POETRY and COVID-19

An Anthology of Contemporary International and Collaborative Poetry

SAMPLER

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INTRODUCTION:
PANDEMIC POETRIES

The publication of this anthology comes a year into the Covid-19 pandemic. In the summer of 2020, we invited nineteen UK poets to partner with poets from around the world, to work collaboratively on poems responding to the virus. The poems herein are as personal as they are communal, and as local as they are international. Between them, the writers reside in all of the world's permanently populated continents, recognising that the pandemic has truly hit us *everywhere*. Their diversities of aesthetics and poetics, of Covid experiences – at a distance and/or embodied, anecdotal and/or dramatic – are further significant to their inclusion and their work.

Below, we offer a short overview of pandemic poetries in English. It is, by necessity, both detailed and partial, objective and subjective. It concludes with mention of our ongoing Poetry and Covid project, of which this anthology plays one part in the documentation and artistic processing of our current crisis.

Anthony Caleshu and Rory Waterman

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1.
'Like a cloud that travels on': from Bubonic Plague to Spanish Flu
(Rory Waterman)

It is October 2020, and I am in quarantine for fourteen days: the extra price I have to pay for a trip overseas as second waves of Covid-19 swell around the world. It is day six. I write this on the eleventh floor of The Splaisir Hotel in Myeongdong, Seoul, one of the busiest shopping districts on earth. This is one of many hotels within range of Incheon International Airport that is being used by the Korean government to quarantine new arrivals. Thankfully, the immovable desk where I write has been set by the room's little window, which I have discovered opens about six inches on one side with an unappealing suck. Below, the foundations are being laid for a new tower-block, and lilliputian figures move about in a muddle of mud and girders. My observations have taught me that it usually takes eight scoops from a Hyundai HX300

excavator to fill a lorry's dump trailer. Behind that organised chaos is the serene, squat headquarters of the Bank of Korea, pinned down at each corner by a shabby little green dome, and then a hundred tower-blocks, massive and ordinary, stretching out of sight in all directions – or all directions I can see within my ninety-degree radius on the world. Save for some signage and advertising hoardings using the Hangul alphabet, I could be anywhere that is, by some conceptions, somewhere. Cars and buses swing round the austere Bank of Korea fountain on the only bit of road I can see, but the little square beside it is eerily empty. A Chanel banner ruffles in the breeze, and huge LCDs screens pump out advertisements to tiny audiences – sometimes to no audiences at all. And yet, South Korea has become world famous for its ability to flatten the curve and keep it flat. Among developed nations, it is – at least for now – a 'success story'. And I think I have some personal experience of why. I am allowed to open the door to my room four times a day, to pick up breakfast, lunch and dinner from a plastic box or to drop my rubbish next to it, sprayed inside and out with disinfectant and tied in a heavy-duty orange binbag bearing a biohazard symbol. Security cameras in the corridor check I don't step across the threshold for any longer than is absolutely necessary, and daily announcements in seven languages remind me not to.

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I am *not* complaining: this is a minor, if ultimately memorable, inconvenience. But it is also a reminder of how interconnected we have become. I am here to be a writer in residence for Bucheon UNESCO City of Literature, less than an hour away, but it so happens that I'll also get to spend time with an English friend I met as an undergraduate at the University of Leicester, who now lives in Incheon with his Chinese wife, and teaches at an American university there. That is three continents in one sentence, one chain of fairly quotidian facts. I came here in the conventional way: on a huge airliner, the product of thousands of minds, that no individual on earth could build, and fell asleep while travelling at five hundred miles an hour six miles above central Russia, Mongolia and China, and then diligently around North Korean airspace. It's all so extra-ordinary, all so completely normal.

You don't have to be an epidemiologist to understand how contagious diseases of zoonotic origin can arise apparently out of nowhere, develop into epidemics, and proliferate into pandemics in the increasingly crowded world so many of us – and so many of the systems within which we live – perpetuate. Four months after this virus was discovered

in Wuhan at the end of 2019, New York City was filling 'morgue trucks' with bodies, and people across the UK were waving last goodbyes to parents through care home windows.[1] Nobody could yet even say for certain what the symptoms of Covid were, and no treatments had been developed – it had all happened so fast. But at least we have genuine hope of treatments being found – a more positive facet of the modernity that has brought all of these problems to us so quickly. It is probable that many of the epidemics and pandemics of the past might have followed a similarly rapid pattern of intercontinental transmission, had conditions allowed, though they still often made their way across and between continents eventually. And those caught up in earlier epidemics and pandemics had to contend with an 'invisible enemy' they had little means of coming to understand, to borrow the phraseology of a US President who has professed that he has 'the best words' at his disposal.

