

SWANTON COMMUNITY POETRY CONTEST ENTRIES

Self Care

If I'm not kind to myself
How will I share from an empty shelf?
It's hard to put myself in line
And often I begrudge the time,
But when I show kindness 1st to me
It tends to spread like a strong oak tree.

~Mariel Roman

Questions of Kindness at Seven Below

At on-ramp 21, Jeffrey eased into the passenger seat shivering like a frightened puppy. A hoodie under a Red Sox jacket, faded and frayed, draped his skinny frame; a royal and white wool toque stretched over his ears. He clenched quivering hands in cloth gloves. His tattered tennis shoes were not unlike the ones I trashed last fall.

Rocking back and forth he asked for a ride to the state office building nine miles down the road, *If it's not too much trouble*, he chattered. A government voucher would secure him a room for the coming night. *Temperatures are going even lower tonight*, he said.

I thought of the hundreds of thousands who are fleeing Syria and Iraq, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, the old, the young, fathers and mothers desperate to protect their children. They would envy the wild freedom of the varied fowl at the Missisquoi Wildlife Refuge who fly in and fly out whenever they've a mind to.

Does it matter to anyone other than Jeffrey where he's been or where he's going? What are his dreams beyond surviving dark and frigid nights?

When they gather at the banquet, Jeffrey and the other exiles, will they lift a glass to us who gave them a dollar, a lift, and dropped them off for others to serve?

~Hank Lambert

World Kindness Day: November 13, 2021

In Salem:

No witches would have hanged.
Hysterical girls, instead,
Would have been sent home,
Given aspirin and chicken soup,
And put to bed.

In Russia:

The Romanovs, politely relieved of their diamond corsets,
Would have been allowed to leave the country.
There would be great-grandchildren today
Remembering Grandpa Nicholas
Who was fond of photography and lawn tennis.
In France, Marie Antoinette would never have made
That silly remark about cake,
Instead would have fed the poor and avoided the guillotine.
No wives would have burned to death
On funeral pyres in India.
No babies, in Sparta,
Would have been left on the mountainside for the wolves.

No boy would have hung on a fence
For loving another boy.

No child would have been shot in the ghetto
Or put in a cage at the Mexican border
For seeking a better life.

Kindness may be the smallest of virtues.
The Greek philosophers ignored it, listing only four:
Prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

But, given it, Paris, Prince of Troy, would have reconsidered.
Helen, wife of Menelaus, would not have left her children.
Odysseus on Ithaca
Would have stayed put and tended his apple trees
And there would have been no war.

~Rebecca Rupp

GOOD FEELING

colors of June & a field wrested from war—
& today, i'd think about the dog. & whenever
i hear its unhealthy sound. i taste its *sea grief*—

leashed to a big red drum without any fodder.
i hold a knot of its name in my mouth: *black
Labrador, mother of all small kindnesses.*

at sunset, i see the shadows of orioles coming
towards me with a light— & now i wonder if
the light comes from the visually impaired

woman across the intersection. as if in the woods,
i smell quarry everywhere. & i go to sleep hunted
because of the story about retrievers, their keen

nose & biddable temperament—*sporting* dogs
smiling in my dreams; so far, these brief moments
of good feeling. what if they are the true meaning

of camaraderie? & like a flute, we hold each other
& skate gently across the expanse of a moving
landscape— how it looks like a *promenade*

~ Ojo Taiye

Kindness can change the World

So many focus on the negative things,
Instead try and do what makes your heart sing.
For me it is making someone else smile,
Whether it's an adult, an elder, a teen, or a child.
If I can do at least one thing a day,
To make someone's frown go away,
My heart and soul fill with glee,
I helped not only them, but also me.
Because showing kindness to all those you meet,
May turn out to be their biggest treat.
A wave or a smile might seem like a simple gesture to you,
But you never know what that other person is going through.
You may just brighten up their day,
And give them a smile that's there to stay.
Which means that they can then pass it along,
They may choose to dance in the rain, or share a fun song.
Or they may go the extra mile,
To visit someone they haven't seen in a while.
Whatever the act of kindness may be,
It will spread like wildfire, you will see.
Do what you can to spread good cheer,
And ALWAYS choose love over fear.
And Remember if you are having a bad day,
Someone else's kindness can make it go away,
What goes around, comes around,
And your frown will also be turned upside down,
So let's all put a smile on our face,
And work together to make the World a much better place.

