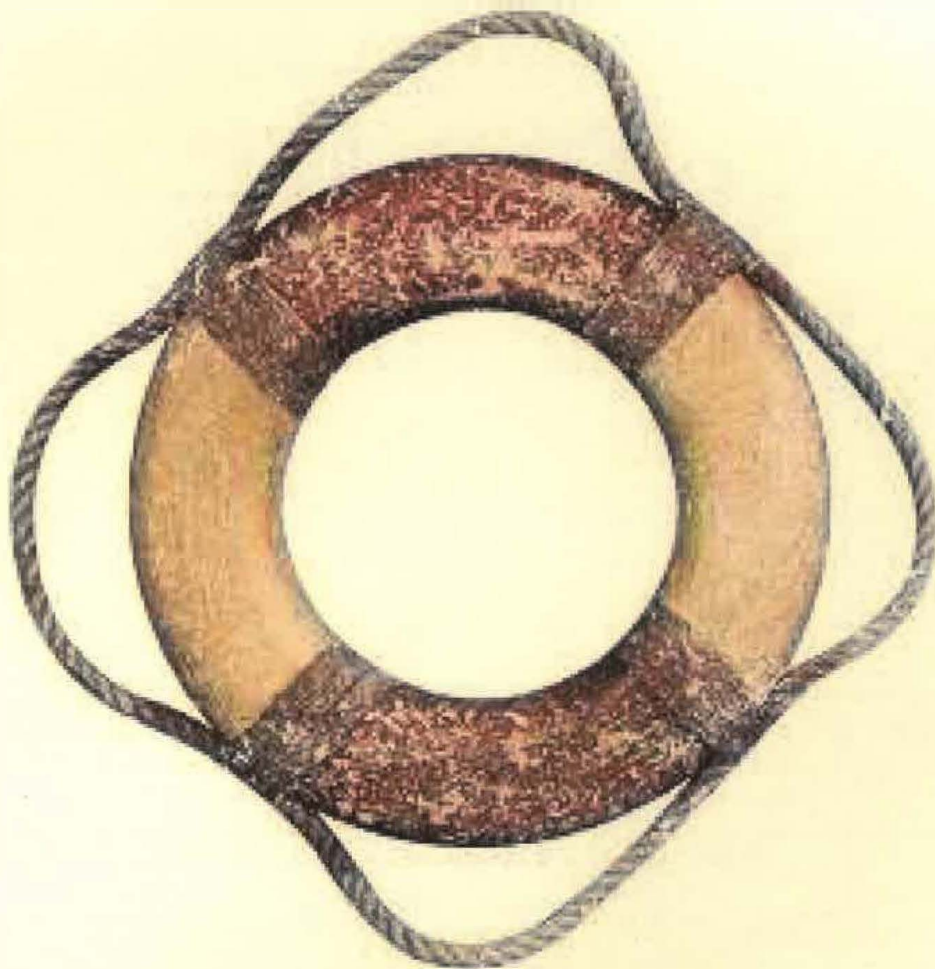


POETRY WRITING: LYRICAL LIFESAVING



OLLI at AUBURN, FALL 2020
INSTRUCTOR: Ken Autrey

OLLI Poetry – Fall 2020

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Embers / Ken Autrey

Dad's fires in the backyard pit
started wild, shrunk to a murmur,
then turned to charcoal embers
that lasted the evening.
Gusts of wind blew sparks up,
brought the coals to fleeting life.
before they subsided.

The next morning I rushed out
to hold a palm over the coals,
test their warmth, and stir them
with a stick, peering for
a lingering glow. I cast a handful
of dry leaves onto the ashes,
hoping they'd flare up.

When I weed the garden, repair
the roof, paint a table, my limbs
on a good day warm to the task,
fade into my father's frame, take on
his wrinkles. What never ages—
this working to revive
the heat of his life, my life.

Machu Picchu / Ken Autrey

Arrive as dawn brightens
the abandoned fortress,
stones notched, knitted, locked.

Walk down abraded stairways,
and wind through alleys
that ghost the palms of the forgotten.

Pass through a gap in the far wall, and follow
the path along ledges, around boulders, chasm
on your left dropping steep to the valley

where a river winds like silver thread,
and a town sprawls near hot springs.
Hear the hum of the early *mercado*.

Climb the path up the peak that rises
like a bishop's miter. Find a niche
near the top and crawl through a passage

that opens onto the windswept pinnacle
where three travelers lie,
eyes shut against the sun.

