

Poets vs the Pandemic

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WALT WHITMAN EKPHRASTIC

I never look at it. I always skip past
the woodcut portrait in Leaves of Grass.

I think it's a woodcut, but I can't say.
I'm typing into a blank laptop screen.

Nor do I know what edition. Or what year.
I think he's got a hat on and his arms are crossed.
He may also be balding. I'm not sure.

Maybe a funky belt hangs loose around
his middle aged waist. And out there on the

edges I imagine there are small ink dots,
sort of fading around the lines. I don't know

if there are wrinkles around his eyes. And
even if there were, I think they'd only be

suggested. Maybe his arms are open wide,
hat in hand, standing like my grandfather

who worked a linotype machine in lower
Manhattan. I wish I could show you both
this device I'm working on. The way

it answers all these questions, but I'm not
going to Google. Instead, I imagine you posing

and now someone is asking you to hold still
and you, Walt Whitman, are looking at us.

YEARS LATER, FRANK O'HARA

I was only five
years old
and fifteen
miles away
when you
leaned against
the john door
at the
5 SPOT

so I came
to this poem
a little
too young
and a moment
too late

to do much
for her except
to listen
eyes closed
saying to myself
it's only
a song.

See an [interactive version](http://thebinaryplanet.com/) of this poem.

TRAFFIC JAM

a white sail hitch-boat floats up
[outside my rolled down windows]
in front of me [a canary yellow
Honda] pumps the brakes as we
work together to stop a scheming
Lexus [coming in off the shoulder]
but now the lane with the boat is
suddenly moving and I'm passed
by a truck full of [oxygen tanks]
leaving just enough space to get in
[but no] there's a battered [Camry]
showing no mercy [and here's]
the Lexus [trying to get in again] as
the oxygen truck and even the
sail boat come falling back looking
to [squeeze in behind me] but the
Honda and I are standing our ground
as the lanes begin to clear [and
we're moving again] as I shoot by
the Camry to get ahead of a black
SUV [with a family of stick figures]
waving from the [window] as taillights
come into bloom all over the road
and the [Camry] swings by with the
[oxygen truck] in full retreat and
the man with the [sail boat] is
cursing at the guy in the [Honda]
for allowing the [Lexus] to get back in
[but the Lexus] is quickly pulling away
with a smile in the mirror [and a
middle finger] for all

DRIVING BY A FARM AT A DISTANCE

A Pennsylvania farm knows
you're just driving through.
They see your rolled up windows
and let you go. I sometimes imagine
waking up to a table of butter and milk.
My imaginary wife adorned in gingham.
Outside, imagined animals are waiting
for me to imagine them too.
There might be pigs, but more likely
chickens. I imagine myself putting on
my farmer's suit to scatter some feed.
I believe there are machines that I imagine
need fixing. Heat of the day glistening
on my soaked bandana. My imaginary son
in the next field, all blond cowlick,
stooped over a row of young corn.
Maybe he's a Four-H Club hero
or a desk-bound nerd who wants none of this.
But there's always an imaginary dock.
Sometimes going out upon a useless pond.
Sometimes buried in the woods
by a dragonfly creek.

I am afraid of autumn.
It's then, I imagine, the evening
will appear to me. My plain wife
listening to the radio. Imagined music
in the farmhouse air. This is the night
I will stay on the dock. No one calling.
Lowering myself into the flotsam
of leaf dust and spent butterfly wings
to fall with the stars under the surface
of imaginary water.

Check [out the video](#) of this poem.

JERSEY CITY

it was probably just the [gentle] [tapping] of brakes
the way a car will come to rest at a [red light] in the rain
[on the corner] a green and white [Go-Go Mart]
appeared in the rain-water light of my [windshield]
a night-store ["Open"] 24 hours [and I was happy]
to see this store [the items inside] [crayon bright]
set out in order with [a red smock] woman
[working alone] her outline melting in the drizzle
of [my window] minding her store at night
her [freezers] [magazines] her [lotto machine]
her [coffee] pots all quiet and [still] she was a
[red smock] woman [her store] a florescent rainbow
cast across the splash-water street [and I was happy]
to be [stopped] [waiting] on this flawed corner
of paradise as the light was turning green

7 DISAPPEARING WORDS*

First to go were the [vulnerable] with little voice
and no [entitlement] to fairness. Next up
[diversity] was whited out in one clean stroke
along with [evidenced-based] as in “provable”,
or “true”. Words that made people feel uncomfortable
like [fetus] or threatened the powerful
like [science-based] had to be deleted. Without words
you can even make a people disappear
so on a plain gray desk, a blunt red pen crossed out
[transgender] and they were gone.

* The forbidden words are "vulnerable," "entitlement," "diversity," "transgender," "fetus," "evidence-based" and "science-based." See [Washington Post, December 15, 2017, CDC Gets List of Forbidden Words](http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2017/12/15/cdc-gets-list-of-forbidden-words/2017/12/15/).

THE FRUITS OF FAMINE

On those nights we traced
the shapes of fruit until the dark
became our eyes.

