

# ***Catastrophizing in Catastrophe***

Poems for Benefactors  
Fall 2017-21



by

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## General Dedication

*To Paul '84 and Nancy '85 (Mackey) Mueller*

Here we are, nibbling  
still at the yellow  
tufts of nothing  
before us. Making  
do. Surviving. Till,  
again, we thrive.

—from “Hang Your Head”

*With thanks for your ongoing advocacy of the Humanities and generous support of the Augsburg English Department.*

11 April 2022  
Douglas E. Green  
Professor *emeritus*

Cover Image: D. E. Green

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## Preface

Despite their rough state, it gives me great pleasure to offer these poems to the Augsburg community—past, present, and future—as a way to honor the donors who have so generously supported the English Department Speaker and Event Fund over the past five years. Even in the best of times, funding the humanities and arts is challenging, but Augsburg colleagues, alums, friends, and students keep stepping up to ensure that the literary arts will continue to thrive and grow at the University we love.

This little collection begins with the forty poems I wrote for the 2021 donors who brought us over our ten-year fund-building goal (\$25,000) in just our fourth year. But I would be remiss if I didn't mention that we have had fantastic support from the first year of our annual Give-to-the-Max-Day drive. So I have appended to the current set the poems written for 2017, 2018, and 2019 donors as well. The number of poems for those earlier years is smaller simply because, before my retirement at the end of the Spring 2021 term, I had a lot less time to write as intensively as I did last fall.

You may note the absence here of any poems for 2020 donors. In Fall 2020, after several years' work with forty student editors who took Advanced Studies in Writing with me, we published a digital anthology of student writing over almost the last half century, [\*Murphy Square 1975-2020: A Sesquicentennial Sampler of Literature by Augsburg Students\*](#), the link to which I sent out as a thank-you to 2020 donors. This anthology is available free to everyone through the Lindell Library website (under University Archives).

I want to close by saying how much I have loved my thirty-three years teaching in the English Department with so many wonderful colleagues and students. It has been a great honor.

Douglas E. Green  
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11 April 2022

**GENERAL POEM for 2021 DONORS**

*with special thanks to Cheri Johnson, Lisa B. Lapka, Patricia Fox, Thomas Marshall, Laura EF Lee, Carla Steen and Jeffrey Friedl, James and Caroline Holden, Jayne Carlson*

**Hang Your Head**

As I hang mine.  
We are forlorn  
horses in a barren  
field, heads drooping  
over brown stubble.

We have sad, dark  
eyes. Rivers of sweat  
run down our flanks,  
streaking our blue-black  
hides with rust-red  
dampened dust.

We seem, to passing  
eyes, the saddest  
creatures—without  
sustenance, without  
purpose. And yet.

Here we are, nibbling  
still at the yellow  
tufts of nothing  
before us. Making  
do. Surviving. Till,  
again, we thrive.

**HAIKU**

*for Virginia McCarthy, Margo Ensz, Tracy J. Sundstrom, Scott Bibus, Matthew Green, Cass Dalglish, Rebecca Ganzel, Michael Wentzel, Cary Waterman, Mary Kay and Larry Rop*

**Haiku #1**

My tires need more air.  
So do I. Winter has come.  
The world and I shrink.

**Haiku #2**

Here come the gray days:  
Clouds shadow a dimmed landscape.  
Then the snows arrive.

**Haiku #3**

I will not winter  
But glide into senescence  
Gracefully, greenly.

**Haiku #4**

Moon out at midday—  
Crescent west over 4<sup>th</sup> Street—  
Draws me into night.

**Haiku #5**

Crisp leaves brush sidewalks,  
Scuttle across streets, gather  
In winter's gardens.

**Haiku #6**

Hibernal sunrise  
Illuminates the planet—  
Iridescent love.

**Haiku #7**

The dark descending  
A mere eight hours after dawn  
Blankets sight with stars.

**Haiku #8**

Spring streams burble songs,  
Melodies of bygone snows,  
To lovers on the green.

**Haiku #9**

Pandemic winter  
Is not unseasonable—  
Streets deserted still.

**Haiku #10**

Summer's drought has left  
The autumn evergreens gold—  
Death's grove bright as joy.

**SONNETS, GHAZALS, and PANTOUMS**

*for Jody Scholz, Phoebe Johnson, Eric Browning-Larsen, MLT, Mel Freitag, Charles and Nancy Maland, Madelyn Browne, Davis Jones, Catherine Nicholl, ELS, Kathryn Swanson, Pamela and Frank Sinicrope, Ronald Palosaari, Betty Christiansen, JoEllen Doebbert in honor of Belvin and Connor Doebbert, Kathleen Nybroten, Anthony Bibus III, Linda and Gerald Phillips*

**1. Sonnet: The Land of Good Intentions**

In the land of good intentions nothing  
 much gets done. We are all old Oedipus  
 at Colonus, bemoaning our guilt,  
 our responsibility eschewing.  
 We didn't mean to, so we're innocent.  
 I prefer Lear, who shoulders the burden  
 of his errors: "Oh, I have ta'en / Too little  
 care of this! Take physic, pomp!" Lear sees what  
 he has done.

