

# 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](#) 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/news/health/wp/2017/12/15/cdc-gets-list-of-forbidden-words/).

## 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 vermilion 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] [Nutty 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.

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





no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of  
silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion  
of silence no suggestion of **is there anything** silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of  
silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion **in the attic** of silence no suggestion of silence no  
suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence  
no suggestion of silence no suggestion of **is there anything** silence no suggestion of silence no  
suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion **that can be had** of silence no  
suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence  
no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of **a gray lock falling** silence no  
suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion **don't push**  
**it back** of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no  
suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of **help me**  
**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  
suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence  
no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of  
silence no **I want to show you my night** suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no  
suggestion of silence no suggestion **with its sorrowful smile** of silence no suggestion of silence no  
suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence  
no suggestion of silence no suggestion **peering over the kitchen stove** of silence no suggestion of  
silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence **in the blue of a losing flame** no  
suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence  
no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion **we've seen too many afternoons**  
of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion **to fall for yet another** of  
silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion  
of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no  
suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no suggestion of silence no sugges







blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed **this is the tumble** blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed **there are no more rocks** resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized **to hold onto** and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized **the answers have been written down** and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized **and forgotten** and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized **there is something in nothing** and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized **it is possible** and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized **to be someone** and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried **it is possible** and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and **for us** betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and betrothed and resumed blind and weak and organized and worried and