Welcome the *caracara* that drops
out of the sky and perches at your side,
head cocked as though waiting for an answer.

Behind you, below, take in the maze
you wound through, gasping in thin air,
and wonder where you go from here.

Age / William Blake Brown

Old age overtook me by stealth; I never expected
to be pushing up against eighty, and there were many
times when things could easily have gone the other
way and they would have said I died young.

But here I am, not yet certain whether longevity
is a gift or a punishment. I wobble between
the two poles, leaning toward one or the other,
depending upon the circumstances in which
I find myself.

Some fires have been banked, and the passions
that were spent on what seemed to be terribly
important is just moldering leaves
at the bottom of the compost pile of our lives.

In evening when ghosts gather, I recall the people
I will not see again, the intimacies that were stolen
away by time and fate, the things I was going
to do that I never got around to.

Yet I am awake when light dilutes the darkness
and washes it away, and a scatter of embers catch
the morning breath and illuminate possibilities

And if you asked what wisdom I have accumulated
it is simply this: I have learned to live with myself.

Dancing / William Blake Brown

Beyond the window, a gyre of leaves
dances across the parking lot.

 We used to dance.

It is mid-afternoon, the shadows lengthen.
I sit at the foot of your bed, watching
you doze as the darkness creeps
across your face. You have pulled
your soft blanket around you, the way
 you once cocooned yourself in your cape.

Today I must wear a mask to be with you.
The pandemic has changed so many things.
We are supposed to stay six feet apart.
I stretch it to mean that our heads
must be that distance, so I can pat
your foot as you lie still, your face a mask

 We used to wear balaclavas and walk
 close together, holding hands.

More leaves give up their grip and cascade
onto the pavement and skitter away.

 On a woodland path, leaves floated
 down and settled on our heads,
 and we laughed. Our hearts were
 as light as the leaves.

When your eyes flutter and then open,
I will share with you what I have been
remembering. For a few moments you
will be still, trying to reconnect. Then you will
say, yes, I remember, and across your
face will spread the smile that has warmed
my heart for so many years.

Sun Rising Over the Santa Catalinas / Cathy Buckhalt

Stretching one finger at a time,
Light changing by the minute,
Clouds hanging on the highest peaks,
Pale blue sparkling above,
Inky gray,
Almost purple,
And in the distance a kiss of pink,
Morning comes.

Voices of My Scottish Ancestors / Cathy Buckhalt

Standing in Kircaldy cemetery,
Feet planted on ancient moss
Beside my grandfathers' crumbling graves,
History surrounds me.
Family surrounds me.
Religious strife surrounds me.
I long to know these people,
Feel their struggles,
Hear their stories.
I belong here.
I kneel
And can almost hear Reverend Gillespie's voice,
"Stay strong to our heritage.
They will not take our faith,
Our church.
We stand united,
Though many may die.
We will be here always."
Yes, I belong here.

Late September / Wendy Cleveland

I let the dog out, surprised by the chill
we haven't felt in months. The pandemic began
on the cusp of spring and then the heat of summer
raged on with the fury of a virus all its own.
This coolness awakens in me a familiar
memory of my mother in autumn,
how she rolled up the rug, waxed the floor,
rearranged furniture, braised beef, mulled cider.
Soups and stews filled the house with aromas
of oregano, rosemary, tarragon, and thyme.
I open her metal recipe box stuffed tight
with 3x5 cards, yellowed newspaper clippings,
slips of paper bearing her bold capital letters -
pot pie, stuffed veal, chili con carne, beef and cabbage, -
ingredients blurred by an oily finger, a dollop of cream.
Spaghetti and meat sauce catches my eyes, ink smudged,
spotted with dark remnants of crushed tomatoes,
her annual recipe for Christmas Eve
when snow crept up the back steps
like an uninvited guest, the smell of garlic
pungent, the family snug around the table
of floral Noritake china, silver plated flatware
and candles, always candles.
I prop her words in front of me on the counter
chop, sauté, simmer.
Later I'll take the spent geraniums to the field,
rinse the terra cotta pots, bring in the patio cushions,
then ease into pasta dinner with wine, smooth jazz,
soft light.