The punishment may be too  
 severe and the motives of his raven  
 daughters avaricious. Nor can he now right  
 the many wrongs he has inflicted. At least  
 not on his own. We need each other kindly:  
 For night spreads o'er our Dover, no rescue in sight.

**2. Ghazal: Break of Day**

As I began my morning walk with the dog, the sun had not quite risen.  
 The night was ending. The East glowed with orange light.

But when I looked back toward downtown, the West too shone  
 With the soft rose of a pastel sky right after Sun has set.

We moved, the dog and I, within this doubled light—  
 Sunrise of this morning and premonition of sundown.

No mystery: Today Aurora had offered her rays to declining Night,  
 Whose departing darkness softened them to artificial dusk.

And yet. This Green world—dog and man, town and park—felt the universal bright,  
 As if in our strange time it were both break of day and fall of night.

**3. Sonnet: Better Angel**

The words echo in my head, play over  
 and over and over. I say them aloud,  
 imagine the forms gratitude and love  
 take: I conjure them. And revenge. I'm weak:  
 I can't resist taking down the enemy,  
 peeling back the skin of their unkindness  
 unkindly, rooting out the mystery  
 of cruelty cruelly. I could write an ode  
 to vengeance, a crown of sonnets to the rack,  
 pantoums to nail- and eye-plucking that would  
 shock Goneril and Regan, villanelles  
 to celebrate in dungeons their spilled blood:  
 I would sate my atavistic urges.  
 But I won't: I'll turn to love and gratitude.

**4. Sonnet: First Snow**

It's snowing—a crunchy white carpet,  
 the frigid cousin of summer's sandy beach.  
 This snow comes only on the coldest days.  
 The morning, though overcast, is lit—  
 even before dawn—snow refracting light  
 in air, and ground illuminating world.  
 It is so beautiful! Snow crinkles  
 underfoot and then across the street there  
 flits from bare branch to bare branch the red shock  
 of cardinals. The world is so lustrous!  
 I feel like Shelley fronting his West Wind.  
 Sometimes such beauty smites us, forces us  
 to bow before the homely deity  
 we've abandoned—forgotten how to love.



## 5. Pantoum: The Caregivers

We visit weekly and they're always there.  
 One lays out my mother-in-law's dress,  
 Which she selects with thought and care.  
 Another responds to a request for pop.

Next time we find laid out a different dress,  
 And Joan in the bathroom being groomed.  
 Then a new fellow brings in a tiny can of pop  
 She sips from as we sit and chat.

Today Joan has just finished being groomed.  
 The sun is shining through the window  
 As we sit. She sips her pop. We chat.  
 The caregivers prepare this comforting routine.

Today the sun is shining through the window  
 As we enter with a bag of favorite chocolates.  
 The caregivers move through their comforting routine.  
 We banter with them and admire their poise.

Again, we bring Joan her favorite chocolates.  
 An aide chooses a bright red scrunchy with some thought.  
 We banter with her as she puts up Joan's hair.  
 We visit weekly and marvel at such care.

## 6. Sonnet: Flurries

Here we are in winter again—flurries  
 embroider the edges of the sidewalks  
 and set off the still-green grass, tuft from tuft.  
 The world is enlaced, a white fog blowing  
 in the distance, the flakes speckling my glasses  
 and melting on my cheeks. Stark bare tree limbs  
 receive the softening down. I always forget  
 that winter too needs, no, demands our love.  
 So I will give it. I will look anew  
 at the world, afford it what grace I can,  
 seek out friends, neighbors, even strangers  
 to share a laugh, a stay against harsher  
 times—against encroaching isolation  
 we will seek communal consolation.

**7. Sonnet: Winter World**

The dog and I move through morning darkness,  
 the first dusk of day that is December.  
 There is snow in the air, damp and cold—wind  
 skinning cheeks, fingers creaking in distress.

There's nothing to be done. It's just winter.  
 Snow compacted into ice slips me up.  
 Again. I right myself and wish for spring  
 to lift the frigid curse we're living under.

The dark engulfs our world, far off and near,  
 creeps into our marrow, freezes our souls.  
 We cannot breathe freely, our sighs fog air  
 colder than the Cannon River's floes. We fear.

Hope waits on sunrise, hint of skyline bright—  
 a dawn I must believe rekindles light.

**8. Ghazal: Old Chicken**

Hope is perhaps the thing with feathers.\* I'm not sure.  
 But I know it has no working wings. It pecks scraps in the yard and molts.

Optimism would be welcome now. A pleasant thought might cure,  
 If not a virus, a lot of other ills, like the spiritual mold

That mildews the soul and the eyes obscures.  
 No, hope no longer flies. It has no lift. It's grown quite old

And sere. It doesn't know what it's waiting for,  
 What arrival to expect when expectation seems far too bold.