*~Written with love by, Tammy S. Irish
"Be the reason someone smiles today"*

What Does Being Kind Mean?

As a child, my father taught me the meaning.
Called neighbors kith and kin because what else

Could a neighbor be if not beloved?
I have never seen anyone feed the poor like

My mother. I couldn't for the life of me know
A world of compassion if she didn't wear it

Like a tradition. The key is to love again & again:
Another metaphor for caregivers and a jar of benevolence

That means there are many children crying in the street,
Go and be with them— make your love yield. And I am

Reminded too, of how generosity dips its warm hand
Into my nest. We are made of the joy we share.

This garlic bulbs of hope— a light that stains my ovaries.
We all need a hand every now & then— this simple act

Of breathing is now the language of compassion— an
Avocado slice with the world. A good neighbor only

Means I have more wonton for myself and you too.

~ *Ojo Taiye*

Beets and Carrots

On such a bright warm sunny afternoon I knew where to find her.
The soft dark brown earth in her garden patch awaited her bending knees.
Her floral print apron billowed out from her dress which served another purpose this day.
A soft and gentle container for the encroaching weeds
The ungloved hands soft and yet strong with nimble fingers deftly locate the offenders crowding her beets and carrots.
No matter the task the same look is upon her face, blue/grey eyes twinkle from sunrise to sunset.
Peace of self, a visible form of peace, and how I linger there in her reflection.
I sat crossed-legged transfixed by the gentleness of a tug to the weed while vegetables receive a thorough massage.
The words spoken seem only above a whisper.
" Best to accomplish the task right the first time".
No other words are needed for the kindful lesson and spirit has been released to my heart and to the universe.
Beads of sweat upon her brow, an apron full, a smile of satisfaction, yes weeding can be filled with grace and kindness even to an unwanted weed.
Those same hands without a tape measure guided by muscle memory and her keen vision perfectly turn a quarter-inch of cloth under.
Lions and Tigers and Bears, oh my. Baby quilts to cuddle and soothe though her hands are not around the form.
How many have you crafted I inquire? Oh, I never count the number I only know of the need.
Those ever searching hands to serve as broad as the heavens as deep as the seas gently would stroke the ivory keys.
"I wish I were a tulip" or " Amazing Grace " would steal her a few moments to lift her heart of heavy obligations.
The twenty-five years of English teaching to the unwanted, the trouble makers, the weeds no one else wanted.
She instinctive knew they were Beets and Carrots in desperate need of a massage of kindness, acknowledgment, a cheerleader, to draw out what no one else could see.
"Meet them where they are at" she would share with me. It was the most important lesson I ever learned and the most pivotal lesson I ever taught.
Always, always a WELL of kindness to all her endeavors.
A refuge for me. A door always held open upon my coming and going.
Popcorn with our chat? Yes, please. For she knew me so well that I needed to have a sense of safety before I could speak.
Remember you can come here anytime. Like a Mayflower awaiting the morning sun, there was empathy, truth, stability but the greatest of these is LOVE.
What does genuine kindness do? It continually without reservation seeps into the sponging earth and says I'll nestle here and help you grow!!!

~By Sharon Reed for my Beloved Friend/neighbor Elaine Anderson!

What Lessons We Can Learn From The parable of the Good Samaritan

Find a family & put color there—
There is no end to any ounce of compassion.

So many children are crying; go and be with them.
I've never seen anyone bloom like caregivers.

Think of what your aid could have done,
Make your love yield and passed it down.

And when you come home, believe me,
There is nothing beautiful than to carry,

The small brightness of a dying world.

~ *Ojo Taiye*

THE NOTHINGNESS OF ME

At the moment of my death
Will I abruptly see
The nothingness of me?

My mistakes, self-interest,
Temptations and lost causes,
My nature of a crank?

At the moment of my death
Will I be swept away
Into a space so dark and dear

That no one else can see,
Or even yet remember,
My troublesome and angry self?

"You're old like Moses,
And fat like little Buddhas," I said with scorn,
"And you don't give me credit."

But once I wished I hadn't spoke
That careless word, those sharp retorts
To Mom and Dad, who loved me - they were kind.

