



Crowstep
Poetry Journal

COLLECTION 6

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Scarecrow

Berthe Morisot, *In the Cornfield at Gennevilliers*
1895, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

This is not the painting
that museum-goers stand before, soaking up
the red of a woman's hat, or the crimson poppies
dotting verdant fields.
Not umbrellas sprouting on a canvas
like strange mushrooms and a Paris street
silvered with rain.

Not the blue tutus of ballerinas,
the bridges smudged across bottomless rivers,
or gardens frothing with shrubs.
Not haystacks or cathedrals brushed by dawn,
flamed by noon, purpled by twilight.
This is a painting we'd pass by.

Here, a horizontal block of faded ochre
anchors a solitary figure resembling a scarecrow.
He stands in the foreground's patch of muddy turf.
Behind him, across the field, houses and farms
scatter like blackbirds, and a smokestack pokes
a nondescript sky. The man himself is nondescript,

having stepped towards us with the calm deliberation
of someone who has a destination in mind.
He shoulders a rucksack of sorts, and has remembered
his hat. His two pinpoint eyes stare out
of a nearly faceless visage, as though the journey
to find himself is as important as where

he will lay his head at sunset. Over all, the sky
hovers like a nameless god, a swatch of yellow-gray
holding the lone human in its gaze,
neither asking a question nor telling the truth,
following the day tripper
with its all-seeing, cycloptic eye.

Donna Pucciani is a Chicago based writer. She has published poetry internationally in *Shi Chao Poetry*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *Agenda*, *Gradiva* and other journals. Her seventh and latest book of poetry is *Edges*.

Bad Timing for a Prophet

For seven years, he sat, squinting,
by the whispering waves of the sea-lagoon,
fingers playing with small hills and valleys
of a million purple-tinged shells,
stuttering at the fishermen's questions
waiting for a voice – a sign.

Weary of the wet sand,
the sickly fruit of the tall trees,
he strode inland into the heat,
as if he had a purpose,
held high a shard of Phoenician glass
as a charm against the sun god's blazing chariot.

An acacia bush crackled as it caught the light,
miraculously twisted itself into spiny fire.
A dove shrilled as it flapped away
in search of an outcrop or an olive tree
and a voice cried out:

"You have no branch or brand
to capture heat. Come back
when you have learned
to plan better."

"P-p-prometheus seeks you, not I"
the man replied.

"Ah.Ah..
The One you seek has no name you can say,
is no man-eater, no hairy teller of trashy riddles,
but a Fierce Spirit high in the barren mountains,
his imperial face more terrible than Medusa's."

He turned away, remembering
a bed of trampled bulrushes
by stinking trapped water,
wondering where the spirit could be
and how beautiful, how grand and never-ending
the distant land promised to some, and

held by others, must surely be.

The voice, now sad, called as it faded:
"He bullies and pities in equal measure"
but the man did not hear the warning.

David Allard, now retired from teaching English to asylum seekers and refugees, writes poems and short stories. Some of the work has appeared in USA and UK publications.

Hold On

To keep things going, actions sustained
I must carry a pebble, safe in my pocket,
worry worn, seasons smooth, spherical surface
a sea spell charm, black, body banded white.
Palmed safe, it disarms overspill, in apogee,
like a Tardis, amplitude unpredictable.
A secret story keeper hidden in fabric folds,
so the heart does not enclose what the eyes hold.

My pebble is a time-worn adept alchemist,
working darkness to metamorphosis,
an expert at witnessing tides' washing refrain –
always only this, impermanent never that again.
It costs me nothing to wrap my fingers round,
the benediction of longed-for, solid ground.

Alison Jones' work has been widely published in journals such Poetry Ireland Review, Proletarian Poetry, The Interpreter's House, The Green Parent Magazine and The Guardian. Her pamphlets, Heartwood (2018) and Omega (2020) were published by Indigo Dreams. She is working on a full collection.