They say hope is ever Green and will wind and rough weather endure.  
 But that's wishful thinking when, day after endless day, nothing new unfolds.

[\*A play on Emily Dickinson's famous poem.]

**9. Sonnet: Weathering Winter**

Cold froze on my glove teardrops at first light,  
 even though I'm not one to wear emotions  
 on my sleeve. Frigid winter temps chilled winds  
 to rival my youth's worst brush-offs, their bite.

Winter tests our very mettle, seeping  
 through every flaw in the season's armor,  
 raising the hair on arms and legs in spite  
 of our bodies' layered wool and down swathing,

so that, even more than our minds, our flesh  
 yearns for spring, feels in each return to home  
 and hearth the warmth of the day's lengthening.  
 Thus we trick ourselves to begin afresh:

And thus we'll thaw, melt in each other's arms,  
 As if we'd ever lived so—past winter's harms.

**10. Pantoum: Such Stuff as Dreams**

*Yes, we are such stuff as dreams are made on,  
 our little lives rounded with a bitter chill  
 that lasts months, darkens our souls slumbering  
 as if eternally. But sun will come,*

before that bitter chill rounds out our little lives,  
 impending Spring draw out day's wintry hours.  
 We turn once more to face the glowing East—  
 as if eternally, Sun comes again.

Impending Spring draws out this winter day,  
 belated Twilight gives us leave to walk.  
 We turn at dusk to face the glowing West  
 sing hymns to morrow's possibilities.

Belated Twilight gives us leave to walk,  
 to while in parks our sunsets and our noons,  
 and sing hymns to morrow's possibilities.  
 We take life revived for eternity.

We while in parks our sunsets and our noons  
 after dark months our souls lay slumbering.  
 Though we take this life for eternity,  
 We show ourselves the very stuff of dreams.

**11. Ghazal: Cosmic Comedy**

Do not “rage, rage against the dying of the light,” as the poet said.  
Let your last sentence, like the one above, end on a throwaway word.

Let soup dribble down your chin onto your new holiday sweater,  
just another of old age’s miscalculations, betokening the end you dread.

Sip water through a straw to hydrate this shriveled body, old and desiccated.  
Love of life is not for the fainthearted: You must anticipate the worm—

The decay of the body, of the house, of the planet. Well, not the world.  
It will persist for a good long time, just not with us on it.

Some think this end a tragedy. But it’s just “fire and ice,” as another poet said.  
Or something else, returning Earth to wilderness and greensward.

**12. Sonnet: The Cheerier Sort**

Would I were one of the cheerier sort,  
I’d be popular, have many more friends.  
A lot more folk would then with me consort,  
this party or that cocktail recommend.  
Were I a member of the cheerful crowd,  
I wouldn’t be here worrying a poem  
into the world, reading each line aloud  
again and yet again, till it strikes home.  
But those smiling people and their laughter  
simply aren’t for me. I like to sit and cry  
now and then, to mop my tear flow after  
a melodrama, for real or on TV.  
Make no mistake: I am no misanthrope.  
I love this busy world—beyond all hope.

### 13. Sonnet: Pandemic Song

I'm calling it off with my friends. Again.  
The risks are much too great. Covid-19  
doesn't mess around. And that omicron—

it's quick. Inevitable. I don't like  
this feeling that no matter my routine  
or how I agonize each choice I make,

it's always wrong. A moral quandary.  
I want to see my family, everyone I love.  
Heck, I need them—to feel alive, to see

some purpose in my living, some intent  
to act as if I knew the meaning of  
love. Yet I'm calling it off with friends.

Again. The risks remain—they're still too great.  
My premonition is we're just too late.

### 14. Sonnet: The News Now

Every morning I wake to the news.  
It's sometimes a disaster, far or near,  
the cataclysmic climatic kind—fire,  
flood, tornado, hurricane. Other times

it's social—another school or police  
shooting. Often now it's pandemical.  
There's just no escaping catastrophe,  
at least the threat of it. You live, you'll die.

Some have always lived so, have always had  
to live so, for generations. You know,  
driving while black in America has  
never been just driving, especially

while black and male and youngish. It will maul  
you—such danger. Worse than viral aerosol.

**15. Sonnet: Selkies in My Bathtub**

When I was a girl, I imagined selkies  
 inhabited my bathtub. I'm not sure  
 how they got there, but they never failed me.  
 I'd run the bath, get in, and there they were.  
 Sometimes they appeared miniature seals,  
 at others they seemed everyday mermaids,  
 and sometimes they had a dual appeal—  
 feral sea creature below, princess-made  
 above. They could be a little ominous—  
 at first I wasn't sure if they would bite.  
 They didn't, so I never had to fuss.  
 Skittish, they were hard to hold back from flight.  
 They still seem real to me, whether lies or truth.  
 Now they're gone—flown off, farther than my youth.

**16. Ghazal: Not an Option**

My dog barks too much—a yap so shrill it makes me doubt my selection  
 of this canine friend, indeed my very sanity.

