



**Poems During the Pandemic**

an anthology  
edited and designed by  
**Beto Cumming**

## Introduction

For the last month or so, I have sheltered at home except for occasional trips for essentials. A couple of weeks ago, I thought about doing some sort of project that could help others. Since I edit and design books, I decided to edit and design an anthology of poems to comfort (and entertain) family and friends. I emailed some friends to ask them each to suggest one poem by someone else that helped them during a difficult time or a poem that have been thinking about during this indefinite time of uncertainty. I was pleasantly surprised by two things. First, most of those I contacted were enthusiastic about the collection. They emailed a poem or a link to a website with a poem. I got some responses like: “It’s a real comfort” and “You are wonderful!” Second, although I did not know what kind of poem suggestions to expect, I was impressed by the variety and strength of the poetry. I will treasure this collection. I want to thank the 27 people (including myself) who have shared these poems:

Lana K.W. Austin, KB Ballentine, Gaylord Brewer, Bill Brown, Maria Browning, Daniel Corrie, Beto Cumming, Bob Cumming, Sue Weaver Dunlap, Keith Flynn, Carol Grametbauer, Kari Gunter-Seymour, Beth Gylys, Luke Hankins, Georganne Harmon, Karen Head, Marilyn Kallet, Robert Lee Kendrick, Cathy Ann Kodra, Carolyn Kreiter-Foronda, John Mannone, Karen Salyer McElmurray, Linda Parsons, Rita Quillen, Janisse Ray, Alice Sanford, and Kory Wells.

—Beto Cumming  
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# The Peace of Wild Things

—by Wendell Berry from *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

# In Any Event

—by Dorianne Laux *Raleigh Review*, Fall 2019

If we are fractured  
we are fractured  
like stars  
bred to shine  
in every direction,  
through any dimension,  
billions of years  
since and hence.

I shall not lament  
the human, not yet.  
There is something  
more to come, our hearts  
a gold mine  
not yet plumbed,  
an uncharted sea.

Nothing is gone forever.  
If we came from dust  
and will return to dust  
then we can find our way  
into anything.

What we are capable of  
is not yet known,  
and I praise us now,  
in advance.

## Look It Over

—by Wendell Berry from *New Collected Poems*

I leave behind even  
my walking stick. My knife  
is in my pocket, but that  
I have forgot. I bring  
no car, no cell phone,  
no computer, no camera,  
no CD player, no fax, no  
TV, not even a book. I go  
into the woods. I sit on  
a log provided at no cost.  
It is the earth I've come to,  
the earth itself, sadly  
abused by the stupidity  
only humans are capable of  
but, as ever, itself. Free.  
A bargain! Get it while it lasts.

## Available Light

—by Sandy Coomer from *Available Light*

I've come to the lake to take pictures,  
capture first light lifting off water,  
    an image that is more  
than the muted colors of a somber morning,  
a world worn dull with sorrow.

It's hard to find a reason to smile  
when all around me the edges of the good  
    I believed in sink beneath a hard reality.  
I can't argue that the world isn't sometimes terrible.  
If you listen to its language, you stall beneath its weight.

But watch the lake. It wants nothing more  
than to stroke the shore, curl kind arms  
    around the sun-shifted bank.  
The things I want are simple too—a fingerprint  
on the window of understanding, a thread of faith.

It's not memory's work to hold me crouched  
against the brick walls of my suffering,  
    nor is it the will of my past  
to latch the gate and leave my dreams starving  
in the shadows of a narrow field.

The sun rises every morning—  
the sun stands to speak at the lectern,  
    sweating and brimming with light.  
So what if my heart is broken.  
That's part of a heart's job—to break

a thousand times over the darkness of this world  
and still peer through the smallest window at dawn,  
    ready to leap across the empty lawn

and gather whatever light lies waiting,  
like manna, to fuel a single day's breath.

I take what I can—a spectrum of color  
as photons dance in shimmering waves,  
the light brilliant and endless.

