

A Collection of Poems

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City of Rockford Poet Laureate 2021-2022

Rockford Area Arts Council Awards Commemorative Poem

In the dark days of the pandemic
we turned to music, devoured old movies,
created films, wrote poetry.
We painted.
Reacquainted
with our muse, sang
and resurrected musical instruments
left in closets
or pianos gathering dust for decades.

In the dark days of the pandemic
we danced
tried to prance
a favorite vinyl found by chance.

Or reveled in the art of nature when we could:

The swirling bark of a tree, skunk cabbage,
a flute heard gliding in the wind near a pelican,
a limber body in ballet or jazz in all its grace.

The comfort and challenge of great art
became the balm of the heart.

What would we do without color and form?
Where would we be without the comfort
of favorite tunes from every era to warm us,
moving our bodies with swirling energy?

Art is an antidote to loneliness and despair. Call it hope.

In isolation we assembled mosaics,
monuments, challenging sculptures.
With time to contemplate
we learned to meditate.

Uplifting, fortifying, engagement,
despite our lives' frantic rearrangement.
Art took us out of ourselves for a moment,
Transcendent.
Resplendent.

Art was our raft on stormy waters.

Raps
spoken word woke us
from gloomy naps.

Challenging poetry excelled.
Rappelled
like a mountain whose summit
belted us into a sky
of undiscovered revelations.

Amanda Gorman rocketed us into that bright day,
showed us what a difficult poem can say,
a collective epiphany
catapulted words over the rainbow.

Art lifts the heart to peaks and space unrealized, above jet streams.

We will survive that stormy sea
a virus
always with us
invading the seas of our bodies,
contaminating us like oil spills.

Still-- we paint.
Act.
Strum
Drum.
No caution.
Pure passion.

Art still swells, a bell bringing us together.

When we could not visit family and friends.
art soothed our souls with songs and snapshots--
glimpses of better days to come transporting us
through despair
until the we saw the ink-black of Covid
melting, turning to the chalk-gray of hope.

Hope is the artist's palette
bright yellow, blue, and green
to stream.

Waiting for the end of fear.
Waiting for that new year.
Waiting to show our faces.
Waiting to go places,

mask-less and smiling
to finally open the doors
and have a deep, rich coffee shared
up close and personal again.

Art was the cinnamon latte we shared in memories.

Stand proud you painters, spoken word artists,
you dancers and sculptors, you singers and song writers,
you film makers, educators, players of all instruments.

You may never know
how much your fine little show
of art
or your big bombastic show
of art
un-broke our collective heart.
In the meantime, we'll take art
in all its bright costumes.
Strut it in, wear it proud. ANY ART!

Come Sit Awhile
Dedication for the Rockford Women's Suffrage Plaza
August 21, 2021

Come sit awhile
In a magical world
Where benches beckon
Your reverie.

Mosaics of Light.
Each site bright.
Pieces placed
Into our lives here.

Here we honor
And commune
With those places
Familiar faces,

Those who have lit
Our community
For so many years
In so many ways.

Woven into the mosaic
You will see something new
Each time you come.
Reminders of gentle greatness:

A rolling river with its trolley,
Its Symbol bold and bright.
Or the Log Lodge, where
So many memories have been made.

The Jefferson Street Bridge
Leading to the Main Street District
Reinvented and vibrant with new life,
The magnificent Coronado, a treasure.

Or reminders of the past:
Memorial Hall, Shumway Market,
Rockford Register News Building
Beattie Park Gazebo and Mounds.

Come sit awhile
In a magical world
Where benches beckon
Your reverie and take your mind

To favorite haunts that call you back:

Anderson Gardens in its perfect beauty,
Jane the Dinosaur to contemplate.
Womanspace labyrinth to walk and meditate.

O, Rockford is rich with history
And culture, amidst the trees
Of our Forest City, our sunflowers,
Butterflies, and especially our hearts.

Sing you places of the heart
From these benches
That make us a rich community!
Let the flowers bloom!

Red rose for Sigma Alpha Iota,
Pink rose for Alpha Kappa Alpha.
Yellow for the suffragettes
Who we honor here and always.

O, Rockford is rich with history
Big and bold, serving the greater good:
Supply Core, Booker T Washington Center,
Beyer Stadium and the thrill of the Peaches,

Big and bold, serving education and economy,
For decades before and onto the future:
Our own Rockford University, Collins Aerospace,
From the quaint to the glorious,

Midway Village with its vintage gardens,
The one-of-a kind Starlight Theater
Under the moon in all its phases.
Amidst a rainbow of pride,

A peace dove rises to the heavens,
Streaming yellow ribbons
Of the text that brought us here,
O great 19th amendment of equality!

