New Year’s Eve Letter to Friends

By David Clewell

Every year the odds are stacked against it

Turning out the way you’d like:

A year of smooth, a year of easy smile,

A year like a lake you could float on,

Looking up at a blue year of soothing sky.

Mostly the letters you’re expecting never come.

Lovers walk out and keep on going

And in no time they’re no friends of yours.

Mostly, the sheer weight of days

Gone awfully wrong: a tire blown out,

Someone’s heart caving in,

The hole worn finally through the roof.

Sometimes it’s only a few tenacious cells

Digging in against complete dissolve.

The smallest strand of DNA, stretched thin

Over thousands of years, goes taut

And finally holds.

I’ve watched men at the Mission staring out

Into the middle distance,

Putting up with the latest version of salvation,

All the time wondering just

How long until the bowl and spoon.

They’ve been around enough to know

The good part’s always saved for last and

There’s no promise they won’t make to get there.

Each year cuts our lives down to size,

To something we can almost use. So we find it

Somewhere in our hearts: another ring shows up

When we lay open the cross-section.

One more hard line in hand

Spreading slowly out of its clench.

It used to be the world was so small

You could walk out to the end of it

And back in a single day. Now it seems

To take all year to make it mostly back.

And so this is for my friend all over:

A new year. Year the longshot comes home.

The year letters pour in, full of the good word

That never got as far as you before.

The year lovers come to know a good thing

When they find it in the press of familiar flesh.

Walk out onto the planet tonight. Even the moon

Is giving back your share of borrowed light

And you take it back, in the name of everything

You can’t back in your life.

Imagine yourself filing with it

Letting yourself go and floating

through the skeleton trees to your place

at the top of the sky.

And here’s the best part, coming last,

Just after all your practiced shows of faith.

Even now, while you’re still salvaging

What passes for resolve.

Remember this, no matter what else happens:

This year you’ll never go without.

It’s no small thing you’ve been in line for,

This bowl and spoon passed finally to you.

**David Clewell**

1955–2020

David Clewell was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey. He earned a BA from the University of Wisconsin and an MFA from Washington University. He was the author of 10 poetry collections, including *Taken Somehow By Surprise* (2011), *The Low End of Higher Things* (2003), *Jack Ruby's America*(2000), *The* Conspiracy Quartet (1997), Now We're Getting Somewhere (1994), Blessings in Disguise (1991), which was a 1989 National Poetry Series winner, and Room to Breathe (1976). His poems appeared in many journals, including Harpers, Poetry magazine, Kenyon Review, Georgia Review, Missouri Review, New Letters, and Yankee.

Clewell's awards include the Pollak Poetry Prize, the Lavan Poetry Prize, and the Lifetime Achievement in the Awards Award from the Webster Groves Arts Commission. taught for many years at Webster University, and he served as poet laureate of Missouri from 2010 to 2012. He died in early 2020.