Excerpt from *The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart*

—by Kenneth Rexroth, published by Pym-Randall Press

Water is always the same—  
Obedient to the laws  
That move the sun and the other  
Stars. In Japan as in  
California it falls  
Through the steep mountain valleys  
Towards the sea. Waterfalls drop  
Long musical ribbons from  
The high rocks where temples perch.  
Ayu in the current poise  
And shift between the stones  
At the edge of the bubbles.  
White dwarf iris heavy with  
Perfume hang over the brink.  
Cedars and cypresses climb  
The hillsides. Something else climbs.  
Something moves reciprocally  
To the tumbling water.  
It ascends the rapids,  
The torrents, the waterfalls,  
To the last high springs.  
It disperses and climbs the rain.  
You cannot see it or feel it.  
But if you sit by the pool  
Below the waterfall, full  
Of calling voices all chanting  
The turmoil of peace,  
It communicates itself.  
It speaks in the molecules  
Of your blood, in the pauses  
Between your breathing. Water  
Flows around and over all  
Obstacles, always seeking

The lowest place. Equal and  
Opposite, action and reaction,  
An invisible light swarms  
Upward without effort. But  
Nothing can stop it. No one  
Can see it. Over and around  
Whatever stands in the way,  
Blazing infinitesimals—  
Up and out—a radiation  
Into the empty darkness  
Between the stars.

## Rain Light

—by W.S. Merwin, from *The Shadow of Sirius*

All day the stars watch from long ago  
my mother said I am going now  
when you are alone you will be all right  
whether or not you know you will know  
look at the old house in the dawn rain  
all the flowers are forms of water  
the sun reminds them through a white cloud  
touches the patchwork spread on the hill  
the washed colors of the afterlife  
that lived there long before you were born  
see how they wake without a question  
even though the whole world is burning

# Fear

—by Pablo Neruda from his *Selected Poems*

Everyone is after me to jump through hoops,  
whoop it up, play football,  
rush about, even go swimming and flying.  
Fair enough.

Everyone is after me to take it easy.  
They all make doctor's appointments for me,  
eyeing me in that quizzical way.  
What is going on?

Everyone is after me to take a trip.  
to come in, to leave, not to travel,  
to die and, alternatively, not to die.  
It does not matter.

Everyone is spotting oddnesses  
in my innards, suddenly shocked  
by radio-awful diagrams.  
I do not agree.

Everyone is picking at my poetry  
with their relentless knives and forks,  
trying, no doubt, to find a fly.  
I am afraid.

I am afraid of the whole world,  
afraid of cold water, afraid of death.  
I am as all mortals are,  
unable to be patient.

And so, in these brief, passing days,  
I shall not take them into account.  
I shall open up and closet myself

with my most treacherous enemy,  
Pablo Neruda

.

## The Empty Frames

— by Joseph Enzweiler from his book, *The Man Who Ordered Perch*

“Imagine the body lowered from the cross.  
A man from his ladder releases the weight  
that flows down, lifeless to the arms of Joseph.  
The crowd scatters below, shadows who knew him,  
the mourners kneeling as if torn, death  
fresh in his robe, thieves and the governor’s men,  
even those who believed in him struck now  
with wonder atop their grief. See them  
move in the rust and umber colors of earth.  
Look now at the Savior bathed in yellow light  
how his mother’s face is lit with tears  
and the shroud, spread upon the ground  
burns like a desert tent. Think of the light,  
how they alone were made so bright. A torch  
hidden somewhere in that gathering sorrow  
is all we know, a mystery we must endure.”

He looked down from the empty frame.  
A gesture moved them on.

“Here the Prodigal Son returns. But notice  
as the young man kneels, stripped by the world,  
how his father touches him, so the fire red  
of the old man’s cloak reaches from his shoulders  
as if furthering his love.”

And so he went, frame after frame,  
from memory, this second winter of the siege.  
The little group he led looked up,  
a hunger in them, in the frames a hunger too,  
hung back in hope, an emptiness believed in  
while the canvasses were rolled and hurried east.