How has poetry – 'the best words in the best order', as Samuel Taylor Coleridge allegedly put it – regarded previous epidemics and pandemics?[2] The deadliest pandemic on record was the bubonic plague of 1348–53, which later came to be known as the Black Death. Between June 1348 and December 1350, it killed approximately half of the population of England; the next occurrence of bubonic plague in that country, in 1361, killed up to a fifth; and another, eight years later, was almost as deadly again. There were then successive waves of the plague at least once a decade for the next century, some lowering the population by as much as ten percent. This puts our current – and to us staggering – death tolls, and the duration of our privations, into perspective. It is surprising, then, that the Black Death, and successive waves of bubonic plague, do not have a more noticeable presence in late Medieval English poetry, especially considering that so many of the late medieval masters such as William Langland, the Gawain Poet and Geoffrey Chaucer lived through several of them. Chaucer might have taken Boccaccio's *The Decameron* as a

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[1] Gina Cherelus, '"Dead Inside": The Morgue Trucks of New York City', *New York Times*, 27 May 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/27/opinion/coronavirus-morgue-trucks-nyc.html> [accessed 20 October 2020]; 'Coronavirus: Government sued Over Care Home Deaths "Disgrace"', BBC website, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-devon-53012565> [accessed 20 October 2020].

[2] These words are attributed to Coleridge, but were written down by his nephew, Henry Nelson Coleridge, and first published posthumously in the latter's *Specimens of the Table Talk of the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1835).

model for *The Canterbury Tales*, but the most explicit reference to plague in his counterpart is in 'The Pardoner's Tale': 'a privee theef men clepeth [call] Deeth' who 'hath a thousand slayn this pestilence'.[3] Boccaccio's collection of novellas, by contrast, is a framed narrative in which what we might now call a 'bubble' of seven young women and three young men isolate from the Black Death in a villa outside Florence, and it contains gory depictions of what they left behind. In *Piers Plowman*, Langland went a little further that Chaucer in describing the effects of plague, 'with many kene sores, / As pokkes and pestilences' that 'kulled ful manye', but that seems to have been his longest explicit written mention of it.[4] A little later, John Lydgate (c.1370–1451) translated his 'Danse Macabre' 'owte of the frensshe' from a version in a Paris cemetery, and of course this also personifies 'cruel dethe', who is 'wyse and sage', and slays 'Bothe ȝonge [young] and olde' by 'stroke of pestilence'.[5] Lydgate is also responsible for 'Doctrine for Pestilence', a poem to be used as a guide or 'gouernance', for which reason it was immensely popular.[6] Attempted cures for plague at the time included such ingenious futilities as cutting a pigeon in two from the breast downwards and applying it, opened, to the patient's swellings before the bird died. For the most part, however, Lydgate's advice boils down to adjusting your diet to balance your humours: 'fro[m] frutes hold thyn abstinence' but eat 'chekenys' and 'Drynk good wyn'. It is wonderful, at least in retrospect, to think of poetry attempting to play this practical role in public health. But while poems can provide solace – we hope this anthology does that, among other things – any reader turning to poetry for medical advice now is probably looking in the wrong place.

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Other expressly informative late medieval accounts of plague do exist, though none in English. One notable example is 'The Plague of Rhodes' (c. 1500) by Emmanuel Georgillas. There is no published full translation in English, though one might expect current scholarship to be clamouring to this task, considering the parallels.[7] Georgillas

[3] Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Pardoner's Tale', in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (3rd edn) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 199.

[4] William Langland, *Piers the Plowman and Richard the Redeless*, ed. Walter W. Skeat (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), p 584.

[5] Florence Warren, ed., *The Dance of Death: Edited from MSS. Ellesmere 26/A. 13 and B. M. Lansdowne 699* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 24.

[6] Quoted in Bryon Lee Grigsby, *Pestilence in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 131–6.

7 I rely here on the partial translation provided in Costas Tsiamis et al, 'The

describes how 'The island of Rhodes was struck by God-sent death and suffering', and is apparently especially keen to forewarn 'you great rulers who lead us': 'listen to what this evil has been, this great and terrible shame'. Some of what he describes has chilling parallels with contemporary conditions in much of the world: he charts the mass burials outside town (to some extent comparable to the ones we saw on Hart Island near New York in the spring of 2020, for example),[8] how 'relatives and the neighbours' followed official orders to 'shut themselves into the houses' and the subsequent eeriness of the deserted streets, and the agony of personal suffering: 'I lost my wife and children / my three sisters and their husbands' and their children: 'the sword of Charon took them all'. In fact, by Georgillas's account, he lost twenty of his twenty-eight relatives, most of whom were children: unlike with Covid-19, young people were especially vulnerable to the Black Death. He also describes how it all began:

> a ship brought it when it moored in the harbour
> and on it Death was hiding in a sack
> and there the priest had gone to sell them eggs
> and Death sprang up and went to kiss him.