The City of Porto

your moon sings in the dark.
i note her love of strangers here,
her care for the blind.

she asked me on my second night
to describe the Douro river
as it behaves behind her back in the sun,
& the blue scarves of sky
& the proud afternoon- how he showers
under short bursts of cloud
& dries himself in the streets of Ribeira
with St Francis watching.

your moon is in love with your afternoon.
she thinks him every departure beyond
the tiled walls of São Bento station.

old Porto, carry me tomorrow in your glass;
its mouth red with consecration, carry me
over your six bridges with their devotion
to the stretch, to people; those intrepid ones
& those still braving to look
down.

Night Radio

how often has the human voice— low & soft
on the talking channel saved a life? or is it always
saving a life- whispering through night the secrets
of bees, political scandals, Proust's advice to friends,
& examinations of things like Chopin's young life
full of sickness & aching genius? in twenty seventeen,
on a benzo cold turkey i got on my knees and wept
at the Shipping Forecast. when the announcer was done,
she brought me out on her boat around the lighthouse,
then back again, saying nothing. i fell in love with her
without knowing her name. last night i heard a Frenchman
speak an ode to the game of chess. i turned my head to hear
the quieter bits like a willing child taking his ear drops.

tonight, they will address the saints of Naples, a Russian poet,
modern gardens in the digital age, Akutagawa's chopsticks,
the appendix, a croakless frog.
then the Shipping Forecast; lifeboat of waves.

Witness Statement

woman on road, not moving.

bag on road, family-size
milk carton leaking from it.

loaf of white bread,
split & torn by motorcycle tyre
no longer spinning.
woman on road, not moving.

man on road, in helmet, not moving.
bird on pylon, singing.
then two birds on pylon, singing.

but man on road
& woman on road
not moving.

Eugene O'Hare's poems appear in *Causeway*, *Stand*, *Dedalus Press* and others. He
was shortlisted for the poetry prize at Belfast Book Festival and the Fish Poetry Prize.

Telescopic

Because
we are not mariners,
no longer fashion
great sails of lambswool,
traversing oceans by map
and brave moonlight.

Because
instead of craning necks
at skies of legends we bury
heads in cell phones,
forgetting names of
stars forgetting even ours.

Judi Mae Huck is an arts administrator currently based in Las Vegas, Nevada. She is the Clark County Poet Laureate coordinator and a teaching artist for both literary and visual arts. Follow her on Instagram @bandittrl.

Walking Out on All Hallows

Through a tunnel of dusk and mist
under a silver line between thick clouds
as crows rasp an evening conversation
an exchange of news and alarm.

This tiny parish was my world once
I know there is a ruined wooden cottage
behind ivy tangles, and a badger in the woods
dragging her striped flanks through ferns.

I witness snowdrops, shimmer of bluebells
mourn red sandstone's slow erosion
and fields laid bare by ash die-back
Bone white sheep stare at me.

The pub's lime-wash walls are shabby
though the glittering windows invite me in.
I don't enter. I photograph the haunted vicarage
where Tennyson's father's footsteps pace

watch for Clay's Light* hovering over the fen
scared to see my face inside.

I turn and track the pathway home.

Is this where I'll come when I'm a haunting?

* <https://www.mysteriousbritain.co.uk/folklore/clays-light>

Fox

She speaks to me all through the night.
I walk digitigrade in the yawling dark
while peaceful and secluded in my room

my ear the keen sensor of a hypervigilant survivor
feels brush of fur - whine, yelp, bark, cry
explosive and combative call

my sleep swollen lips mutter apology
for my grandfather who betrayed his class

cow-towing to toffs as he biked behind the hunt
and my own sins, spreading like palm oil
on my age mottled skin

this kinship, tantric connection,
the ferment of fear.
Let the night keep us
safe and listening.

Winter Anthem

I want to feel bark under my fingertips
breathe air so cold it makes my bronchi flinch and contract.
I want my heart to beat faster
blood rush to sound in my ears

I want to smell the musty/fresh aura
of friable earth held in my palms
see fragments of acorn cups, pine needles
even a worm, threading through pulverised stone
I want to see new growth, a snowdrop
breaking through ice on a pallet of dead oak leaves.

All day long, grey shame is reflected in the sky,
a silent pause before new life explodes
rewilding, despite everything,
furious chatter of sparrows, a blackbird's dew drop song.