Winter twilight fills the hall, then night.  
He walks here now, this place he loves,  
toward a siege light in the far door.  
The glass at his feet, pieces of extinct stars,  
their worlds gone cold. On his right  
the windows go by slowly, blue frames  
of the city, a strip of film about the end  
of time. He stops in the dark  
and stretches out one arm to them,  
a tour now for the spirits.

“Look at these panels delicately hung,  
of war, our Russian dead, starvation winter.  
See here the orange sky, how well  
the yellow dress and blood are joined,  
bodies filled with ice, the shattered horses.  
And there a wall of blackened stone,  
its eyes put out. Here is a cloud  
in a jagged pane as a flower might be.  
Brush work so fine, artillery like a heart.  
Over here we watch the flare sputter down  
and angels who were greater than God  
thrown from Paradise to the city’s  
red glow. The eye is drawn to each of these  
hung neatly on the wall. Behold them now,  
these are the masterworks of our age.”

The morning smelled of kerosene.  
A vase was packed in sand.  
Another group ushered in the day,  
their coats stood hungry around them.  
He turned and began again,  
pointing lightly in the frozen air.

“Today we’ll start with this great work,  
St. Mary Magdalene in Penitence.  
See her golden hair pulled forward,  
clutched to her breast, how her clothes  
fall torn and loose from her, like the old life,  
as she gazes to heaven in her tears.  
How the artist suffered in her  
his night of the painting, fire streaming  
toward a blackened sky.”

They could see her.  
Two strokes of light where sorrow fell.  
From the empty frame, down the shattered plaster  
she wept. He turned to his audience.

“Now please, this way, there is so much more.”

So they followed him that morning,  
in every room he walked, and all the days  
thereafter, beyond the broken hall  
into April and the greening of the trees.

## A Fading of the Sun

—by Wallace Stevens from *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*

Who can think of the sun costuming clouds  
When all people are shaken  
Or of night endazzled, proud,  
When people awaken  
And cry and cry for help?

The warm antiquity of self,  
Everyone, grows suddenly cold.  
The tea is bad, bread sad.  
How can the world so old be so mad  
That the people die?

If joy shall be without a book  
It lies, themselves within themselves,  
If they will look  
Within themselves  
And cry and cry for help?

Within as pillars of the sun,  
Supports of night. The tea,  
The wine is good. The bread,  
The meat is sweet.  
And they will not die.

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,

—by Emily Dickinson # 280

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,  
And Mourners to and fro  
Kept treading — treading — till it seemed  
That Sense was breaking through —

And when they all were seated,  
A Service, like a Drum —  
Kept beating — beating — till I thought  
My Mind was going numb —

And then I heard them lift a Box  
And creak across my Soul  
With those same Boots of Lead, again,  
Then Space — began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,  
And Being, but an Ear,  
And I, and Silence, some strange Race  
Wrecked, solitary, here —

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,  
And I dropped down, and down —  
And hit a World, at every plunge,  
And Finished knowing — then —

## The Round

—by Stanley Kunitz from *Passing Through: The Later Poems, New and Selected*

Light splashed this morning  
on the shell-pink anemones  
swaying on their tall stems;  
down blue-spiked veronica  
light flowed in rivulets  
over the humps of the honeybees;  
this morning I saw light kiss  
the silk of the roses  
in their second flowering,  
my late bloomers  
flushed with their brandy.  
A curious gladness shook me.

So I have shut the doors of my house,  
so I have trudged downstairs to my cell,  
so I am sitting in semi-dark  
hunched over my desk  
with nothing for a view  
to tempt me  
but a bloated compost heap,  
steamy old stinkpile,  
under my window;  
and I pick my notebook up  
and I start to read aloud  
the still-wet words I scribbled  
on the blotted page:  
“Light splashed . . .”

I can scarcely wait till tomorrow  
when a new life begins for me,  
as it does each day,  
as it does each day.

## A Blessing

—by James Wright from *Above the River: The Complete Poems and Selected Prose*

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,  
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.  
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies  
Darken with kindness.  
They have come gladly out of the willows  
To welcome my friend and me.  
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture  
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.  
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness  
That we have come.  
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.  
There is no loneliness like theirs.  
At home once more,  
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.  
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,  
For she has walked over to me  
And nuzzled my left hand.  
She is black and white,  
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,  
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear  
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.  
Suddenly I realize  
That if I stepped out of my body I would break  
Into blossom.