But a miniature poodle—how can I blame him? I elected  
 him, chose him. To regret the choice now would reveal a moral laxity.

When I first encountered him, of all pups he was the model of precaution,  
 crawling on his belly to approach anything unknown like a suppliant devotee.

It betokened, I thought, obedience. But like our dogs we have imperfections:  
 We are hounded by the incessant yips of our beloveds' humanity.

*Regret, however, is not an option. Because love is bigger than perfection;  
 it is the embracing, ever green, of a whole, more complicated reality.\**

[\*Adapted from Molly Beth Griffin's essay "The Exact One I Wanted" in *Queer Voices*  
 (92)]

**17. Pantoum: Joy Fills Me**

At dawn peach rose-petal auras and pure  
 baby-blue stripes ribbon a cloudless sky.  
 Joy fills me—the colors, the dog's canter.  
 Everything betokens happiness.

Bright baby-blue pervades the noontide sky,  
 blinds strollers through parks, drivers on boulevards.  
 Joy fills me still, colors the day: I canter—  
 a pup, thoroughly alive, exuberant.

Blind strollers through parks, drivers on boulevards—  
 I feel what they feel, blood pulsing joy  
 like a pup, so alive, exuberant,  
 I want to bark and howl at brilliant moons.

What others feel, I do—blood-pulsing joy,  
 the wails of grieving loss, the song of Sun.  
 O, let us bark and howl at brilliant Moon!  
 Let us trill delights, sigh lamentations.

The wails of grieving loss, the songs of Sun,  
 at dawn raise auras, peach-petal and purple.  
 We have trilled delights, sighed lamentations—  
 Let Joy now fill, now color us—set hearts acanter.

**18. Sonnet: On Edge**

The yellow-orange glow of breaking day  
 traverses westward-stretching cloud-ribbons.  
 Light moves, it is moving, it's moving us  
 even at sunrise west with the declining sun,

which will go down, sink below the horizon,  
 to hide beyond the vast waste of ocean.  
 Time's order seems thus to our lying eyes,  
 which cannot see what intellect discerns—

how Sun rules Earth, how Sun at center flames.  
 Our peripheral nature makes us human,  
 border-dwelling, living on the margins,  
 rather than at the center of this system:

Such liminality spins us out far,  
 tangent shooting toward a distant star.

**VILLANELLES**

*for Riley Conway, Kevin Shutes, Paul Hallgren, Devoney Looser, Grace Sulerud*

**Villanelle #1: Winter's First Storm**

The day begins with anticipation—  
Snowflakes and slate skies presage its finish:  
First hibernal storms foretell the season.

At the start, there's irrepressible elation:  
Will this snow perfect our winter wishes?  
Such days begin with anticipation.

But already we hanker for cessation,  
Regret our joy, hope the flakes diminish:  
First hibernal storms foretell the season.

Whirling white induces hibernation,  
We nap and drowse as winds flap and wish.  
Yet day began with anticipation.

The storm portends several days' stagnation,  
A prospect in which we take no relish:  
First hibernal storms foretell the season.

This stormy day ends in irritation  
Now the dawn of our delight has vanished:  
The day begun in anticipation—  
This first hibernal storm—foretells the season.



**Villanelle #2: For My Father**

What is a father? The role keeps changing.  
You cradle this stranger, squalling at you.  
You're unprepared, always rearranging

Your plan. But there's no plan. You're exchanging  
One task for another—painting rooms blue,  
Pink, gold. What's a father? The role keeps changing.

You find emotions swing, feelings ranging  
With the baby's temper and your spouse's mood—  
You're unprepared, always rearranging

Your several selves. You sense them moving, ranging,  
Striving to fulfill love's need, to renew  
What *father* is even as it's changing.

Paternal obligations are estranging  
You from whom you love and from who loves you.  
You're unprepared, always rearranging

Your world, surrendering control, engaging  
The strange newcomer and the one who chose you.  
What's a father? The role's ever changing—  
You're unprepared, always rearranging.

**Villanelle #3: Catastrophe**

“Don’t catastrophize,” my shrink counsels me.  
A sigh arises from my depths: *Can you  
Catastrophize in a catastrophe?*

We’ve been imprisoned, unable to see  
Each other in the flesh. That’s why we’re blue.  
“Don’t catastrophize,” my shrink counsels me.

We steel our spirits for adversity,  
Force our fearful selves somehow to eschew  
Catastrophizing in catastrophe.

But now we are apart, virtually  
Restricted, engaging solely on Zoom.  
“Don’t catastrophize,” my shrink counsels me.

You have sworn always to abide with me,  
To keep to me, as I to you, still true.  
Let’s not catastrophize in catastrophe.

The pandemic rages on and on and we  
Wonder daily if at long last we’ll pull through.  
“Don’t catastrophize,” my shrink counsels me  
As I catastrophize in catastrophe.

**Villanelle #4: Evening Sky in Winter**

Winter light pastels the evening sky,  
Deep orange bleeds up into pale yellow—  
A palette that may soothe or terrify.