Pandemic Parody: The Sound of Silence / Margaret Craig-Schmidt

(based on the 1966 No. 1 hit, "The Sound of Silence," by Simon and Garfunkel)

Hello COVID, not my friend,
Give us back our breath again
Silence respirators beeping
Stop the fevers upward creeping
Quiet visions that were planted in our brains
Death remains
Within the sound of silence

We walked in cities all alone
Fearing our future now unknown
We followed footsteps of hushed ghosts
Of those only recently diagnosed
With a virus that would change the world
And loudly interrupt
The sound of silence

And on the evening news I saw
Ten thousand victims, maybe more
Pundits talking without speaking
Congress hearing without listening
Nashville writing songs that voices never share
And no one dare
Disturb the sound of silence

Our news voiced economic doom
Close friends visited via Zoom
The virus took its deadly toll
A child cried tears without control
And our world was filled
With wailing
Sounds of silence

"Fools," said COVID, "You shelter in place
Wear masks on your face."
But silence like the virus spreads
Filling all available beds
And my words like silent teardrops fall
And echo
In the heart of silence

And the nurses bowed and prayed
That soon a vaccine would be made
But a sign flashed out its warning
In the words that it was forming
And the sign said, "The words of the virus
Are written on hospital walls
And nursing home halls"
And whispered in the sounds of silence

Helen / Patty Disque

The most beautiful things in life cannot be seen or heard; they must be felt with the heart.

Helen Keller

Living in a silent world, devoid of color,
No Light or sounds.
With only touch and smell,
Isolating life for this child.

Communication does not exist
Until life's sustainer—water,
Builds a hidden bridge,
Giving light in the darkened world.

The savage child connects with teacher,
Who's sensitive to her student and
Becomes a sanctuary,
Standing alone, apart from all.

Their hands translate the language,
As they reach and touch, together,
Traveling around the world,
Communicating with all they met.

This special child becomes a beacon
For others in their quiet world,
Speaking, hearing with her hands,
Proving life is what one makes it.

When eyes and ears and speech were lost,
Other senses were developed for
Coping bravely in her life—
Feeling with her heart.

Meeting Helen / Patty Disque

I met her first when I was almost five,
the sister of my grandmother's friend.
They were having tea on the big front porch
one summer afternoon.
The porch where I had been before
with the familiar smell of flowers.

I was told to speak up and be polite
and that she could not see or hear.
But no one told me that she would
place her fingers lightly on my lips
I quickly answered, "almost five."
My grandmother later told me
that Miss Helen was a famous lady.
But I had failed the test
when I spoke with frozen lips.

Six years later I had another chance
to meet Miss Helen once again.
She came with her sister and her friend
to visit us at church.
The familiar church with stained-glass windows,
brass organ pipes and polished wood
on Adams Street downtown.

She took my hand and held it firm
then spoke some words that were not clear
and placed her fingers softly on my lips.
Her friend said Miss Helen thought I'd grown
Since last that we had met.
I made a point to move my lips
As I said, "thank you," rather quietly.

But I quickly added that it was nice
to shake her hand again.

The Death of Laptops / Scott Melville

It could be a result of a fall, spilled coffee,
they could get zapped in an electrical storm,
be asleep as the house fills with smoke
and don't make it out in time. More likely
there's an internal problem, the failure
of a microchip, a circuitry glitch,
something to do with conductivity.

It simply might not have started up
one morning, perhaps was merrily employed,
humming to itself, and suddenly froze up,
blinked off, went piff or puff.
Maybe it was an all too painful decline
over months and years, a general slowing,
an accumulation of bazaar behaviors,
an ornery spinning of wheels.

And there are those which would not die,
had never acted funny, and they get
unplugged, carted off and wiped clean
because we fancy a spanking new machine,
have sugarplum, giga dreams.

Whither Wander You / Scott Melville

Radiate, radiate, radiate far and wide as the lines of latitude and longitude on a globe.

John Muir

When I start to paint a landscape or seascape,
I end up with a landscape or seascape, good or bad.
A rock might have shifted, a wave might have
foamed a bit more, but that's about it.

When I do a still-life, the hues, the background
might change, but the fruit, the bottles and bowls
pretty much stay as arranged and are there at the end.

My men, my barns, my buffalos never turn out
to be women, K-marts or kangaroos.

But when I start a poem about football, the ball
could get kicked and go spinning through the air,
kinda fluttering towards the goal post. Fluttering
leads to butterflies. Not all insects have colorful wings,
a lot of them are thin, transparent, fly-like things
with interesting veins, worth commenting on,
putting to choice words.

My next poem might start out about termites,
and there you have it, a soften wooden post giving way
to metal fences, those metal fences around worksites
or prison yards, and there's the silhouetted security
guard up in the tower, how still he stands.
Or is it a woman?