This is how medieval plagues spread across swathes of the globe: on trade routes. Like Covid-19, the Black Death likely originated in East Asia. It was a result of (albeit natural) climate change, which pushed infected rodents from depleted and drying marshes and grasslands towards urban areas. It then spread via the Silk Road to the Crimea, and from there – on fleas that were parasitic on rats aboard merchant ships – to North Africa, Western Asia and up through Europe. It arrived in England aboard a ship from the province of Gascony, the dispute over which had precipitated the Hundred Years' War. From there, it naturally made its way also into Scotland and Ireland. By the standards of the early twenty-first century, of course, that world of international trade and commerce seems extremely slow and primitive. Our civilisations, not least in the wasteful West, rely more than any other on globe-crossing transportation, in bulk and at

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Knights Hospitaller of Rhodes and the Black Death of 1498', *Le Infezioni in Medicina* 3 (2018), pp. 283–94.

[8] 'New York Ramps Up Mass Burials Amid Outbreak', BBC website, 10 April 2020 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52241221> [accessed 20 October 2020].

speed; more of what we consume than ever comes from other places. And exponentially more of us travel internationally on a regular basis – or at least we did until the spring of 2020. Our medicine is, thankfully, greatly improved; but modern pestilences can emerge and spread like never before, and of course they are doing. Something needs to be done. Nobody quite knows what, without the sort of compromises that neither many of us, nor the governments and corporate interests that rule so much of our lives, can contemplate.

The plague's demographic effects also often had something in common with modern realities. For example, it affected urban areas more than rural ones, and the poor more than the rich, primarily because the poor had less access to nursing, typically lived in closer proximity to one another, and did not have the means to flee to the countryside and winter it out. It also precipitated uprisings – perhaps most notably, in England, the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, a consequence of resentments between serfs and landowners after labourers' wages had increased following a huge drop in the population. This initiated a huge social change: the eventual abolition of serfdom in England. It is undoubtedly the case, then, that the plagues of the Middle Ages sped up an inevitable, if grindingly slow, move towards equality, with transformative effects on all facets of life, including poetry. It just didn't leave much of a direct mark on the art in English at the time. Covid-19, by comparison – and as we shall see in the second section of this introduction – has already been written about in poems a great deal, though how much of that work will endure is a matter for time, the great sifter, to determine.

From the late fifteenth century onwards, outbreaks of bubonic plague in the British Isles tended to be localised. Nonetheless, it recurred at reasonably frequent intervals until well into the eighteenth century, occasionally killing up to a quarter of the populations in the cities and towns it afflicted. Several of the Renaissance dramatists clearly demonstrate an awareness that contagion is not only airborne, but transmitted by expiration: in John Webster's *The White Devil*, 'your breath: / Out upon sweetmeats and continued physic – / The plague is in them',[9] and in Shakespeare's *King John*, Melun refers to 'black contagious breath',[10]

[9] John Webster, *The White Devil*, ed. Christina Luckyj (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 36.

[10] William Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor, and Stanley Wells (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 448.

among many examples. The most common explanation for the origin of the contagion, of course, was divine intervention. Nevertheless, some things had been learned, and methods of containment had improved significantly, many of them not dissimilar to the ones we see today: 'Bills of Mortality' gave regular death figures, parish by parish; ships were held in harbour until it could be confirmed there were no cases on board; the sick faced quarantine and watchmen ensured they observed it. Even my current, extremely comfortable counterpart to that experience seems memorable enough to write about – but how to do it, with more than just passing reference? Shakespeare didn't, though it is well known that he turned to writing sonnets as a means of earning income when plague shut London's theatres – his own ingenious furlough retention scheme, if you will. Shakespeare's fellow playwright Thomas Dekker turned to pamphleteering in the 1603 epidemic, publishing *The Wonderfull Yeare*, in which he proclaimed that one could 'fill a hundred paire of writing tables with notes' after witnessing 'one houre on this stage',[11] but few of his contemporaries converted any of their notes into poems. One exception was Ben Jonson, whose elegy 'On my first Son' does not mention the plague directly, only that his child had escaped the 'world's and flesh's rage, / And if no other misery, yet age'.[12]

However, plague returns as metaphor or point of comparison in a huge number of poems. In John Donne's 'Love's Deity', insincere love is a 'deeper plague'.[13] The events in Jonathan Swift's satire 'The Beasts' Confession' occur 'when a plague broke out / (Which there-fore made them more devout)'.[14] Alfred Lord Tennyson's 'Demeter and Persephone' speaks of 'younger, kindlier' Gods who 'quench, not hurl the thunderbolt' and 'stay, / Not spread the plague'.[15] Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Fears in Solitude' sets a love of Britain where he has 'drunk in' all his 'ennobling thoughts' against the influence of the nation overseas:

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[11] Thomas Dekker, *The Plague Pamphlets*, ed. F. P. Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 21.

[12] Ben Jonson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. George Parfitt (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 48.