Women Rock!
The Rock River rocks on.
Cheap Trick escorts you.
Rock on, Ladies. Rock on.

Rock on, Susan, the creator.
Rock on, Elaine, the organizer.
Rock on, spirit of Dorothy Bock.
Rock on, Ladies, rock on!

Rock on, donors who made it possible.
Rock on, volunteers

Who lovingly pieced the mosaics on benches.
Rock on, artists and creators!

Then come and sit awhile
Time and again, in a plaza
Created for all, where no one
Is excluded from community.

Come sit awhile
And take pride and comfort here.
Amongst these places,
Kindred spirits of all faces.

Mosaic benches of light.
Each site bright.
Future and past.
This plaza shall last.

Consider the Ripples: Experience the Arts

Consider the ripples
That grace Monet's Water Lilies
Or the ripples wafting
From the trumpet of Wynton Marsalis.

Experience the arts
In a city transformed with murals bright
Or the ripples of engagement
Of children painting, helping them take
flight.

Consider the ripples
Of vibrant colors those murals provide
Or the ripples of films and sculptures.
Diverse communities of pride.

Experience the art
Of arpeggios played on pianos
Or the ripples of dedication
Teachers have for young virtuosos.

Consider the ripples
A fine orchestra enlists
Or the ripples of discipline
Of each instrumentalist.

Experience the art
Of voices blended in choruses

Or the ripples of practice
And joy that they give us.

Consider the ripples
Of kids with mosaic installations
Or the giggles of delight
In their stunning creations.

Or ballet dancers
Graceful with pirouettes
Or the rippling and sizzling
of Hip Hop duets.

Know this: Every donation
Is a ripple of generosity.
Every volunteer is like an eagle
Gliding to service and philanthropy.

Experiencing the arts
Creates circles concentric
To sustain and welcome
artists eclectic and eccentric.

This could go on, of course,
But you get the drift.
Remember the ripple effect
Whatever your gift.

Invasion after Invasion

Just when we wanted to celebrate
the waning of Covid
the nomination of the first Black
woman to the Supreme Court,
the Russian invasion of Ukraine begins.

We see masses crammed into subways,
those audacious Soviet subways
deep within the earth
built with chandeliers and marble
decades ago in case of nuclear attack.

I remember those subways
from my first trip abroad,
1969, a college group to USSR.
I remember smokey air, the strange beauty
of Saint Basil's, where no one worshipped.

I remember Kiev,
surprised by its serene steep hills
and romance of Ukraine.
But those were days
when everything seemed possible.

Now, after being ravaged by Covid,
now, surviving our own coup,
now, when hope is like a pilot light
sputtering, going out, being re-lit,
now the invasion begins.

Invasion after invasion
of bodies, minds, countries.
Invasion after invasion
of peace of mind and direction.
What happens when sanctions and reason
fail?

We call upon faith.
We gather, march, protest.
We call upon world leaders.
We sign petitions.
The people of Ukraine try to flee.

Some people as always have answers:
Nuke 'em. Blow them off the face of the
earth.
Do they know how shortsighted that is?
Do they contemplate collateral damage?
Do they consider the repercussions of mad
men?

Like a dark subway,
some of us remember hiding under desks
as if that would thwart a nuclear bomb.
So we pray.
We pray for the people of Ukraine.

We send blankets of prayer
to wrap them in the harsh night
the crowded trains
the babies in mothers' arms.
the little girl in the subway with her cat.

O, People of Ukraine,
We stand with you.
We cry with you.
We wish we could save you.
We remember you.

Invasion after invasion
somehow some of us survive
against the odds. May it be you.
Invasion after invasion
we try to rekindle the pilot light of hope.

Mosaic of light—Each Shard Bright
--for the dedication of the Women's Centennial Sculpture
October 31, 2020

Like the Rock River flowing to its source
We flow. We grow.
From our mothers and grandmothers
Toiling and tending
We flow. We grow.
We flow as a powerful current.
We grow as a powerful source.

Mirrored tiles. Myriad styles.
Strength and beauty beguiles.
Mosaic of light. Each shard bright.
Crown of golden light. We take flight.

In a circle of light we beam. We team.
In ribbons of color we circle:
Purple for loyalty to the cause.
White for purity of purpose.
Yellow for life, light, and hope.
Mosaic of light. Each shard bright.
We beam as a powerful beacon.
We become a powerful, winning team.
We grow as a powerful source.