Pauline Swards is a retired psychiatric nurse. Born in Lincolnshire and currently living in Brighton, they write about place, community, music, working class and women's history. Their published poetry collections are *This is the Band* (Hearing Eye 2018) and *Spirograph* (Burning Eye 2020). Pauline loves reading and hosting live events.

How the Raven Was Made

Snipped from a midnight sky
absent of stars.

Reaper robed, scythe beaked,
raucous croak an ancient
door creak.

Give it towers and steeples
to haunt, worn gargoyles
to perch on, teach it
to pass between
the thin veil of worlds.

Kathryn Metcalfe is a poet from Renfrewshire. She has read poetry in walled gardens, yurts and at peace protests. She appeared at Paisley Book Festival 2022 as part of the Long Table Poets. Her pamphlet *Like Nesting Dolls We Are* was published in 2023 by Seahorse Publications. She volunteers at her local RSPB.

If I had a Daughter Who is a Hummingbird

(For SB, who visited in dream to tell me we have a daughter who is a bird.)

spring would be a sacred
vault, fall a desiccating heart
and there could never
be enough summer.

I would plant morning glories
and hydrangeas, deep-throated
flowers to feed her, trumpets
of joy to bring her buzzing.

I would sing the sun up
and weep it down, spend
the dark hours like a penitent
awaiting salvation by beauty.

I would spend winter watching
the clouds, remembering
the gossamer shimmer of wings
made of light and wind and tears.

In the cold of her absence
I would ponder the exotic fruits
of consolation. I would dream migration.
I would imagine the stars blooming.

Michael McIrvin is the author of several poetry collections, including *Optimism Blues: Poems Selected and New* (2003, 2019) and *Hearing Voices* (Fearful Symmetry, 2020). His most recent novel is *The Blue Man Dreams the End of Time* (2009, 2019). Michael lives on the High Plains of Wyoming.

Last Night I Dreamt of Dali

Dali shaves off his taches
and hands me a paint brush,
let's commence.

I stare at the white wall. A new city
to conquer. I dip a brush into gold
and paint rings.

*You're going around in loops,
go discover your surroundings
and look close at the ordinary.*

I stab a pencil into the confident clock,
watch it melt like a wheel of ice cream.
I pick out the arms of greedy time,

stick them on the cat. Watch her fly
across the sky. I gaze over to
the whispering sea, seagulls dive

onto a child eating chips. I pick up
the coral paint, pour it over
the cauliflower, kick it along

the floor and down the stairs.
Dali lookalikes turn to look, sip gin
and twirl their taches.

I take a knife, split open a pomegranate,
it bleeds over the canvas.

That's art, Dali laughs, messy, bloody,

*full of revenge, each seed wants to
swallow you whole and demands more.
He drops a crimson seed into his mouth.*

Sucks it and spits it out. *If you don't follow
your heart it'll suck the breath out
of your everyday.*

Ansuya grew up in India and now lives in London. Her work has appeared in anthologies and in print and online publications such as *Black in White*, *Drawn to the Light Press*, *Gypsophila*, *Last Stanza*, *Half Way Down The Stairs*, and has work forthcoming in *Rattle*.

The Beachcomber

He picks up the things from the sea.
He finds only what he must find, what is offered.

Deep ocean whelks on the planks of old ships,
Korean crisp packets, the vertebrae of a whale after storms in the kelp.
Old boots. Strange nuts. Tangled nets. A lobster pot, smashed.

And only once, in the dusk. Phosphorus,
 where the moon churned the shingle at high water, under starlight.
Freezing cold. December.
With the Seven Sisters overhead and silence but for the universe.

Pete Chambers is a 42 year old poet from Cornwall. He enjoys knocking off early to mess around on the beach with his little boy. He likes drinking too much and slow dancing round the flat to Portishead with his partner, Emily. In the summer the three of them go swimming in the sea together, splashing around in faraway coves.

The Flying Ointment For A Besom

The girls chant outside
the corner shop:
one, two, buckle my shoe...
three four, knock
at the door...five, six pick up sticks...
They hop, and straddle, land a foot.