[13] John Donne, *Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 41.

[14] Jonathan Swift, *The Works of Dr. Jonathan Swift*, vol. 7 (London: W. Bowyer, 1768), p. 360

[15] Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *The Complete Works* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1891), p. 433.

Like a cloud that travels on,
Steamed up from Cairo's swamps of pestilence,
Even so, my countrymen! have we gone forth
And borne to distant tribes slavery and pangs,
And, deadlier far, our vices […].[16]

Particularly prescient, given recent conversations about the legacy of slavery in the United States, is the black American twentieth-century poet Robert Hayden's historical poem 'Middle Passage', which describes among many privations onboard slave ships 'A plague among / our blacks – ophthalmia: blindness'.[17]

Of course, almost every epidemic on record has been documented in poetry to some extent. Most frequently mentioned among these is probably syphilis, 'the Great Pox', partly because of the licentiousness with which it is often associated – and not only in the common interjection 'a pox on' whatever has raised the speaker's heckles in countless works of Renaissance drama. However, again, few poets wrote about it in detail, though in his poem 'To the Quene' the late medieval Scottish poet William Dunbar describes how syphilis makes men feeble 'lyk willing wandis [wands]', and suggests a preventative measure: 'Keip fra harlottis nycht and day'.[18] The earliest known work in English-language poetry about smallpox, which afflicted Britain from the late sixteenth century onwards, is Thomas Spillman's 'Upon His Ladies Sickenesse of the Smalle Pockes' (1602): 'Cruel and unpartiall Sicknesse, / Sword of that Arch-Monarke Death, / That subdues all strength by weaknesse'. His lady has survived, but he can 'tracke' the marks of the illness 'In the pure snow of thy face'.[19] Half a century later, John Dryden was compelled to write his elegy 'Upon the Death of Lord Hastings'. This is certainly not his finest verse. Indeed, it is almost ludicrous. But, like Spillman, Dryden also draws attention to the physical impacts of the disease – and lingers on them:

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[16] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Poetical Works* (London: Frederick Warne, 1892), p. 139.

[17] Robert Hayden, *The Collected Poems*, ed. Frederick Glaysher (New York: Norton, 2013), p. 48.

[18] William Dunbar, *The Poems*, ed. David Laing (Edinburgh: Laing and Fobes, 1834), p. 116.

[19] Thomas Spillman, *A Poetical Rhapsody*, ed. H. E. Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), p. 222.

Blisters with pride swelled, which through 's flesh did sprout
Like rosebuds, stuck i' the lily-skin about.
Each little Pimple had a Tear in it,
To wail the fault its rising did commit. […]
No comet need foretell his change drew on,
Whose corpse might seem a constellation.[20]

From the early nineteenth century onwards, there are quite a few poems in English about cholera, though many of these have an attendant focus on poverty, which implies poets were often seeing that pandemic as a vehicle for discussion of wider social conditions. In *Chaunt of the Cholera: Songs for Ireland*, John and Michael Banim personify cholera as a mercenary: 'Kings! tell me my commission, / As from land to land I go'.[21] In 'The Garden by the Bridge', Violet Nicolson (who wrote under the pseudonym Laurence Hope) evokes 'Poor beasts, and poorer men': 'Parias steal the rotten railway sleeper / To burn the bodies of their cholera dead'.[22] And Rudyard Kipling's several evocations of the virus include the soldiers' ballad 'Cholera Camp', which describes how the disease is 'before us, an' be'ind us, an' we cannot get away, / An' the doctor's just reported we've ten more to-day': the job of these low-ranking, working-class men is to keep on going in spite of the dangers.[23]

War and disease are often closely connected in the public conscience, and in literature – and not only because war often spreads disease. 'Spanish Flu' was so named because the press in neutral Spain was not subjected to censorship during the Great War of 1914–18, and was free to report on the illness, giving the false impression the country was especially badly hit. In fact, it probably originated in a Kansas army camp, and came to the trenches with American soldiers in 1918. From there, it spread from Russia across Asia, and into Africa. Armistice celebrations in Allied nations then proved perfect breeding grounds. The downsides to modernisation were felt keenly, both in terms of

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[20] John Dryden, *The Works*, ed. Sir Walter Scott and George Saintsbury (Edinburgh: William Paterson, 1885), p. 96.

[21] John Banim and Michael Banim, *Chaunt of the Cholera and Songs for Ireland* (London: James Cochrane, 1831), p. 6.

[22] Laurence Hope, *India's Love Lyrics* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1901), p. 56.