~Martha Patterson

TRADITION

after Enrique Villasis

And to give weight to the meaning of kindness
I return to my childhood's black and white,

Inside the unfinished body of an old district
Building; a homeless golden retriever,

With dark eyes, set widely apart, exposed to
The cold, already wounded and scored— its tousled

Skin and the low percussion of its arteries scissoring
To the rhythms of distant feet. *Not as a multitude*

But as one—my sister caught in the flush of her own
Humanity, chases through the broken window not

Minding the prickling thorns. To the direction of this
Fevered animal. Like how one recognizes *suffering*

And there is no one to beg or ask for pity. Kneeling
At the bath, she pours warm soapy water on his skin,

Sponge his face, brushing from head to tail. And over the
Kitchen table my mother & I stitching together the bruises

With no other motive than mercy— all night long I watch
My sister give life to this newborn, lolling in the crook

Of her elbow. The warmth in her voice as she sets him down
On her flowery bed. Maybe I love the joy in her finest—

The night purring so deep until it matched the scale of
Their snore. Today staring at the sky and thinking for a moment—

What would have happened if my sister hadn't picked up tradition?
As a child, how was she to know whom to call a neighbor?

~ *Ojo Taiye*

Raincoats in the Summer

The rain graces the streets
like kisses to old friends
you haven't seen since youth.
The flowers grow together,
watered by those droplets,
in a magnificently curated garden
enhanced by its diversity.
Chase that yellow-umbrellaed dream,
where you're dancing in the puddles,
unhindered by the formalities of each day.
And the sparrows will sing
in celebration of your ability
to join them in nature's parade,
despite the sun being sentenced
to a summer behind the clouds.

~Gianna Sannipoli

Feast of Love

The kindness of your eyes
above your plate. So many
meals shared over nineteen years.

No one holds the divination leaves,
how many swallows remain.

Behind you, windowpanes press
against the darkening mountain.

The server knows our beverages.
Mine: always the same,
served in a salt-rimmed tumbler,

yours in a martini glass,
with a submerged brown cherry.

These simple hours, swallowed
in tiny sips, to make them last.

~Leah Mueller

WHICH KIND ARE YOU

Dolphins diving, diving, our genial divining
looks like smiles all the while as we hunt or play
each day but manage to stay so close in evolved pods.
We can't wait to commune, send clicks, blips, chirps, or whistles
such busy, wizened and freely loving cetaceans
easy elocution gives us and our mammal moms
the skills to walk on water navigating Tropics.
We spread kindness, use aquatic romantic displays
like emerald weeds, hollowed broken sticks, enticing
the willing and the worldly, open to what feels good
keeps warm, brings close, since variation is our nature.
Mystic, altruistic pescatarian feeders
we strive to colonize and keep everyone as friends.

OR

Purpose, purpose, purpose-driven porpoises we pose
portly and short, mid-jump, as will fill our lungs with air
in the lively arc of our non-human personness.
Supreme marine mammals we dorsal fin and flipper
in hydrodynamic feats complete with round faces
gracing our shy inner circle of best friends.
Reflected sound waves pave the way to fun families
and fancy foods, swimming among the clicks with whistles
clear acoustic signals we so keenly comprehend.
Ultra, ultra, ultrasonic range, fine monitors
we vocalize to communicate, kind mom and child
wild in our coastal, offshore, and river habitats
contact calls can give us all supersensory hugs.

~Charlie Becker

Pictures

Pictures,
Reflections
reversed and plain
colored,
small figures-yet
none the same.
The faces
frozen
in a moment of time.
One by one
The faces rhyme.
Memories good
Memories bad
All forever in
"A picture".

~Mary E. McDonald

Birds of Kind

Is it really so hard to be kind
my birds manage to do it
oh sure, they squawk
knock each other off
the bird feeder

But they never maim, rob
or exhibit blatant brutality
They understand their commonality:
the jays, the blackbirds, the cardinals,
even the squirrels are in on it.

Mother Nature's creatures
could teach us a thing or two.

~Eileen Bader Williams

Gifts of Gentle Kindness

And yet the summit is no place to be
with the wind gathering itself
and the midday clouds forming
converging into each other
the horizon darkening
an infinite reverberation
of unseen thunder
and lightning breaking distant peaks.

We must descend back into the landscape
even as the darkness surrounds us
you, in thought, unscaling
the earthquake-broken ridges
and I with bleeding hands
clinging to flint edges
and always a third nearby
whose voice we cannot hear
a form we half-comprehend.