For Kate, Constance, and the Kids,
We celebrate. We emulate.
For all the Suffragettes who paved the way,
We celebrate. We emulate.
We are stars ratifying the future.
Remembering the past,
Illuminating the present.

Mosaic of Light. Each shard bright.
Like stars we light the firmament.
We shine within and for each other.

For love of the Earth, we nurture:
Our hearts, butterflies, and Peaches.
We pitch our lives forward and strong
Run the bases
Cheer each other on.
We honor the spirit within each other.
Mirrored tiles. Myriad styles.
We include. Never exclude.
May our lives sizzle and explode
Like the birth of the Earth itself.

For the voices never heard,
The lives cut short
For the sacrifices and courage of all women,
For a hundred years of seeking
We vote. We own. We find.
Yes, we find our voices here at river's edge
Lift them like eagles over the Rock River.
Crown of golden light. We take flight.
We wing. We sing.
We flow as a powerful current.
We grow as a powerful source.

Mirrored tiles. Myriad styles.
Strength and beauty beguiles.
Mosaic of light. Each shard bright.

Rockford: City of Bridges, City of Hope

--after "Bridge over Troubled Waters,"

Simon and Garfunkle

Of all the names Rockford has been given—
Forest City, Garden City, Screw City, City of
Murals,

City of Sculptures, City of Art and Music,
City of Parks....

I think I like the newest best: City of Bridges.

For bridges take you over troubled waters,
the dams and swirling Rock River,
the places where we need to be connected.
Connection, diversity, healing, and hope—a
bridge.

Oh, I love the idea of forests, of course.
Trees that shade and bring sanctuary,
filtering light and giving solitude space
in forty-four preserves tucked into
crevasses,

where pelicans, eagles, and blue-birds play,
where dells, rivulets, and creeks
shimmer in summer, where a canoe
or kayak might float lightly by.

And the gardens that reflect such diversity:
the altars and bright colors amidst blight,
the cottage gardens created for wildlife,
the manicured and dazzling rose gardens.

Salutations to the screw makers,
the tool and dye makers, the late shift,
the assembly line workers,
the airplane parts that find outer space.

Now the murals bedazzle and speak
in every corner of the city,
with every theme natural and ethnic,
with every bright color under the sun,

surprising us in places we wouldn't expect
to see a child's face painted on an old
building.

And sculptures keep us company
along the Bike Path and through downtown.

I swear there isn't a town with more artists
per capita, their gems at shows, markets,
Artscene, Greenwich, festivals, and
galleries.

Self-taught, bold, provocative. Elegant and
formal.

Rockford rocks with a music scene so
vibrant
that there is literally something for everyone:
classical in the grand Coronado, Hall of
Fame Cheap Trick,
the folk singers, ensembles, gospel, salsa,
and jazz.

Yet today I am drawn to us as a City of
Bridges.

We cannot deny the troubled waters
of our otherwise vibrant and eclectic place.
We are plagued by violence and
confounded.

Valiant people from every side of the bridge
try to instill anti-racism, anti-violence,
a quelling of domestic quarrels,
but the loud beat of violence goes on.

Yet Rockford keeps transforming,
keeps reinventing herself, seeking
inclusive solutions, repurposing old
factories,
saving landmarks lost in recession.

We must continue building bridges
between communities and causes,
bridges of understanding and compassion.
Connection, diversity, healing, and hope—a
bridge.

Poetry Is

Poetry is the scrapbook of the heart,
the blue print of the soul,
the labyrinth of the mind,
the path of perception,
the inventory of love in all its forms.

Poetry is the antidote for shallowness,
the remedy for stagnation,
the balm of loss,
the clarified moment of memory,
the ruthless recollection transformed.

Poetry is the senses, salted,
the lens, magnified,
the thought, simmered and ignited,
touch translated, taste not tampered,
tapped and untethered feeling.

Poetry is meticulous metaphor,
synesthetic symbiology,
the reckoning and redemption,
stones of sculpted stanzas
that lead beyond the temple of turmoil

to the sanctuary
where a garden bench waits for you,
perhaps a small chalice of wine,
a communion of meaning gleaned,
shared amidst the likewise spirits.

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Also read in tribute for local POETRY OUT LOUD, 2021.

Opening poem for Rockford University April 1, National Poetry Month, class presentation, 2021.

