter
In her new, elegant gown,
Dreaming of all that her life would be,
Could be,

And hoping it would be even more than that.

But more likely she simply hoped her daughter
Would have food and shelter and safety,
And she wore the same threadbare dress as the day before
And the day after.

I imagine a beautiful wedding
In their town church
Smiling faces of friends and family turned toward her
As her father walked her down the aisle
And her mother happily wept in the front pew.

But more likely they simply signed official documents
As religion was banned,
The pastor sent to gulag,
The church was burned down,
Five of her brothers were already murdered,
And her father had died of starvation when she was three.

I imagine a honeymoon-like year,
Full of love and kind gestures,
Slow, relaxed mornings of sweet pleasures,
Such simple moments of joy
As they discovered each other
And themselves.

But more likely they found solace in each other

In the little time they had
between the late end of the long workday
and the early beginning of the next.

I imagine they sat down in the evenings
At their cozy wooden table
To share a meal made with love,
And have warm conversations
About their day and their dreams for their future
together.

But more likely they were both withered and gaunt
And ate a simple broth
And a small portion of bread
Before covering themselves with their thin, patched blanket
And sleeping a deep but unsatisfying sleep.

I imagine a doting mother and playful father,
An ever-growing household
Full of children running through the kitchen
With flour-smudged cheeks and grass-stained knees,
Laughter and love building the walls
Of a home.

But in reality they didn't have a chance
As she was imprisoned and beaten for stealing grain
that she did not take,
and he was taken by the NKVD

and shot
for no reason at all.

I imagine their love...
because they could not.

In Love with a Sound on the Stairs

Megan McMurrin

I hear the bounding descent on the stairs
She's four, she's seven, then ten, my child, my all
The cadence pa thump pa thump pa thump uniquely theirs

She's grown, she's changed, her pronouns now they/theirs
They're eleven, twelve, thirteen, a stone, a wall
I hear the bounding descent on the stairs

My words fall wrong, my touch brings only glares
In arguments that I cannot forestall
The cadence get out just stop get out uniquely theirs

Loss hits me like a death, I'm unprepared
What's buried, what's gone, there's one thing that remains
I hear the bounding descent on the stairs

Perhaps a day they are lifted briefly from despair
Footfalls sound like hope, I grasp at any gains
The cadence pa thump pa thump pa thump uniquely theirs

Ascending silent my hand near theirs repairs
Accepting each day I cannot know their pain
I hear the bounding descent on the stairs
The cadence pa thump pa thump uniquely theirs

A Proof of Prime Passion

Shruti Sekar

Our hearts beat like $\cos(x)$ and $\sin(x)$

Complement pairs that add well together

Always in phase through a thousand cycles.

X to my Y, thou mark thyself treasure.

No limits on how dearly I won

The blissful attention of your prime interest.

My derivative half, my integral sum-one

Parallel lines: we converge despite our difference.

In this world of variables, you're a constant

Thou art the square root of my splendor.

I'd log memories of my equivalent

Infinitely close to my soul's center.

Zero degrees of separation when you quantify

A mathematician's distance from their cutiepi

MR. FIX-IT

MB Gayle

You look at me

Wearing a "MR. FIX-IT"

Onesie.

Just an hour ago I dressed you in it

Though now it's covered in

Spit.

Silly. Screen-printed letters scream under dancing tools, baby carpenter glamor.

Ring-spun pliers, screws, wrenches, nails,

Hammer.

Your onesie should read,

"MR. ASSISTANCE-WITH-EVERYTHING-EVERY-BURP-OR-FART-IS-WHAT-I-NEED."

Your smile, despite that stupid, gendered garment,

Makes me laugh, grounding me, like emotional

Cement.

I tried to grasp the lessons from each nurse

Through foggy fentanyl, incredible incision, exhausting epinephrine, plummeting progesterone, no possible

Reverse.

Why my mom worried all the time, I never understood,

But now I get it.

Motherhood.

Immense joy, intense panic, gripping fear, wild,

Indescribable Love,

Child.

You shattered my previous mind and you are helping me rebuild it.

Maybe you are

MR. FIX-IT.