## To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian

—by Ross Gay from the *American Poetry Review*

Tumbling through the  
city in my  
mind without once  
looking up  
the racket in  
the lugwork probably  
rehearsing some  
stupid thing I  
said or did  
some crime or  
other the city they  
say is a lonely  
place until yes  
the sound of sweeping  
and a woman  
yes with a  
broom beneath  
which you are now  
too the canopy  
of a fig its  
arms pulling the  
September sun to it  
and she  
has a hose too  
and so works hard  
rinsing and scrubbing  
the walk  
lest some poor sod  
slip on the  
silk of a fig  
and break his hip  
and not probably  
reach over to gobble up

the perpetrator  
the light catches  
the veins in her hands  
when I ask about  
the tree they  
flutter in the air and  
she says take  
as much as  
you can  
help me  
so I load my  
pockets and mouth  
and she points  
to the step-ladder against  
the wall to  
mean more but  
I was without a  
sack so my meager  
plunder would have to  
suffice and an old woman  
whom gravity  
was pulling into  
the earth loosed one  
from a low slung  
branch and its eye  
wept like hers  
which she dabbed  
with a kerchief as she  
cleaved the fig with  
what remained of her  
teeth and soon there were  
eight or nine  
people gathered beneath  
the tree looking into  
it like a

constellation pointing  
do you see it  
and I am tall and so  
good for these things  
and a bald man even  
told me so  
when I grabbed three  
or four for  
him reaching into the  
giddy throngs of  
yellow-jackets sugar  
stoned which he only  
pointed to smiling and  
rubbing his stomach  
I mean he was really rubbing his stomach  
like there was a baby  
in there  
it was hot his  
head shone while he  
offered recipes to the  
group using words which  
I couldn't understand and besides  
I was a little  
tipsy on the dance  
of the velvety heart rolling  
in my mouth  
pulling me down and  
down into the  
oldest countries of my  
body where I ate my first fig  
from the hand of a man who escaped his country  
by swimming through the night  
and maybe  
never said more than  
five words to me

at once but gave me  
figs and a man on his way  
to work hops twice  
to reach at last his  
fig which he smiles at and calls  
baby, *c'mere baby*,  
he says and blows a kiss  
to the tree which everyone knows  
cannot grow this far north  
being Mediterranean  
and favoring the rocky, sun-baked soils  
of Jordan and Sicily  
but no one told the fig tree  
or the immigrants  
there is a way  
the fig tree grows  
in groves it wants,  
it seems, to hold us,  
yes I am anthropomorphizing  
goddammit I have twice  
in the last thirty seconds  
rubbed my sweaty  
forearm into someone else's  
sweaty shoulder  
gleeful eating out of each other's hands  
on Christian St.  
in Philadelphia a city like most  
which has murdered its own  
people  
this is true  
we are feeding each other  
from a tree  
at the corner of Christian and 9th  
strangers maybe  
never again.

# The Tent

—by Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks

Outside, the freezing desert night.  
This other night inside grows warm, kindling.  
Let the landscape be covered with thorny crust.  
We have a soft garden in here.  
The continents blasted,  
cities and little towns, everything  
become a scorched, blackened ball.

The news we hear is full of grief for that future,  
but the real news inside here  
is there's no news at all.

# Snowdrops

—by Louise Glück from *The Wild Iris*

Do you know what I was, how I lived? You know  
what despair is; then  
winter should have meaning for you.

I did not expect to survive,  
earth suppressing me. I didn't expect  
to waken again, to feel  
in damp earth my body  
able to respond again, remembering  
after so long how to open again  
in the cold light  
of earliest spring—

afraid, yes, but among you again  
crying yes risk joy

in the raw wind of the new world.

## Sci-Fi

—by Tracy K. Smith from *Life on Mars*

There will be no edges, but curves.  
Clean lines pointing only forward.