On those nights we left our fields
unhearing the crack of broken roots,
the silence of dying ground.

On those nights, twilight filled the deserts
of our crossing with the vermillion breath
of watermelon.

On those nights, the stars seeded the skies
above the camp. Jackfruit guards
stood still as celery stalks.

On those nights we dreamed like you
of strawberry days on porcelain plates.

On those nights I made an apple out of sand
and watched it blow away.

DRIVING ACROSS A BRIDGE

“our Nation has made great strides.”

Chief Justice, John Roberts, *Shelby County v. Holder*

for all the supposed wisdom
of [rivers] they offer no solutions
[licking the docksides] of cities
the open sores of [warehouse]
windows [the ragged] hoops of
vacant parks tagged and [slashed]
beside stone walls and forgotten
monuments of cement as I cross
the Whitestone bridge into Queens
wondering [who I'd be] on the
Edmond Pettus Bridge

mine is a tribe of immigrant
factory hands [raised] across
the Rikers Island narrows
[armored] in shot glass rings
[measuring ourselves] by
the hats and coats of others
[fearing what we do not have]
protected in the [normal] ways
the [family] ways the [generic]
ways the [muted] [necessary]
[every day] [ways] of hate

it's always 1965 on the Edmund
Pettus Bridge [some locking arms]
some wielding [billy clubs] some are
[praying] others firing [tear gas]
others [walking] some on horses
some will [roll up the windows]

lock the doors [look straight ahead]
[stay in their lane] as the bridge
arcs over a river of lost history
bleeding out of Selma

AFTER MIDNIGHT ON A ROAD OUTSIDE CASPER, WYOMING

Maggie is sleeping beside me
as highway lights spin a circus
wheel of [stars and signs]
along a valley of [real and
imagined] homes arranged
like circumstantial fortresses
along the plains of the gasoline
night

panoramic [backlit] towns
winging off the windshield
like galaxies moving away
in all directions as pings
and flashes of LEDs spark
the [incandescent dashboard]
with small bursts of information
only to recede back inside
the car [like luminous
creatures on the floor of
some undiscovered planetary
sea] or the final flares of a
distant civilization's lost war

there's a blue Kerouac light
radiating off the North Star
of a high mounted 7-11 sign
as the road takes [speed] and
[distance] to arrange the cars
in temporary partnerships
arriving and departing
[like anonymous lovers]
meeting up and moving on
in steady streams of [visible]

and [invisible light] at a fixed
speed no matter where we go
[or what] our circumstances
present [or the way we find
ourselves] or how we
happen to be

Maggie is dreaming of being
inside me [exploring] the ribbed
cities of my [fluid tubes] the
innumerable piano wires in the
thousand reaches of my limbs
[the neural connections] signaling
sensation along the cellular
cemeteries of my blanched skin
[my double-star partner] lighting
and darkening our always falling
surfaces like the intermittent
brilliance of an interstate moon
or the neon pulses of a 24-hour
“Welcome” sign

the Earth is a special house
[seething defiance] amid the
dead minutia of interstellar waste
barreling along on blind rubber
[obeying the same laws] as keeps
the car on the ground as lights
the way ahead as keeps the past
in the rearview mirror as thrusts us
out [onto the road ahead] moving
always further away

in our postcard motel Maggie
comes out of the bathroom in
a cloud of [shower steam] I’m

on the bed gazing at a painting
of a white clay cottage [inside
the cottage] a tollhouse keeper
labors at a table [his wife has
a basket of bright red apples]
the husband looks up to take
one [as forest creatures] arrive
at the cottage from afar

MAKING AN AUTO INSURANCE CLAIM

[my side view mirror] [got wacked] [by an unknown] [driver] [so I called] [an 800 number] [to make] [a claim] [and I was put] [on hold] [listening to a song] [with a strange] [xylophone] [solo] [and they broke in] [every three minutes] [to thank me] [for my patience] [I don't play] [the xylophone] [but I was in] [a band] [called] [Curb Your Dog] [with a drummer] [called] [Nuttty Chuck] [he knew] [three notes] [on the xylophone] [C] [C#] [and D] [he could play them] [fast] or [slow] [but we had to] [kick him out] [so Nutty Chuck] [and a guy named Horse] [moved] [to California] [with the xylophone] [and around] [this time] [the phone] [was asking] [if I would like] [to take] [a survey] [at the completion] [of the call] [after which] [the song] [with the xylophone] [came back]

[there's always] [a tendency] [to account] [for things] [my aunt Grace] [who was not] [my real aunt] [learned to play] [the flute] [at the age] [of 98] [I remember] [asking her] [about] [my mother] [as she talked] [she would toot] [a note] [or two] [she told] [my mother] [toot toot] [my dad] [would never] [toot toot] [leave his wife] [so all] [the children] [toot] [toot] [toot] [would be] [illegitimate] [toot] [toot] [my mother] [almost took] [her own life] [toot] [when she learned] [she was pregnant] [with me] [toot] [toot] [Grace said] [I should be] [grateful] [they didn't have] [abortion] [in those days] [I tooted back] [I'd be good] [either way] [toot] [to you] [and now] [the phone] [began] [asking questions] [I gave a 7] [to the service rep] [I gave 0] [for the time] [on hold] [I gave my mom] [an 8] [I gave myself a 9] [for being patient] [and 10 for the song] [with the] [xylophone] [solo]