[23] Rudyard Kipling, *Barrack-Room Ballads and Other Verses 1885–1891* (Teddington: Echo, 2004), pp. 193–4.

the mechanisation and chemicalisation of battle, and the ready global transmission of contagion. That pandemic infected up to a third of the world's population and claimed considerably more lives than the Great War (estimates put the figure at fifty to one hundred million) in half the time, but again brought us very little notable poetry, even though many poets were nearly killed by it, including H. D., D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot. This had most certainly not been true of the first global, mechanised war: 'man's inhumanity to man' at its most brutal was bound to inspire poets to ask questions a pandemic could not raise. The Spanish Flu was subsequently pushed to the back of the collective memory and almost forgotten for a century, but it does undoubtedly play a significant if often subtle role in much of the literature of the period, and this is often overlooked. As Elizabeth Outka has pointed out, 'When we fail to read for illness in general, and the 1918 pandemic in particular, we reify how military conflict has come to define history. […] If we know what to look out for, the literature of the era emerges as particularly adept at representing the pandemic's particular qualities and its vast yet hidden presence'.[24] Outka makes a compelling case that we might read works such as Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Yeats's 'The Second Coming' through this lens, even though neither addresses the matter explicitly. The latter is very obviously concerned with political flux in Ireland and the after-effects of global war, but are we missing something if we read it only in this light? After all, the pandemic affected almost everybody, and our distance from it now should not blind us to the fact that it was a viral horror unique in the lifetimes of almost everybody, and pervaded people's daily experiences at least as much as the current pandemic pervades ours. Yeats wrote the poem weeks after his pregnant wife had nearly died from the virus, which gives a secondary resonance to the poem's claim 'That twenty centuries of stony sleep / Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle'.[25] 'Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world', writes Yeats in the first stanza, and today, perhaps more than ever, we can hear in Yeats' 'mere' the incongruity of the great devastation that might be wreaked from something as tiny as a virion.

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[24] Elizabeth Outka, *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 2.

[25] W. B. Yeats, *Selected Poems*, ed. Timothy Webb (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 124.

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Sinéad Morrissey
&
Jan Wagner
(*trans. Iain Galbraith*)

Sealand

I know all the colours of the sea: dirt-green, tar, mud, incarnadine.
It laps at the pillars with its million lips, yet eats so slowly
I'll be long since dishevelled by sharks, by Osedax bone-worms'
eyeless burrowing, by the time this Kingdom topples…
Fort of my heart, fort of my steel persistence
where there is only each instant, ringed and given and lit
and without alternative, carry me onto Judgement.

The washerwoman sea hangs out its mists like laundry.
Dolphins, distant shipping. I made my wife a Princess
but she rarely visits. She has flashy miraculous teeth
and loves to be photographed. Clouds. Contrails. Stars.
E Mare Libertas. I fret over inheritance like Henry.
Even the gun deck reeks of freedom – no sliver
of land in sight from the rust-eaten lookout. Sunrise, sunset,

sunrise, sunset: the days contains their replicas
which they kindly unfurl: meals out of mess-tins, admin, horizon-
scanning, sleep so deep and faceless I've reverted to factory
settings by morning. The flag of the world's smallest country
snaps in the wind and I dream of a football team.
As I jog the lovely contours of the bullseye helipad
in ever decreasing circles, happiness happens.

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APPROACHING INCHKEITH

…and provided them with everything they would need for their nourishment, food, drink, fire and candle, clothes, and all other kinds of necessities needed by man or woman. He was desirous to discover what language the children would speak when they came of proper age.

Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie,
The Historie and Chronicles of Scotland

two untainted by sin and a maid
mute from birth. it's a quip of the sort
to kick off some alehouse yarn
or legend of a saint. away to larboard
the roar of the surf, to the fore the storm-worn
cliffs and lass whose stub of a palate,

the moment she tries to speak, flaps about
like a herring dancing on the mole.
'wooded island' – more like a clod the lord,
bored with creation, flung away, a mile
of loneliness and haar, unredeemed as forlorn
as a seabed wreck. and then this sky of slate.

speech to me is after the crossing when i hold
my fare in my fist or yell ashore to a friend
to catch my dock line. the name we call
a thing is like the thing, i think, while the wind
of the west hoists another tattered gull
above this fathomless realm of cold and salt.

but how will they speak, first to the maid,
then to anyone else? like breakers, tongues of angels,
a crackle of embers, storms, the peal of distant
bells on the breeze? will one scrunch like pebbles
under foot on a beach, while the second,
like this scraggy goat, utters an occasional bleat?

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George Szirtes
&
Alvin Pang

Past Time

We sigh the word 'again'
as if it were a new thing
like rediscovering rain,
an endless reckoning
with our sense of ending.

We are waiting for the train
to arrive before it has left.
We're singing the refrain
while music comes adrift
and trains refuse to shift.

We think to breathe and weigh
the sunlight as it falls
on grass swept through the day
by wind like distant bells
or anything that tolls.

Dear friend, the words between
the silence rearrange
the various shades of green
though nothing seems to change,
so even grass is strange.