Prom Prelude, Then and Now / Diane Miller

Silent it squatted, arm resting on the cradle.
I willed the insistent clamor of awakening
to shatter its stolid blackness.
Still the telephone didn't ring.

He had turned around in Math class twice,
Started to talk about Sub-Junior Prom.
Did he just want details to plan,
Or was he trying to ask?

The coiled cord snaked around the corner
Of the desk, long enough to reach the closet.
It was all tangled, like my breathing,
But I didn't dare move it till it rang.

At stake the chance for lipstick,
The dress only my cousin had worn,
Embarrassed conversation as a parent drove,
Carnation wrist corsage. Heaven.

Pokemon pop-out on the back,
My Mimi's phone rides easy.
She pulls it from her pocket.
“ ‘Sup?’” she asks, and takes a multi-call.

“Sure, Izzy, and we can get Bobby too
And Lauren and Abby and Josie
And maybe Josh will drive.” All set.
Pizza on the way and ice cream after.

It's still Prom. Still lipstick and a dress.
Now even a mani-pedi and an updo
To go with cymbidium orchids.
All that's missing is the angst.

Sweet Dreams / Diane Miller

The rocker was old and low to the ground, just like my Maw.
Like her, it didn't creak but rather breathed upon the floor,
pausing and resting as needed.

Its skirt of faded chintz was soft to touch, like Maw's arms
around me as I drifted toward the deep peace of childhood,
nodding and dreaming toward night.

Her hair was long and silver, I recall, she wore for bed
just one long plait that hung beside her easy breast,
soft as any pillow.

I took the gleaming rope of hair and gently, gently
rubbed the soothing fan of its end like fairy fingers
against my nose until I slept.

Before Light / Crystal Rogers

subdues the darkness
the trees against
a lightning sky
their trunks

close together
a pile of upright
sticks, branches
long grasping fingers

late November
heavenly blue
morning glories
struggle on

after a late start
few leaves still cling
helplessly waiting
their moment quiet

no crows, sleepy
chickadees, frogs,
not even crickets
speak into the cool

sun pulls a grey
blanket over her head
to postpone her duties
perhaps a minute more

Totally Under Control / Crystal Rogers

Hurricanes ravage same area Nicaragua two weeks apart
Intensive care covid beds spill into hospital halls
Fires consume the west, trees, nesting birds, salamanders, homes
Election results certified, despite outcries to the contrary
Schools switch between virtual and in person learning and back again
The president plays golf,
Environmental regulation dismantled
Parks and the Arctic open to drilling
Coastal cities study plans to cope with sea level rise
Leonid meteor shower obscured by clouds
F-150 sized asteroid passes within 240 miles of earth
Humans drive evolution in plant species
Covid-19 most contagious in first 5 days
CDC advises against Thanksgiving travel
Wildlife returns to Fukushima
Shortage of health care workers due to fatigue and Covid infections
Second shortage of toilet paper
Only 400 North Atlantic right whales left
Bundled plastic nobody wants stacks up inside chain link fences

Brain Waves / Mary Ann Rygiel

My mind has become a dusty attic
Full of trunks that sit at skew lines to each other.
Retrieving treasures from those coffins of the past
Is not easy. Clasps resist my best effort
To get inside, to find something important.
Even if something is found,
It doesn't look the way I remember it
Or the way I lived it.
Photos are curled, paper has liver spots,
A lace collar is yellowed.
The collar was made by my husband's grandmother
Who crocheted to pass the time;
Or was it by a sweet old nun,
Who also crocheted?
My sari for a friend's Indian wedding
Is ordinary, not a shimmering parrot
Of green cloth wrapped in a crinkly
Exotic paper not sold here,
Only at the Tulsi shops in India.
Did I read that book? What was it about?
Did I teach a class on that? How did it go?
What is her name? I had her son Colin in class.
Let's start with his name, and then work your way
To Crystal. Or is it Connie? Both start with C.
You're on the right track. Remember
How the students used to send emails
And say, "Am I on the right track here
In this essay?" Or, near the end of the term,
"Can you work with me on this deadline?"
And "I always brought the book and a pencil to class."
Did you mean to use the word "coffin" above?
Wouldn't coffers have been better?
Why would it be better?
You will see that a company from Paris
Les Nereides
Sells a Glass Coffin Bangle
With Snow White sleeping inside.
She only awaits the entry
Of a prince, to bring her back to life.