WHEN VICTOR AND LINDEN GOT MARRIED

it was the rain-bomb days of August
<in the age> of [Despcito] ten years
after the rise of <modern> food
[trucks] during the [penultimate]
<season> of “Game of Thrones” 951
years since <the Battle of Hastings>
just [days] before the North American
<eclipse> in the [era] of <John Oliver>
a year after [La La Land] when
the <Travelocity> dude was riding high
but <Progressive> [“Flo”] was slowly
losing [ground] these good years
of <cold brew> and <MealPal>
as [online deliveries] were just
<taking hold> 17 [years] before
<social security> was set to [run out]
as cracks were spreading along
<Greenland’s> mountains [we still]
wore [earbuds] Frank Underwood
was <president> waiting for the [2020]
campaign [there were] <snow leopards>
in the [wild] it was the age of [Netflix]
[HBO] [Amazon] and [Google] years
before our inevitable collision with
<Andromeda> when the [sun]
was still burning [hot] <in middle age>
with so much [atomic fuel to burn]
there were [blueberries] in our salads
<strawberries> in our [Frogurt] they
made a table for us [it was] summer

D.C. PINBALL

[Shot] out a Fort Stevens cannon
the ball caroms up Georgia Avenue
for [50] quick points off the [Leisure World
globe] ricocheting through the strip-mall
stores of Aspen Hill to spin jauntily
down the Starbucks corridor of Connecticut
Avenue [picking up dollars] in the doorways
of K Street law firms [lighting up] lobbyists
[for cash and prizes] whirling around
the Tidal Basin only to be trapped
in [Jefferson's dome] then loosed
by a [flip] of the Washington Monument
knocking the ball into the reflecting pool
where [the poor] once stood waiting
for their own [bonus points] at the lap
of Lincoln who kicks the ball around
the outer rings of [Dupont Circle]
up Mass Ave past the [Naval] gazing
[Observatory] picking up gargoyle points
off the walls of the Washington Cathedral
then up the Neiman Marcus highway
of Wisconsin Avenue past the grave of
[Scott Fitzgerald] before falling into
the ancient waters of the [Rock Creek]
now flowing silently by a pick-up
B-ball game at [Candy Cane City]
untouched and gaining speed as it sails
past the proud shores of [P Street Beach]
to slip through the hands of white gloved
Georgetown [unable to make the save]
as the ball drops into the [Potomac]
on its way out to the big sea
that knows nothing of us.

Black Hole Ekphrastic*

...the dark itself not dark enough
At Night, Stanley Plumly

Dog's eye darkness. Suspended spider-like
in your starry black bag, scoping all comers

like a blind decoy eyeing its prey. Gas lighting
all who make it to your edge until another sun

is made mortal by your pull. Seeing is never
believing. You lay waiting like a cold cup

of black coffee—shining, lightless. Your space
your time. I can only hypothesize your insides

from the finite horizon of eyes. But touch?
You offer a rim of sealed skin. Then nothing.

* Based on the first ever photograph of a black hole, taken by the Event Horizon Telescope Collaboration (USA) 2017, first shown April 10, 2019.

THE LOVE POEM OF AN AVERAGE MAN

for Gertrude Stein

a large box is handily made a large box is handily made a large box is handily made a large box is handily
handily made a large box is handily made a large box is handily made a large box is handily
made a large box is handily made take my nail bitten hands a large box is handily made a large
box is handily made a large box is handily made my oil stained shirt a large box is handily made
a large box is handily made a large box is handily made a large my steel toe shoes box is handily
made a large box is handily made a large box is handily made a large box is handily made a large
box is handily made a large box is handily made no song is sad a large box is handily made a
large box is handily made a large box is handily made a large box is let's step out handily made a
large box is handily made no song is sad a large box is handily made a large box is onto ground
handily made a large box is handily made a large box is handily made a large box is handily
made a large box is handily made a large box is handily made a large box is handily made a large
that is not you box is handily made a large box is handily made a large box is handily made a
large box is that is not me handily made a large box is handily made a large box is handily made
a large box is handily made a large box is handily made a large box is handily made a large box is
handily made no song is sad a in your cloth coat large box is handily made a large box is handily
made a large box is handily made a large plain shirt box is handily made a large box is handily
made a large box is handily made a large box is handily and flats made a large box is handily
made a large box is handily made a large box is handily made a large box is handily made a large
box is handily made a large box is handily made a large box is handily made a large box is
handily made a large box is handily made a large box is handily pretend your beauty made a large
box is handily made a large box is handily made a large box is handily made a as a gun pretends
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window is useless no window is useless no a drowning boat window is useless no window is
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it back of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no
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gather my lost silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence
toy soldiers no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no
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of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion to fall for yet another of
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