*

Nothing seems to change
and nothing seems to move;
the heart ebbs out of range:

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it craves a sea to love
but all there is, is groove

and tolerable drain
and mud raked over coals
for heat. But still we strain
to sing, to brave the shoals.
The minutes claim their tolls.

The hours pay their keep.
The tables turn and plead
for unreserved sleep.
The still extracts a fee:
free time is never free.

Old Leonard had it right:
that everything is cracked.
I had to slough my sight
to gain this smarting fact.
Each day I cannot act

is one forfeit, astray,
misspent. A page turned.
But what is there to say
with time? What earned?
And to what blind end?

This rhyme is delay.

*

We are only delaying autumn, not cancelling it,
Autumn will not be postponed. Or not for long.
Leaves that are preparing to fall will reconsider
their position and will make a statement
in due course. Birds have continued to mate
and the rate of egg production has not fallen,
nor have the leaves. Birds wings continue to beat.

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The position with hearts is equally assuring.
They too continue to beat and have not been cancelled
though some may experience an inevitable delay.
This is the language and these are the terms
in which we negotiate delay and postponement.
Be assured that nothing has been cancelled.
Our punctuation is in place, grammar is on our side.
So now there is only autumn to prepare for.

*

I'm thinking how here we reckon
Our days without the seasons' clock:
pendulous Fall, Winter's white tock.

I suppose what we do is carry on
Until caught, invariably, by surprise:
May's loud heat, December's lush skies.

Today an unseasonable gloom
Has thrilled an afternoon:
A year-end storm come much too soon.

Heaven reduced to a waiting room.
A Ragnarok thrum. The bawl of a jet.
It's August, but not September yet.

The schoolward course is test-bound,
Rung-stepped, an almanac of hoops.
The Financial Year, implacable, loops

Onto itself: Finds us but is never found
Wanting. Another while, another clinical scan.
Man hands worriment to man

In a sealed plain envelope.
Dental visits. Barber stops. We take
Circling as certainty of line. Break

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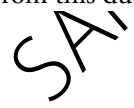
COLLABORATION STATEMENT
George Szirtes & Alvin Pang

We first met in Norwich at an international conference in 2012; we quipped and made each other laugh and became acquainted with each other's work. From time to time we had opportunities – albeit all too few – to spend time together: in Malaysia, in Singapore, and across the UK. We found between us an easy, natural friendship, as well as a poetic meeting of minds. Over the years, we had discussed wanting to collaborate in writing, and this project was a prime occasion. Our collaboration began with a short ten-line poem by George, itself part of a daily poetic journal of the UK's first lockdown. Writing poems back and forth in response to each other, our correspondence took in our respective circumstances and moods, socially, physically and mentally. We moved with the progress of the disease, beginning with a sort of haiku-like form and then adopting various forms of verse as we proceeded (and as the year evolved). In registering and exploring the times in which we find ourselves living, our exchange has stretched well beyond the stipulated four pages. It continues even now, and we hope to complete a book's worth of material from this duet.



Rory Waterman
&
Togara Muzanenhamo

Burrs

We are turning into ghosts here. The days mirror each other.
Silence sits flat like a stone on the horizon. Muting everything.
The house is cold and dark and quiet as a cave. My daughter
wakes up much later than usual. And as I am seated, writing
this to you, she's still in bed – her body clock adjusted three
weeks back. After schools closed, she was so happy to be free

from the early morning rush – dressing as she ate breakfast,
the neighbours' dogs barking and cars revving and speeding out
of wrought iron gates, traffic flooding streets as the sun cast
its eye through the kitchen window where my wife would shout
For Christ's sake we're going to be late. Faucets running.
Keys lost then found. Doors slamming. The general chaos of leaving.

All these things my daughter now comments on with a hint
of regret. Though she's happy to go to bed late and wake up late –
though she's adjusted to the quiet – there's just one complaint
that constantly drags at her heels like an invisible weight. Eight
year olds, she insists, should get out and play with their friends.
She's also beginning to tire of asking when all of this will end.

I leave for my mother's, fleet through ghost suburbs and into
my plotted and pieced homeland. And, yes, 'When will this end?'
she says, gesturing a happy hug across her yard. Then 'Let's go!'
and I follow her command, her boots, round the fields, the bends
in countless hedges, on a route she's treaded daily, from budding
hawthorn to bulging haws, stopping to 'gosh!' at anything

SAMPLER

that moves, or to lift her binoculars, often frantically missing
whatever it was: a kestrel trembling on cloud, a green woodpecker
fanning back to the copse. She wants to show me something.
This is why I am here: love without touch, to risk her health for
our health. The hay is baled, our calves pimpled with burdock burrs.
And, worlds away, riots have broken out again, I tell her,

slipping my bastard phone away, sorry, as silently we decide
not to navigate what we think, even for one another. We're
on the edge of the woods now, near a stable, derelict beside
a brick-strewn, dimpled lawn that was a country house. 'Not far'
she says, proud, then grabs for my hand as she misjudges
a style, retracts in a blink, tumbles hard to the mud.

