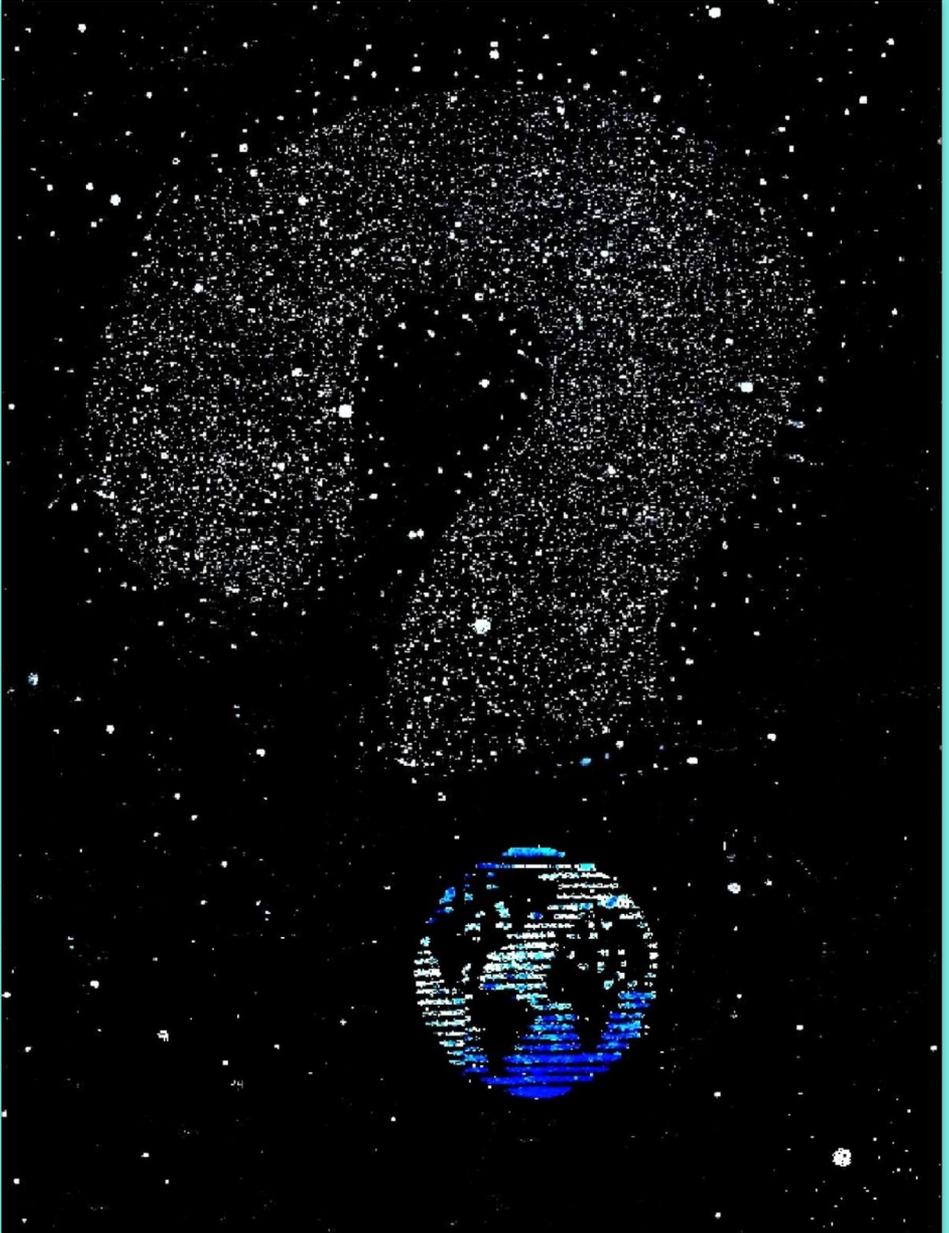


COVID-19: Reflections



The Scriblerus Arts Journal

COVID-19: Reflections

Spring 2021

The Scriblerus Arts Journal

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Editor's Note

COVID-19 has irrevocably altered our global society. Countries have shut down, adults have lost jobs, students have transitioned to online learning, and young children are developing their first memories in a world of masks and social distancing. Life is not what it was a year and a half ago, when the idea of a global pandemic was the last thing on anyone's mind. In a season of paradox, COVID-19 has united and polarized societies. It has left us lonely, and it has brought us together through an unprecedented number of virtual gatherings.