History, with its hard spine & dog-eared  
Corners, will be replaced with nuance,

Just like the dinosaurs gave way  
To mounds and mounds of ice.

Women will still be women, but  
The distinction will be empty. Sex,

Having outlived every threat, will gratify  
Only the mind, which is where it will exist.

For kicks, we'll dance for ourselves  
Before mirrors studded with golden bulbs.

The oldest among us will recognize that glow—  
But the word *sun* will have been re-assigned

To a Standard Uranium-Neutralizing device  
Found in households and nursing homes.

And yes, we'll live to be much older, thanks  
To popular consensus. Weightless, unhinged,

Eons from even our own moon, we'll drift  
In the haze of space, which will be, once

And for all, scrutable and safe.

## Assurance

—by William Stafford from *The Way It Is*

You will never be alone, you hear so deep  
a sound when autumn comes. Yellow  
pulls across the hills and thrums,  
or the silence after lightening before it says  
its names- and then the clouds' wide-mouthed  
apologies. You were aimed from birth:  
you will never be alone. Rain  
will come, a gutter filled, an Amazon,  
long aisles- you never heard so deep a sound,  
moss on rock, and years. You turn your head-  
that's what the silence meant: you're not alone.  
The whole wide world pours down.

## Timely Advice

—by Ilse Aichinger, from *UXB: poems and translations* (trans. Patricia Dobler)

First of all  
you must believe  
that day will come  
when the sun rises.  
But if you do not believe it,  
say yes.  
Secondly,  
you must believe  
and with all your might  
that night will come  
when the moon rises.  
But if you do not believe it,  
say yes,  
or nod your head submissively,  
they'll buy that too.

# Let Evening Come

—by Jane Kenyon from *Collected Poems*

Let the light of late afternoon  
shine through chinks in the barn, moving  
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing  
as a woman takes up her needles  
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned  
in long grass. Let the stars appear  
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.  
Let the wind die down. Let the shed  
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop  
in the oats, to air in the lung  
let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't  
be afraid. God does not leave us  
comfortless, so let evening come.

# Lady Freedom Among Us

—by Rita Dove from *Collected Poems: 1974—2004*

don't lower your eyes  
or stare straight ahead to where  
you think you ought to be going

don't mutter *oh no*  
*not another one*  
*get a job    fly a kite*  
*go bury a bone*

with her oldfashioned sandals  
with her leaden skirts  
with her stained cheeks and whiskers and heaped up trinkets  
she has risen among us in blunt reproach

she has fitted her hair under a hand-me-down cap  
and spruced it up with feathers and stars  
slung over her shoulder she bears  
the rainbowed layers of charity and murmurs  
*all of you    even the least of you*

don't cross to the other side of the square  
don't think *another item to fit on a tourist's agenda*

consider her drenched gaze    her shining brow  
she who has brought mercy back into the street  
and will not retire politely to the potter's field

having assumed the thick skin of this town  
its gritted exhaust its sunscorch and blear  
she rests in her weathered plumage  
bigboned    resolute

don't think you can forget her  
don't even try  
she's not going to budge

no choice but to grant her space  
crown her with sky  
for she is one of the many  
and she is each of us

# In the Time of Pandemic

—by Catherine M. O’Meara published in her blog, *The Daily Round*

And the people stayed home.

And they read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still.

And they listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently.

And the people healed.

And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.

And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.

# Kindness

—by Naomi Shihab Nye from *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems*

Before you know what kindness really is  
you must lose things,  
feel the future dissolve in a moment  
like salt in a weakened broth.  
What you held in your hand,  
what you counted and carefully saved,  
all this must go so you know  
how desolate the landscape can be  
between the regions of kindness.  
How you ride and ride  
thinking the bus will never stop,  
the passengers eating maize and chicken  
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness  
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho  
lies dead by the side of the road.  
You must see how this could be you,  
how he too was someone  
who journeyed through the night with plans  
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.  
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,  
only kindness that ties your shoes  
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,  
only kindness that raises its head  
from the crowd of the world to say

It is I you have been looking for,  
and then goes with you everywhere  
like a shadow or a friend.