The crone, nettled
with arthritic knees, shuffles
along the leafy street.
She knows their game, the numbers
and squares, the court
where youth displays.

Needled by age she buys
a broom. The head's a bundle
of birch twigs. She lubricates
the handle of hazel wood
with belladonna. Her joy
flies. The girls wave.

Phil Wood was born in Wales. He studied English Literature at Aberystwyth University. He has worked in statistics, education, shipping, and a biscuit factory. He enjoys chess and learning German. His writing can be found in various places, including: *Byways* (Arachne Press Anthology), *The Seventh Quarry* (issue 39).

Oil Angel

I thought I saw a little angel dancing in the middle of the street
leaping fragile arabesques over the oil stains
and spinning circles around the iron sewer grates
then the train exhaled into the white gauzy wings
the angel floated fast up to heaven
so translucent I saw it burst with the white sun
and sink back to the black tarmac
settle as a plastic bag
its little dance deceased
if I hadn't seen it still it would've danced in that vacant street
to honor the world with no witness
and if it hadn't danced
I might have

Six little birds

Six little birds describe the curve
Of a telephone wire
Lancing like a new, dark Milky Way
Through the shadow-puppet sky
Their round heads are points on a constellation
With the string of lights switched off
Normally at night they won't
Speak of morning but now they whisper a name
Of incomprehensible meaning
Giving for a moment a voice to every star

Amanda Allbert graduated from the University of California, San Diego with a degree in Linguistics and a love of words. She currently lives in Southern California where she works at a café and devotes her free time to writing poetry and fiction. These are her first published poems.

Table

It must be hard to be a table. To have no say where you're placed or what's placed on you.
To have no say whether the sun is in your eyes or whether you might
be lonely. It must be hard to shoulder the responsibility of
stillness when everything else is in chaos. Created to
fill a gap or fulfil a need or slot into an existing
space. Just another piece of the furniture.
No one expects you to feel, or under-
stand, no one expects you not to
listen. You are always listening.
No one expects you to want
anything, to need anything,
to be anything that means
anything. And, after a
while, you start to
fear they might
be right.

A Ritual

take the apple firmly in your palm
cupped like a child's sleeping face

select the small knife from the kitchen drawer
and split the skin with its sharpness

let the cider-scented juices run down your wrist
gathering wetly in your woollen sleeves

anchor the blade with the pad of your thumb
and guide the metal through the soft pliant flesh

listen to the sweet squelch of rupture
the degloved fruit shedding its glossy pelt

throw the unbroken spiral of peel skywards
and read the letter of your lover in the fallen shape of it

do this as often as it takes
to secure the answers that you need

Leanne Moden is a poet from Nottingham in the UK. She's performed her poetry at events across Britain and Europe, and she was a semi-finalist at the BBC Edinburgh Fringe Slam (2018). Leanne writes about womanhood and belonging, and her second pamphlet, *Get Over Yourself*, was published in 2020. leannemoden.com

Accidental Nocturne

The one in bed while the world dreams
itself into being. The one
who sleeps like a knocked-over urn,
moonlight scouring forests,
starlight blowing holes in winter's airs,
darkness issuing its evictions and writs.

The one undressing after a long journey,
a seven-decade gadabout in life's jalopy.
In one ear, the vox angelica.
In the other, wind behind a haunted hill.
In his heart, a tiny cataclysm,
the drums of war, the petitions for peace.
Another soul leaning against the tide,
bemused by its oceanic properties.
Former hellion. Prior Sumerian prince.
A child in the full drag of a man
The gollum without text or purpose.

A light comes on in the mind's back narrows.
It's the darker side of of midnight,
night reinventing the owl, planets skywriting,
and the one who's searching for the proper word,
the latest utterance in his boney parable.
He opens the book of the hand
and reads what needs be written.

Bruce McRae, a Canadian musician, is a multiple Pushcart nominee with poems published in hundreds of magazines such as *Poetry*, *Rattle* and the *North American Review*. The winner of the 2020 Libretto prize and author of four poetry collections and seven chapbooks, his poems have been broadcast and performed globally.