Impending dark compels we question why  
Chill winds with such ferocity do blow  
Though winter light pastels the evening sky.

Beauty so radiant should mollify  
Our qualms and fears, the fading afterglow  
A palette that should soothe, not terrify.

The luminous heavens should testify  
To some Great Comfort all too seldom shown  
But when winter pastels the evening sky.

Or so some do believe. Others just sigh,  
Roll their eyes, think the promise hollow—  
Heaven's palette neither soothes nor terrifies.

Many keep searching still for Truth on high,  
Some Great Power behind the dusky glow.  
When winter light pastels the evening sky,  
Its palette will some soothe, some terrify.

**Villanelle #5: Dress Rehearsal**

Daily life is not a dress rehearsal  
for living, but itself the performance.  
We're onstage now, before the grand dispersal.

There's no practice run to perfect lines and all,  
no backstage where we wait in dormancy.  
Daily life is not a dress rehearsal.

It's our being—the here and now is all  
we have. We can't appeal for clemency.  
We're onstage now, before the grand dispersal.

Let's not wait, but act, not be too careful  
nor stymied by striving for importance—  
our daily life isn't a dress rehearsal

for something better, something magical.  
Of life perfected no one can inform us—  
we're onstage now but will soon disperse, all

dissolve into the ether universal,  
mere elements amid a cosmic dance.  
Life's simply not a dress rehearsal,  
we're on the stage now, just before dispersal.

**SESTINAS**

*for Diane Palan, Peter Wodarz, Chris Scribner, Paul Kilgore, Alejandro J. Herrera  
and Morris Floyd, Rodney E. Hill*

**Sestina #1: Dangling Limb**

Today I saw a broken  
branch hooked overhead  
on a power line  
as I crossed the street.  
I felt powerful and vulnerable  
at the same time. It was wonderful.

It was more than elation—I felt wonderful.  
They had pummeled my ego, but I hadn't broken.  
I wasn't a superhero, but I wasn't vulnerable  
either. I was just dangling like that branch, overhead,  
just hanging high above, twisting in the wind above the street.  
Nothing would cushion my fall, should I drop from the line.

It's funny: I had come from a noble line  
of immigrant movie moguls, too proud but wonder-filled,  
who took for granted, as if they owned it, the very streets  
they walked to work and back. They couldn't imagine being broken—  
that condition befell only those who got in over their heads.  
But we wouldn't be those people. We weren't vulnerable.

No, if need be, we could dine on the vulnerable,  
make them our feast if they wouldn't toe the line.  
You can take a poor man and dangle possibility above his head,  
make him believe in you and in himself, convince him he's wonderful.  
For you he'll undertake hard labor, even murder, before he's broken,  
before he lies naked, his children starving, his home a filthy street.

That's what I was thinking this morning on the street,  
a delicate long branch above, so beautiful and vulnerable.  
What had it been in its full glory on the tree, before the winds had broken  
it off, before it had balanced on the line  
like an acrobat on the high wire, a wonderful  
sign of something grand we can't quite fathom overhead

because it's beyond us, over our head,  
not just a marvel above the street,  
not just a wonder full  
of possibility, not just a thing in its majesty but something vulnerable,  
something toward which we do not incline—  
a sad thing, a thing life's broken.

We too are broken, dangling overhead  
on a powerline, just above the very street  
on which we think we live, so vulnerable and yet so wonderful.

**Sestina #2: Draught for the Faint Heart**

Like you, I live in a body,  
 a state not for the fainthearted.  
 It requires regular maintenance, like a house  
 or a car, so each night  
 it rests from the day's frenzy and rage,  
 when from the cup of dreams it sips

sustenance. A mere sip  
 suffices—gives the body  
 the strength it needs not to rage  
 like a toddler nor to turn fainthearted,  
 withdraw into internal night,  
 wander through a darkened house.

At their best our bones and flesh house  
 spirit, drink deeply of the world, soul-sip  
 the pleasures of each place, each day, each night.  
 Why do we not luxuriate in the body?  
 Why are we, in the face of such magnificence, fainthearted?  
 We should against the forces that constrain us rage,

should unleash our rage:  
 not submit meekly to house-  
 arrest, self-convicted, faint of heart,  
 afraid even to take a sip  
 of freedom, to unbind this body,  
 loose it to the liberty of night.

The nectar of sweet freedom and the night  
 release us from our rage  
 at constraints on and by the body.  
 We move through and beyond this human house  
 into the world, from which we sip  
 to revive our fainting hearts,

from which we faint hearts  
 a draught of night  
 can liberally sip,  
 can end our futile raging,  
 and find instead a house—  
 the home that we name *body*.

Though the body faints, its heart  
 houses the myriad powers and gifts of night:  
 Let it rage against constraint nor fear from the cup of liberty to sip.