But the veins of quartz give off their own light
ivory within gray granite
flowing downwards along the slope
interrupted at edges receding
then leaping back to the surface
the edge worn away into handholds
as the rocks sing in the wind
and the rain begins falling.

These are the shadows we've known
through endless nights of watching
the sounds we've barely heard
footfalls and hurried breath
and we lose all of our thoughts
as a tree loses leaves in strong wind
or as a waterfall flowing
from a limitless cliff
loses water into small droplets
until it becomes only a mist
swirling through dark air.

How can we understand the stream
when we see only the mist
how can we know the tree
while holding a single leaf
or the bird through a broken feather
golden within this dark
or the mountain from a single speck of dust
caught in the palm of our hand?

Yet something of us remains
even as we become the landscape
something descends this slope
in company with the rain
unable to see the hand before us
unable to see a path
we know must be there.

For this path is the unearned gift
a prism of grace within the storm
if only we have enough faith
to follow unexpected turns
switchbacking down the moraine
if only we have complete patience
placing each new step
until we find certain footing
not gliding along through loose sand
or trusting canted rocks
if only we can contain
the force of our descent
along the rainslick surface.

We move forward with joy
even as the lowering storm
gathers itself around us
we bear a kind of love
for rock and wind and rain
praising the darkened day
for who can know what moves beneath
the changing mountainside
who can measure the ridges
or draw a line between them
who can enter the hillside springs
and know their sweet source?

We are left with only love
to sing us along this path
not knowing beginnings or endings
not knowing why the light parted
or where the wind hides.

We are left with gentleness
a tranquil balance of spirit
trusting not in ourselves
nor light or even stone
but only the unmarked path
carved beneath our feet.

We are left with patient composure
submission to endless time
knowing only the next step, the next

trusting our unplanned progress
kind in our humility
for what could we know of this place
who cannot even see
what could we say to the voices of clouds
who cannot be certain we hear?

The range of the mountains, our pastures
we tenderly move within them
arriving among the fields
light begins to return
and we can see the green slopes
the small streams converging
as the wind gentles across this plateau
we have given everything away
to follow this open path
and arrive at this place of peace.

For now it is time to drink
to cup our hands in the waters
and bear it to our lips
the sweet waters of spirit
cleanse and refresh us
here where the chestnut blossoms
open towards the sky
and the small songs of the warblers
echo within the wood
and the first stars begin to arrive
their constellations reminding us
of the promise of endless return.

~W.F. Lantry

The Dog Walker with the Party Cake Hair

Her hair, bound at the brow by a thick orchid ribbon,
gleams icing-white with twinkling sprinkles of
glitter.

A stiff breeze whips & thrusts its ghostly arms
out to her, strumming five leashes like a boreal
Dylan.

As rush hour returns to the world, the cat's-cradle
of dogs with their fistful of leashes makes us pause,
smiling.

Not at all like sled dogs, the mismatched quintet
gambols, trots, races, pads & prances all at once,
joyful.

Despite disparate breeding & bark, they all share
not only a sidewalk but absolute trust in their human to
care.

The dog walker in her vegan-leather boots sidesteps
a dandelion in a small dance declaring even the humblest
counts.

END

~Nancy Brewka-Clark

“A Faint Light”

Under clouds of the invisible fears,
she is standing,
holding an umbrella

Her eyes are covered with
waves of broken expectations for future

But in her hand,
some hopeful fragments
of kindness
that she received in this faded world
are emitting a faint light
and decorate her umbrella

Although she in in despair,
she is in the light

~Yuu Ikeda

Circuits

Flat-abbed physical therapist
has a voice that knocks us round
the room - OVER the step and ON
the bike. Really PEDAL!
- two minutes on each,
and in between we limp
on crutches, walkers or sticks
to the next torture.

My mind is zooming round
at the speed of electricity.
Sparks jump, little fireworks
bang, ideas fizz from here
to there and back as I think
of a thousand wonderful
and terrible things simultaneously.

At the same time -
I can't move the bike pedals.
I'm struggling to say so. Why
are physios so young and thin?
The kinder one is showing me
a knee bend, as if to help,
as if I need to see what happens
when 'knee' meets 'bend'.
I'm not stupid, I want to say.
It's my body, not my mind.

