

# 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,  
no 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 you ....I 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*