## Saint Francis and the Sow

—by Galway Kinnell from *Three Books*

The bud  
stands for all things,  
even for those things that don't flower,  
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;  
though sometimes it is necessary  
to reteach a thing its loveliness,  
to put a hand on its brow  
of the flower  
and retell it in words and in touch  
it is lovely  
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;  
as Saint Francis  
put his hand on the creased forehead  
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch  
blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow  
began remembering all down her thick length,  
from the earthen snout all the way  
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail,  
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine  
down through the great broken heart  
to the sheer blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering  
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and  
blowing beneath them:  
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

## Starlings in Winter

—by Mary Oliver from *Owls and Other Fantasies: Poems and Essays*

Chunky and noisy,  
but with stars in their black feathers,  
they spring from the telephone wire  
and instantly

they are acrobats  
in the freezing wind.  
And now, in the theater of air,  
they swing over buildings,

dipping and rising;  
they float like one stippled star  
that opens,  
becomes for a moment fragmented,

then closes again;  
and you watch  
and you try  
but you simply can't imagine

how they do it  
with no articulated instruction, no pause,  
only the silent confirmation  
that they are this notable thing,

this wheel of many parts, that can rise and spin  
over and over again,  
full of gorgeous life.

Ah, world, what lessons you prepare for us,  
even in the leafless winter,  
even in the ashy city.

I am thinking now  
of grief, and of getting past it;

I feel my boots  
trying to leave the ground,  
I feel my heart  
pumping hard. I want

to think again of dangerous and noble things.  
I want to be light and frolicsome.  
I want to be improbable beautiful and afraid of nothing,  
as though I had wings.

# To St. Brendan the Navigator, Protector of Sailors

—by Cathy Smith Bowers from *A Book of Minutes*

Who among us has not tossed for  
years, bereft, your  
kind, adrift in  
the foamy brine,

searching for some strange and perfect  
world where we might  
begin anew,  
unaware there

is always a veil that hides the  
paradise we  
seek, that always  
we are the veil.

# Of Distress Being Humiliated by the Classical Chinese Poets

—by Hayden Carruth from *Toward the Distant Islands: New and Selected Poems*

Masters, the mock orange is blooming in Syracuse without  
scent, having been bred by patient horticulturalists  
To make this greater display at the expense of fragrance.  
But I miss the jasmine of my back-country home.  
Your language has no tenses, which is why your poems can  
never be translated whole into English;  
Your minds are the minds of men who feel and imagine  
without time.  
The serenity of the present, the repose of my eyes in the cool  
whiteness of sterile flowers.  
Even now the headsman with his great curved blade and rank  
odor is stalking the byways for some of you.  
When everything happens at once, no conflicts can occur.  
Reality is an impasse. Tell me again  
How the white heron rises from among the reeds and flies  
forever across the nacreous river at twilight  
Toward the distant islands.

# A Benediction: On the Tulpenwoede of 17-Century Holland

—by Kimberly Johnson, from *Uncommon Prayer*

Blessed be the disease, the virus subtle  
plunging to the heart of every bulb  
to break as streaks and flames through the conservatory,  
waxy petals freaked with frantic pinks  
and periwinkles. Blessed be the rankle  
that stains its mosaic cell to cell,  
forcing through each blowsy stem-heavy bloom  
color undreamed by the feyest confectioner  
until the very air seems motley. Blessed  
the collectors infected by desire:  
how they want; how they lick their lips  
as if they would devour at the bud  
each sudden new original  
and its exponential next; how they settle  
for a name that they can hold between the teeth,  
biting down against this infinite  
variety. And blessed, O blessed  
all those names, all the neat rows of them  
in the ledger a dear anthology  
of failures: the *Semper Fidelis*  
subsides to the *Fidelis* in a season,  
the *Volition* mutates to *Volitant*.  
Blessed that rage to corner the rarest cultivar,  
to press tight as in a book each beauty  
made beautiful by its not enduring.  
Bookkeeper, I am your daughter, believing  
that by loving I could hold what I loved,  
forgetting that I loved because I couldn't.