**Sestina #3: Frost at Daybreak**

At the park it appears first to my eyes on a nearby fir,  
 then coats every bare branch and evergreen needle in the frost  
 down with which on cold days winter fog blues  
 the landscape. The world becomes a dream.  
 The soft frozen mist silvers the air,  
 sends down the casual stroller's spine a chill

that thrills the spirit, and not the chill  
 that horrifies the terrier's fur  
 when wind hustles the winter air.  
 In childhood we would with our warm breath frost  
 a winter pane and etch the name of one we'd dream  
 of, our someday love, revealed only till the wind blew

and disappeared the name. But we weren't blue,  
 nor daunted by the wind's deep chill.  
 We did not repent our dream  
 nor give up the hoped for  
 consummation. We faced the frost  
 of loves who saw no worth in us, who put on airs

so grandiose that they sucked the air  
 out of the heaven's windy blue  
 and covered over every thought with frost.  
 A haughty idol's unresponsive chill  
 could not undo the pleasure of the dog's soft fur  
 or muffle the persistence of our myriad dreams.

So we keep dreaming,  
 draw deep breaths of the open air  
 to sustain ourselves for  
 whatever may come out of the bright blue  
 winter sky, like the crystal chill  
 of this morning's coat of frost.

I look again at the frosted  
 tree limbs, silent as a winter dream,  
 as a stream chilled  
 to white ice, the air  
 so cold the ice looks as blue  
 as the spikes of a Douglas fir.

This silver world we've waited for, this frost  
 that doesn't blue the heart but lets it ever dream,  
 the still music of this winter air revive our spirit's chill.



**Sestina #4: Viral Refrain**

Each day I wake to the news,  
 always a disaster—some fire,  
 an obliterating flood.  
 Always the same sensational refrain—  
 one more police or school shooting,  
 the unstoppable coronavirus.

In my neighborhood the virus  
 dominates the news.  
 We haven't had a shooting  
 in some time. We're fired  
 up over who'll win the weekend game. We refrain  
 from worry over hot Decembers, odd off-season floods

in Florida. But waves of anxiety flood  
 through me, as noxious as this virus:  
 From nightmares of destruction I can't refrain.  
 Catastrophe has become old news,  
 just one more wildfire  
 taking down another forest, just one more shot

endangering another species—and our own. Our phones shoot  
 footage of another fatal traffic stop. The images flood  
 over us, shocking to most, flames of a daily fire  
 to others, a centuries-long viral  
 pandemic of injustice. Once novel, Covid-19's no longer new,  
 just one more headline, one note in a constant refrain

about disaster, illness, and death. We weary can't refrain  
 from soul-deep suspiration: Will green shoots,  
 as the seasons turn, spring forth anew?  
 Will April rains over parched fields flood?  
 Must we still despair the virus  
 will ever cease to burn, Pandemic's blazing fire

shrink to embers, a smoldering coal fire  
 we need no longer fear? How do we refrain  
 from paralyzing terror? Remember: pandemic viruses  
 do not last forever. Like shooting  
 stars, they may betoken disaster—this flood,  
 that hurricane. The sensational headlines of our diurnal news.

We cannot let such news snuff out the fire  
 of possibility within us or divert the flood of hope, our soul's refrain.  
 Let us, rather, take one more shot—and let our love alone go viral!

**Sestina #5: Blue Notes**

Northern winter offers another spectacular sunrise:  
 Creamsicle orange interwoven with baby blue  
 brighter than Paul Newman's eyes.  
 Such beauty comes unexpected, un hoped  
 for, like birdsong on a frosty morning, like joy  
 in difficult times. But there it is—stunning.

The colors saturate the sky. It stuns  
 us—this tie-dyed blue-orange sunrise—  
 right into forgotten joy.  
 It's impossible to feel blue,  
 to exile the hope  
 that fans out prismatic before our very eyes.

After all, love made these eyes  
 that witness the miracle of first light, so fleeting yet stunning.  
 Love always breeds hope—  
 even when it fails. Every sunrise  
 brings possibilities. Whether slate gray and overcast or clear blue,  
 dawn always promises a new beginning, the joy

of a fresh start, the chance to enjoy  
 whatever dances before our eyes:  
 heaven's clerestory blue,  
 the smile of a friend, whose face still stuns  
 us, a toddler son's rising  
 early, entering his parents' room, hoping

today to be taken in, hoping  
 for that tumbling or tickling joy,  
 that animal release, as unpredictable as the exact moment of sunrise.  
 We eye  
 the brightening horizon, stunned  
 by the pulse of light and the purity of blue

as perfect as Lady Day's blue  
 notes, the paradoxical music of hope.  
 It's no wonder we're stunned  
 by the world's joy.  
 even when our eyes  
 miss it. No, sunrise

isn't always stunning. We don't enjoy  
 every day the hope our eyes  
 seek ever—bluing sky of sunrise.