Painkillers have smoothed
the jagged bits and the ride
around head and body is serene.
A merry-go-round with horses,
lovely. Though too smooth.
I'm stuck on it permanently now.

I cannot complete the circuit
or explain why to the physio.
I watch her seeing me: a panting
lump of damaged flesh,
old (over forty! Imagine!)
Don't worry, you'll get there,
she says with a soft smile.
I can still smile back.
I can still cry,
when someone is kind.

~Cathy Bryant

Alms

I must be the only woman here
with an orange tucked in her handbag;
I adjust my posture and my Christian priorities
as the tramp squats in the narthex.

His manner of taking takes me aback –
no word of thanks, the hasty way
he stashes it in his grimy rucksack,
a thief suddenly in possession of treasure.

It wasn't my choicest fruit, but the one
I wanted the least. And minutes ago,
I took the host, that exquisite Kindness, for granted –
preoccupied with my alms.

~Lee Nash

Your Gift

If money were no object,
you'd open this and find:

A cabin on the edge of woods,
high in the hills, and facing south,
window glass so clear it's invisible --

and out that picture window,
a view of clouds white, white,
drifting polar bears and swans;

or later, late, low on the horizon,
between towering pines, crystal
pink and lavender, lit with gold

Open this package that money
can't buy and you'll find:

A cabin at road's end,
reading chairs on the deck;
hearthside, a comfy rocker;

nooks for private care,
a table, round, for talking,
for listening; good news on

the radio, or music,
balm of the familiar;
and somewhere, a wall of books

Open this package to find:

Far better than a smile,
peace attends your eyes,
returns this gift to me.

~Nancy Cook

GIFT

People smile at you
on the beach, come up and offer you
no reason, lightly, and then go by and leave
done again. Nothing is demanded of you,
payment, no social niceties, no
a gift, freely offered, freely taken,
in mutual trust. People smile at you

The pure relationship, how beautiful it is!

every relationship is pure
friend or lover, husband
simple and unencumbered



~Ashley Jacobson

Nameless Strangers

When I was fifteen
My grandmother and I traveled to New York City.
It was
Exciting. Exhilarating. Electric.
It was
A temporary escape
From my parents' divorce, and the cruelty and quicksand of high school, legs sinking deeper
and deeper.
We went to a play on Broadway: "Anne Frank," starring Natalie Portman.
When the play was over, my grandmother asked an usher if we could get Natalie's autograph.
"Wait by the backstage door," the usher said, smiling.
He must have been in his early twenties—young, but still old to me.
When he saw me anxiously wiping the smeared mascara away from beneath each eye, he
showed me another way: backwards and with a knuckle, to prevent wrinkles.
I still find myself wiping backwards under each eye today.
And though I've misplaced the autographed playbill, I'll never forget the giddiness I felt when I
received it.
I wonder what he's doing today, that warm stranger,
And if he found what he was seeking.
I cannot even recall whether I returned his kindness,
Or whether I viewed it with suspicion.
Isn't it strange how the briefest of encounters
with nameless strangers
Can stay with us for decades?

~ Pamela Spradlin Mahajan

THE GIFT

SHE'S DOING DISHES NOW –
NO – THE TIME CHANGE;
SHE'S JUST GETTING READY FOR BED,
AND I'M NOT EVEN TIRED.

WHAT WILL SHE THINK
OF MY OAT-STUBBLE BEARD?
AND THE GIFT I BOUGHT TODAY?
SHE'LL "OOOH" AND "AAAH"
AND CRUMBLE DELICIOUSLY
INTO MY ARMS.

MY ARMS, THAT HAVE BEEN EMPTY
FOR SO, SO LONG.

HOW DIFFICULT IT WAS TO LEAVE YOU
BUT HOW SWELL IT WILL BE – SOON! –
TO BE TOGETHER AGAIN.

THANK YOU, MY LOVE,
FOR LETTING ME BE ME.

~DON LEFEBVRE

Wonder

I look into your eyes and wonder what you see...

In youI see wonder, I see innocence, I see kindness

and....confusion and fear

I see complete honesty....

I see a child

I see so much more than many others see

I see you....

I see a child who likes sameness and order

I see a boy who lines up his things... to perfection

I see a child who never tells a lie

I see the black and white you see

I see so much potential in you...

I see the future

I see who you can be...

I look into your eyes with wonder and awe

I see you looking right past me

I see you....

~ *Mary E. McDonald*