Something So New

You want something so new
a red door opening to a bright empty room
filled with sun
a window framing a stunning new vista
shimmering with adventure
perhaps the sea with its waves
that roar with promise
or a mountain across a still bay
glimmering with snow
as fresh as new beginnings

You want something so new
A career in hospitality, food and leisure
Where will it take you?
Perhaps a bright future in retail
Or office management.
Maybe you will become a Security Professional.
How cool is that?
Or maybe you are kind soul
Caring for others
In home care and child care.
Or maybe you are driving commercially
To sites yet unseen

Yes, you will have something so new
a bright empty room to stock
your own digs
with your own furniture
a new routine too
new places to stroll
new faces to explore
the possibility of unexpected friends

You want something so new
that it sweeps you away
electrifies each sense
the possibility of being thrilled
finding fish in a new pond
the lure of music yet unsung
dances not yet danced
the baggage left behind
the chance of reinvention

Stroll on State

A sonnet by Christine Swanberg

Come stroll awhile in a magical place
Where blue, red, gold, and green glitter and shine.
Come stroll awhile and glimpse Santa Claus's face.
With joy, wonder, awe the children incline --
Anticipation thick as pine to greet him.
Come stroll awhile, stop for the parade
And who knows what we shall see? As clouds dim,
All shimmers luminous for grand plans laid
To make our Stoll on State merry and bright,
Delighting every sense: steaming hot cocoa
And more--red cheeks, children bundled, a sight
For the holiday. And to think this is all local!
So sing ye of holidays, Sing ye with joy.
Let fireworks thrill each girl and each boy!

TABULA RASA

--a concept created by John Locke, that the mind is a blank slate and colored by what it is put into it

A simple lonely little building
A white rectangle
In an old part of town.

Tabula Rasa.

An idea emerges to paint a mural
On its face,
And a wonderful artist
Eddaviel, modern and exotic,
Agrees to make a mural.
The building is not lonely anymore
But a place to have a voice:
Meet me at the Mural.

Tabula Rasa.

The work begins.
First the bone sketch
And then the children
Plumping their hands with paint
And filling in the white spaces.
Coloring the tabula rasa
In bright colors.
Delicious shades and textures
Color the mural.
What's new, blue?
Red sped by.
Green's so keen.
Color machine.

Tabula Rasa.

You are born with a mind
Like the plain white wall,
Waiting to be filled with color.
Reading colors the mind.
Every new word is a shade of color.
Each new book is like a mural,
Swirling with life and surprise.

Yes, reading colors the mind.

Tabula Rasa.

Step into the white pages of a book
Now turned to stories,
Where, if you are lucky,
Like the main character
In the Never Ending Story,
You become a character too.
Pure magic, lifted into other
Worlds with new colors
And new characters to greet you.

Tabula Rasa.

A plain space becomes a work of art.
A work of art becomes a meeting place.
So everyone, Meet me at the Mural,
Where a lonely space transforms
To vibrant community engagement.
Where you can reach for the stars,
Float by the moon,
Wave to the planets,
Skate around the rings of Saturn.
Eyes vivid and wide
Like the green-eyed lady in the mural,
You reading will transform
Your lonely places,
And take you on many journeys
That color the mind
Like the textures you have created.

The question is: Can you solve
The riddle of the Sphynx?

Happy reading to you all.
Meet me at the mural,
Where it all began!

The Red Lacquer Room--for Lynda Hull

We were hiding in the Red Lacquer Room,
the empty dance floor of the grand old Palmer House
deep in the center of Chicago with its black canyons,

dark sky scrapers, faint friction, sparks of the El
clambering like a craving. You said I'd be surprised
how you had lost your beauty. Thin

as a refuge, your black and blue babushka twirled
into a turban, high Bohemian style, you seemed
more like a ragged survivor than the gypsy that you were.

Dear Lynda, even when we dared
flick on the great white chandeliers
of the Red Lacquer Room, I knew the streets

had won but pretended we crouched together
in a lovely surreal dream where happy endings
bright as crystal chandeliers in ballrooms still glow.

I thought surely you might find a way past
the city's chaos, the jagged graffiti, the stone souls.
I thought you might find stillness in the lake's

lapping tongues, a litting gull, some small place
not quite ecstasy. No, you could never
be consoled by compromise, or live slowly

to keep an ending less violent: that slippery slope
in winter near Provincetown. The fatal crash.
Gone too, the Red Lacquer Room's sparkling lights.

Lynda, know that when I think of you
I still see envelopes of poems crossing the Atlantic
jet streams from the Heartland to Barcelona

where a dark siren song lured you to a strange park
full of circus mirrors at the edge of town.
Sometimes distortion is all the magic we have.

No matter. To me you will always be
my muse, my mentor, my mirror,
my dark mistress of the gypsy jazz night.

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