**Sestina #6: In a Green Shade**

Once upon a time  
 is over. It's raining  
 again. The clouds have opened,  
 a downpour—the drops ping their song  
 above our heads, housebound  
 as we are, awaiting the greening

of the world. I want to transform it all *to a green  
 thought in a green shade.*\* Now. To take time  
 by the shoulders and insist on the bond  
 I understood between us. I want to rein  
 in the present dirge and hear a happier song  
 wafted through the summer air across the open

fields. Right now nothing feels open—  
 the very possibility of fertile green  
 hopes seems yesterday's song.  
 The drops ping. I time  
 their plunking overhead. The rain  
 should feel like a gift that binds

us together. And aren't we bound  
 to one another? Mustn't we open  
 ourselves to the rain,  
 to the possibility of greener  
 worlds, more joyful times,  
 when the music of earthsong

will raise our spirits singing  
 themselves of the harmonic bond  
 of creature to creature from times  
 more distant than we can imagine. Open  
 your heart, love, I want to say. The green  
 will come again, will reign

over the fields and forests. The rain  
 does not signal an end—if we hear its song.  
 It moves the world and us into those green  
 thoughts that one life bind  
 to another, that open  
 our hearts to beating time.

Our pulse keeps time, like those drops of rain  
 we hear now. Let's open ourselves to that song,  
 hear in it what binds us to this life, ever green.

[\*From Andrew Marvel's 17<sup>th</sup>-century poem, "The Garden"]

## APPENDIX

## Poems for Benefactors 2017

HAIKU*For Jessica Fanaselle*

Another pewter  
 sky—one more day falls like lead.  
 In my heart, autumn.

*For Phoebe Johnson*

The ferns have withered—  
 brick-hard earth and dark and you:  
 leaf-dust in my hand.

*For Matt & Allison Broughton*

Medieval sky—  
 Blue—sunlight and atmosphere—  
 Autumn's sacred space

*For Devoney Looser*

Daylight diminishing—  
 Less light, no light—darkening—  
 Hunger cerulean

*For Catherine Nicholl*

Drizzle at sunrise—  
 Fallen leaves strewn across the yard—  
 Then—a child laughs

*For Kevin Shutes*

In long-shadowed days—  
 Sunlight—an aperitif—  
 Then darkling—the night

*For Pat Noren Enderson*

Arctic moon—clear sky—  
 Shadows on snow-stippled yards—  
 A branch cracks—echoes

RENGA-STYLE POEMS

*For Heather Riddle, Sharon Rolenc, Margaret Erickson, Cathy & Rich Powers, JT  
 Pinther, and Jim Cihlar*

Cold—distant—like night  
 Your hand grazes mine—retreats—  
 Imagine our lips

You flinch—in sleep—turn away—  
 Could you now be—dreaming—me?

Phantom—I dream you—  
 Mind haunting heart's obsession—  
 Will you sing—with me?

Rain troubles the lake's surface—  
 Hear its song—the notes we miss

## SONNETS

*For Peter Wodarz*

### **Love's Surgery**

I was looking for a good person, and yet  
 not greatly good—anyone in a pinch  
 might do, who'd look at me with loving eyes  
 and recognize that core so clenched  
 the coil would not to touch untwist  
 but require inordinate patience,  
 the operation of love's exacting  
 surgeon, expert passionate persistence.  
 And there you are—scrubbed, uniformed, and masked  
 for the procedure: Your scalpel ready  
 to cut me to the very heart. No time  
 for anesthesia. No time for thought.  
 I can see only your eyes, flashing green:  
 You adjust the light—breathe—commence your task.

*For Cass DalGLISH*

### **Raptor**

The president of fowls feathers his nest  
 with blood-stained quills and down of lesser birds.  
 He roosts under the eaves of humble homes  
 and caws nightlong his own magnificence.  
 Sparrows and wrens we harbored in the past  
 succumb to the predations of this jay:  
 His orange crest depopulates the yard.  
 Muted fear over bush and branch he casts.

Why don't we chase this winged rapacity  
 out of our gardens, bushes, eaves, and trees?  
 Why have we not his bloody nest ripped out  
 and tossed, abandoned, on the compost heap?  
 Do we no longer hope for the return  
 of birdsong and the capacity to please?

**Poems for Benefactors 2018**

DONOR'S CHOICE

*for Devoney Looser*

**On the USS Albatross**

This is our ship  
various as a city  
intimate as a village  
less like a nation  
more like a world  
with all the possibilities  
of neighbor and friend

This is our ship  
swift in the currents  
winds behind us  
but in frigid seas  
and dark wintry North  
it grinds through  
excruciating ice

This is our ship  
We will not get another

If we cannot pull together  
our lips will dry and split  
our tongues crack and swell  
our ears blister shut

We will lose our way  
our fragile home  
each other and ourselves

But this is our ship  
We do not have to drown  
nor to die of thirst on these ironic waters

We can traverse these seas together  
Together we can reach our ports of call

This is our ship  
We do not need another  
We will not get another

This is our ship

SONNETS

for Kathy Swanson

**Nothingness and Being**

Does Death ever get out of the wrong side  
of the bed? turn to the wall and wonder  
whether it's all worthwhile? sit up and scratch  
his head, lie back down—covers pulled high to hide?