Inner Weather / Mary Ann Rygiel

Men, some of them, write about rugged things
Like a hunter's shots in the distance
And a lonely, frightened, bony dog
That they befriend and who sits next to them on the porch.
Or about how poems are wild animals
Lurking, looking, twitching from every crowded tree
As the poet walks about thinking of revision.
Even staring at startling images in retirement
Brought forth by the remembered scent
Of a photographer's developing lab
A smell acrid and eye-watering.
Ascending a mountain to confront a fear.
Some women think about different things.
Softer, less angled, less bracing things.
Their inner weather is more quiet,
A sunny day with birds saying "hello."
Like making Russian teacakes from almond flour
Dipping them in powdered sugar three times
To a grown son's delight, wearing sugar on his shirt.
Seeing the pearl stringer at a jewelry store
To restring a strand bought for my
Husband's mother, and she regifted
At the end, gratefully set aside in a drawer.
Nestled by gifts from others, also bearing their names.
Or a sister named Rose, her name itself
A flower, saying to a stranger in a store,
As she shops in a state requiring a mask,
"You can't see it, but I'm smiling at you!"

A Virtual Owl / William Tolliver Squires

Among an antique cavalcade
Of dusty taxidermic dreams
One stately bird engages me.
Affixed and modeled on a perch
His glassy bright concentric orbs
Reflect a longing heavenward
Inclined no doubt to prey aloft
To track the night on laser beams—
Suddenly— all shackles fail,
I see him blink both hooded eyes,
Turn his head a slow rotation,
Feathers shudder, bold wings lift,
This predator of darkness flees,
Again he is a Great Horned Owl.

Sacrament / William Tolliver Squires

The dragon of radiation encircles, hovers over me.
Flat on my back, still as stone, I am at solar center.
Rotating arms open, close, triangulate, and activate.
The monster finds me face up on its polished slab
Recollecting faded thoughts of marred perfections,
A cracking, crumbling, frescoed wall, an amputation.
In Santa Maria delle Grazie, a faulty restoration,
Leonardo's *Last Supper*, an ideal lost in brokenness.

Bugle Boy / Bill Wilson

My maternal great-grandfather, John H. Daniels, served in the Civil War. He was a butcher by trade but was assigned as a musician. Given the limited musical options in the 19th century military, he was a drummer, a fifer, or a bugler. First Manassas was his Baptism of fire—gun fire.

And I thought the Five Points was dangerous.
I should have stayed in New York
carving sirloins and pork butts.

I play the bugle at dances,
so they made me a musician.
Didn't matter much.
They shoot at musicians, too.
And, they place us in the front ranks!

July in Manassas is hot enough to boil coffee—
if we had any.
Irwin McDowell commanded us.
McDowell had spent most of his career shuffling papers.
He knew as much about commanding troops
as I knew about field-stripping a Sharps rifle.

I volunteered for the Army for the \$500 bonus—
even though I was only 16.
Figured I could start my own butcher shop—if I survived.
I learned all the bugle tunes.
I never did learn soldiering.
At Bull Run, like most of my unit, I ran
when the first shots were fired.

I'm a butcher. I know about bulls.
After Manassas, I knew how to run!
They say war is hell.
Never been to Hades.
Manassas was inferno enough for me.

What good comes of carving up one's fellow man
with minie-balls and grape shot?
I have no idea.
At least my steers were dead
before I butchered them.

Martin / Bill Wilson

Irish-born Uncle Martin, my father's youngest brother, was an enigma. No one spoke of him. No one visited him. He visited no one. I met him only once— at my dad's wake during my senior year of college.

I was Martin, the black sheep,
a cipher to my siblings. I hope my absence
spared them embarrassment and shame.

No kinfolk knew where I lived, what I did.
I owned little, spoke little, achieved little,
the prodigal son, never given a place at the table.

Charming, handsome, I was coddled and prized.
“Isn't Martin a fine lad?” they'd say.
“Indeed, he is—too bad, his weakness for the drink.”

Jenny and her husband, Arthur, supported me for a time.
I looked like a New Jersey Presbyterian, he joked.
He had me sell trucking jobs to the Proddies in Barnegat.

Slowly, the cursed liquor took me—
more than Michael, James or any of the others.
Slowly, the damned poteen dissolved my life!

I lie in alien soil now, unfamilied, unblessed.
Kin disowned me, the Church would not bury me.
Black Protestants keep me company in the Pine Barrens.

In death, as in life, my own rejected me as I rejected them.
I was never theirs as they were never mine.
John Barleycorn makes for a lonely exile.