Driven by necessity, we pack up and head out to the farm.
The road's a wide ribbon of tar with a cautious stream of cars.
Silence still reigns. The morning sun falls across my forearm.
The passenger seat is empty, my daughter in the back, her tears
long dried after refusing to wear the mask – eyes fixed to the screen
of her tablet. In a calm voice, she says she's never seen

so many men with guns as we drive away from the first of three
checkpoints. The city falls back with its suburbs and townships –
farmland expanding in dry blond swathes of grass where barley
and wheat once stood in stiff green regiments with faint slips
of mist layered above needled awns. Hard to imagine after two
decades, wild grasslands knotted with cockle burrs. Equally hard to

grasp how the months to come will ultimately define an age
within this century. And at the final checkpoint I hand over my pass
and the soldier's eye lifts from the document's final page –
then commands I roll the car's rear window down and the glass
sinks to reveal a child wrapped in a duvet, masked and quiet.
His eye falls cold on her not fearing the virus, but the coming riots.

But she rights herself, quietly, still fit enough, and on we go. And
we are not to talk about it – I know that. But eventually she talks
around it: 'I'm getting old now. I want to enjoy life while I can' –
and is this it? – as she leads me along a fence by a wood. We walk

SAMPLER

Zoë Skoulding
&
Yana Lucila Lema Otavalo

Song of Gulls and Hummingbirds

kunan kampa wakay sumaklla uyarin
now your cry seems like another
kunanka tukuyllapa rinllipi kampa samay uyarinmi
now we all hear your breath in our ears

now there are cries without tears
there's awe in our eyes
there's turquoise of fiestas
there's sea green
there's blackness of earth
silence breathing

mamaku this is your time
to run free your blood through the fields
through the lived city
through the black of a night that isn't night
through the shadow of day that fires up the sun

mamaku your name›s been in everyone›s mouth
we've put gifts of sweet fruit in your belly
we've spread holy smoke in your territory
we've flexed our feet against the ground to talk to you

now
now when life is leaving us
when pain has come to us
when our breathing's cut short
when we can't even talk to our dead

SAMPLER

Vidyan Ravinthiran
&
Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

Love in the Time of Covid

In condos on full moon nights,
standing on balconies,
they blow conch shells

and wave tricolours
to scare off the animals
come home from the wild

to reclaim the land where jackals sang
when you were a girl.
Look out the window. There's one singing.

SAMPLER

from Lakeside Walks

A poem like a tree
can be dated precisely.

For instance today
I saw a blue
face mask hanging
on a branch.

from Lockdown Garden

Close to each other,
socially undistanced,
the mulberry leaves,

uniformly green,
shall turn brown together.
It's like a herd dying.

*

In the heap of dead
leaves crinkly as
brown skins, those
breathing things
foraging around
the bamboo stand
are jungle babblers.

*

It was planted
all wrong, too
close to a wall,
under the mango
trees. There was
nowhere for it
to go except up
like a mast and
that's where
it went, taking
its leaves with it –
long, tapering.
I never saw them
fall. It never
flowered, which
would've helped
me look it up in a

SAMPLER

Anthony Caleshu
&
Mariko Nagai

Lockdown in the Sound

I was swimming
when the lockdown started
and was now thoroughly lost.

The lockdown started
and I swam in the lost.

The tritium, once leaked
into the Sound,
now sounded like bees.

Triton lives in the Sound
lost for so many years:
as children are lost, he is lost.

I swam in the sound
of nuclear subs,
wrist-watch illuminating
the fauna.

The subsonic sound of
the leak from the Sound
illuminated fins underwater.

For 30 years the subs haven't leaked
tritium, but now bloom trillium during this
lockdown: the three white flowers rising
up like the seaweed beneath.

SAMPLER

The flowers bloom like
leaked rheum from ileum.
Did I tell you that tumors
have blossomed out of
season inside of my
mother? No radiation
helps. She leaks. She
sheds. The body has
locked down.

The wifi signal is weak
underwater, our Zoom incomplete.

We live in the past,
the present, the future.

Blown out to sea, we moor
our bodies to a lobster pot.

Each year is imprinted on
a lobster's body. They
are not witnesses to what
the land suffers but they
sense the changes in the
water.

SAMPLER

Lobsters like dogs
communicate by urine.

One limb at a time, I crawl
through the sea, out of
the sea, onto the land.

In the stories, our elegies
for others are always
the elegies for ourselves.

And the funeral, not for
the dead but us, the
dying.

Selima Hill
&
Wang Xiaoni
(*translated by Eleanor Goodman*)

How to Float

Nothing else matters to me now,
nothing except food
and how to float
and how to take no notice of the clocks,
and how to reinvent myself as somebody
who's not so much a person
as a turtle
who bobs along
doing nothing much,
a turtle whose idea of bliss is mud,
mud, sludge, anything pointless,
and do I miss the ticking?
I do not.