Is Death like us—exhausted by routine,  
day in, day out, showing up unwelcome  
on your doorstep or mine or theirs, longing  
for a break, a holiday? Why then so lean

and mean, slave to quota, ledger, numbers?  
Consider rather what existence means,  
the relevance of Descartes' *cogito*,  
Berry's simple life, the taste of cucumbers.

After all, Death already knows or should:  
Your stuff stays here—and only here is good.

for Cathie Nicholl

**Shakespeare Sonnet Pastiche: 55 + 73****Not marble, nor the gilded monuments****Of princes, may you *in me behold*.****No, you shall burn more bright in these contents:***My yellow leaves, or none, or few, that cold**Does shake, shall not outlive this paltry rhyme.**My bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang,***This unswept stone besmear'd with sluttish time,***By and by black night will take away: No pang***At statues overturned, the work of masonry****Rooted out, the sunset fading in the west.**Lost, **the living record of my memory.***Then Death itself will seal up all in rest.*Yet in you I see *the glowing of such fire*That Death cannot but in its heat *expire*.

for Phoebe Johnson

**Athazagoraphobia**

Most poets probably have it—the fear  
of being forgotten, overlooked, ignored:  
Amid red, gold, and orange, leaves brown and sere.

Against flamboyant figures, flat-fall'n word.  
 We want to live forever, starting now,  
 to seem to all around us memorable,  
 to unscrew inscrutable whys and hows,  
 and thus secure best seats at culture's table.  
 But such anxiety isn't ours alone:  
 We've siblings in our fear to go unseen,  
 to pace the little realms we do not own,  
 then disappear as if we had not been.  
 So poets monarchize the blank white page:  
 through dazzling metaphor, eternally onstage.

for Sherri K. Larson

### Midnight in America

Once there was *something better down the road*—  
 or so we thought. After the fallen towers,  
 still at war, we inched our way toward hope.  
 We never got there, fell to other powers.  
 It's dark here now. The old border between us  
 and them evaporates, a mere illusion—  
 no difference between America  
 and there. Day is night and all's confusion.

Once we asked, *What if the mightiest word  
 is love?* Not anymore. We cannot see  
 each other in the darkness, miss the human  
 touch, the neighbor's hand, the gesture—kindly,  
 warm—of fellow feeling. But still we yearn  
 for light, for life, before the silent urn.

**Note:** The italicized words are from "Praise Song for the Day," the poem written and delivered by Elizabeth Alexander at the 2009 Inauguration of President Obama.



*for Kevin Shutes (who gave me license to pick any form)*

### **Paean to Compression Stockings**

Chronic pain held you hostage  
for months. Touch had fled  
into exile. But after the hip  
replacement, your compression  
stockings brought us back  
together. Those tight black  
knee-highs—I had to work out  
the wrinkles so that the flow  
of your blood would not be  
constricted. I loved kneading  
your calves. I loved needing  
you. I loved those socks.

### HAIKU

*for Anonymous*

lead sky—damp umber  
leaves punctuate road and walk—  
dirt-black fields lament

*for Heather Riddle*

an eagle circles  
plummets roadside—talons first—  
scattering fat squirrels

*for Cass Dalglish*

Clouded vault, endless gray—  
Oh, for the light! for the blue!  
A world illumined!

*for Suzanne Stenson O'Brien*

ice-whitened branches  
silvered air and crystal fog  
pristine hush of Death

*for Virginia M. McCarthy*

Sun-warmed December,  
Wings whoosh in arbor vitae—  
Birds are still singing!

*for the Family of Rich & Cathy Powers*

Dusting of snow—light—  
glows midnight—phosphorescent—  
your hand—warming—mine.

*for Annie Lydia Dier*

Wintry discontent  
no inglorious summer  
soothes—dark glacial night.

*For Garry Hesser and Nancy Homans, Tracy Sundstrom, Rebecca Ganzel, and Matt Beckmann*

**Austerity Sonnet: Shutdown**

You worked. Now you don't.  
They paid you. No more.  
You wonder, "Who am I?"  
You're stuck at the door.

Your kids are like ours,  
their needs still persist:  
No home, clothing, food—  
You're feeling remiss.

But you're not the problem:  
You work hard every day,  
tend to your duties,  
and keep want at bay.

Trumped's what you've been,  
And Trump's is the sin.

**Poem for Benefactors 2019**

*During Fall 2019, I had time for only one poem to honor all our donors that year. But it expresses well how inspiring the Augsburg community was during very troubled times. Even now, in the face of myriad local, national, and world challenges, I hope it still rings true.*

***Here at the end of the world—***

announced daily by the media—  
it's nice to know that we still  
have each other, that we can  
look across the quad and find  
meaning and people we care  
for. Yes, the planet is baking  
and flooding, freezing and frying,  
and, if we don't do the right  
things in short order, so will we.

But those researchers toiling  
in the labs, those writers  
and readers among the library  
stacks, those faces upturned  
in debate, those neighborhood  
meal-bearers and tutors offer  
a hope, a hint, that tomorrow  
is, even now, a possibility.