SH

SAMPLER

By the Window

Sometimes, you can only be like a person.
The plates filled with food are not yet on the table
the bees and butterflies come
bringing their inscribed wings.
Aside from a person, what else can you be—
the turtle going off to sing in the grass says
you could never pass yourself off as him.
The autumn sun
keeps roasting the book's printed spine
I've stood by this window for too long
even the bent shadows seem so much like a person.

WX

February, Father and Son Carrying Packages in the Rain

SAMPLER

The father is carrying
hard alcohol or beer in his arms
the child is carrying hard alcohol or juice
either way, what is oscillating is liquid.
Both father and son have damp hair
the child can be no older than three
he's still so small
he hasn't had time to understand.
But the father,
why is he clutching onto anything that isn't his child,
why isn't he holding tight to
that shimmering body.
The rain falls, neither heavy nor light
wetting the upper half of the faces people reveal
stricken with grief.

Note 1: This poem is part of a series called "Isolation"
Note 2: In the first part of this year, because of the pandemic, residents who ordered items online had to leave their residential compounds to pick up the items themselves at designated locations.

WX

André Naffis-Sahely
&
Stacy Hardy

The Bond

for Stacy Hardy

The dry August air reeks of wood and ash
and the smoke plumes
leaving the rocky bowl of the San Gabriels
sink to kiss the lawn.

The dogs bark themselves hoarse, their frightened
black throats as charred
as the wounded hillsides. No refuge for coyotes,
raccoons, or the striped skunk,

as they scatter like sparks from a camper's hearth.
What is power if not
the ability to dislodge the living from
their synchronous groove?

After six months of death and disease, the rabbits
stir from their nests
in the crevices of rusty engines and people finally
begin to mourn.

On Verdugo, a cardboard placard stapled to
a half-stripped tree,
reads: 'Goodbye, Emilio', or, as the newspapers
called him, John Doe #283,

but nobody's heart's large enough to hold all the names
of the fallen. On either
side of the boulevard, a slew
of recession-raptured businesses:

SAMPLER

'to let', 'for lease', 'pray for us' – and even the sign
above the gun-store,
ARMED & DANGEROUS says
'we're through'.

Today, my distant friend, I've only room for questions.
What does endurance mean
if it appears to be endless, what is grass if not gunpowder,
what is this chain of encampments

and shanties hugging the freeway if not humanity's take
on the Great Barrier Reef,
each person a polyp on the coral of concrete?
I think of you in Cairo

and your imprisoned comrades, another tinderbox
awaiting the flint-stone
of hurt… It is late at night,
so let every word

draw blood: everything is not going to be all right.
All my life, an unbroken
string of departures, a litany of leaving, but here
and there, faint glimmers

of meaningful connections, including you, my sister
from another mother,
another father, another world. Perhaps we shall soon
meet again, perhaps not,

perhaps the flowers stuffed into the beaked masks
of plague doctors provided
more comfort than safety, perhaps not,
but what gives us solace

between our first lungful of air and the last handful
of lime? The bond,
only the bond. So, where to now,
wanderer of the wastelands?

SAMPLER

Harriet Tarlo
&
Craig Santos Perez

Rain Sonnet During the Pandemic
November 1, 2020

Sunday morning rain. Church closed.
Our daughter wakes soaked
in urine. I give her a warm bath,
throw her sheets and dirty clothes
in the washing machine.
The strongest typhoon of the year
is approaching the Philippines.
Remember: rent is due today,
the election is Tuesday.
Our daughter's toes and fingers
wrinkle. The spin cycle begins. Lord,
please don't drown us
in the second wave of the virus
approaching the shore.

SAMPLER

if the weathers fit

7 November 2020

Take heart, more than an
emoticon, shelter at home
away from the weight of
pins struck down & blasted
into stone. Tie favours to
the lintel, listen to invisible
oceans, dream of a cleaner
in a corner of the world who
could explain it all, open
rights of way again, sea
passages for invertebrates
quieten the kids, if the
weathers fit. Shoot, I've
lost all but the end of it.

SAMPLER

Election Sonnet During the Pandemic

November 9, 2020

Past midnight, waiting, anxious news.
We voted for the "lesser evil," trusted
our ballots in the mail. Across the divided
nation, the counting continues—
why do we still have the electoral college?
Earlier today, my wife taught our daughter
the numbers song: "one, two, buckle
my shoe…" If they're killed in a car accident,
"three, four, open the door…" no president
would matter. "Five, six, pick up sticks…"
battleground states flip from red to blue.
"Seven, eight…" We turn off the tv, sigh
in darkness. "Lay them straight…" Covid
hospitalizations at an all-time high.