COVID-19: Reflections seeks to shed light on the various ways the pandemic has affected people. There are works of fear, sadness, nostalgia, and exhaustion, but there are also pieces which celebrate hope, joy, and resilience. I invite you to explore the issue and find a reflection of your own experience.

Haleigh Koppelberger

Taylor Aussiker

Superstitions

I am a superstitious person. I am also a rational person. I'm a teacher. I believe science. I know about faulty causality. I teach about it. I know that when one thing happens, it doesn't automatically mean this other, unrelated event will happen (or not) as a result.

But that doesn't stop me from waving when I drive by the high school where I teach in hopes that something good will happen as a result of my waving.

I've been thinking a lot about these superstitions, mainly because the year 2020 was so dreadful and my brain keeps trying to make sense of all the awful things that have happened in the past 12 months: the pandemic, political strife and riots, racial injustice, economic downturn, remote teaching. Oh, the remote teaching!

I had a conversation recently with my sister—not in-person, due to COVID-19—about superstitions. I mentioned my weird superstition about waving at my school road when I drive by, “but that’s it. I don’t think I have any others,” I said. “Well, I do knock on wood, but that’s it.”

“Sofia and I talk to our house!” she exclaimed, describing her ritual with her daughter whenever they leave their house. “We say, ‘bye, house!’ whenever we leave.”

“I talk to my house, too,” I said. “I tell it all the time that I love it.” I thought about this more and realized, as a new homeowner, it’s probably in hopes that it will prevent

something bad from happening to my house.

“The number 85 is important to me, too,” I said.

“Why?” she asked.

“It’s my house number,” I said. “No one can ever find my house, so I’ve littered the place with 85s. I have them pasted at both doors, stickers all over my mailbox, and a metal post at the end of the driveway with the number 85,” I explained. I bought a giant green sign with the number on it and I can’t get it to stay attached to its post. It ends up dangling there for a while and then eventually falls to the ground. The number seems significant, as though if I can get it to stay and get people to find the house that way, then I officially own the house and it becomes real, even though I *do* officially own the house and it *is* real.

To this day, my mail still gets lost and the pizza delivery person sometimes drives by slowly, somehow mystified that there is a number 85 on this road.

Ever since that conversation, my sister and I text each other whenever another superstition comes to mind. One that she said was especially important was not to say something aloud if you didn’t want it to happen. We’ve developed these habits that we often don’t even notice, thinking that we can somehow control the outcome of a situation with a bizarre ritual.

The waving at the school began shortly after I started teaching there, over two and a half years ago. I remember waving and exclaiming excitedly, “hi, school!” as I drove by on a weekend to run errands. And then I started doing it

every time. I rationalized it, telling myself that I associate the school road with good things—a stable job, a grown-up lifestyle. I didn't give it the name “superstition” because I felt crazy when I thought about it. But I knew it was. And it is. I've since admitted to the ritual, especially after doing it with my mom in the car. She's now started to do it, too, hopefully just out of solidarity and not out of her own superstitious reasoning.

And what's worse—I've started waving at my old apartment in the neighboring town as I drive by. It started as a pretense of “honoring my past” and the place where I lived when I decided to change careers and go to graduate school to earn a teaching degree. But I quickly realized that it was just one more superstition to add to my collection. And it's stuck. Another exhibit to showcase in my museum of rituals.

I talked with my dad on the phone a while ago. He came over earlier that day (masked up) to fix a few house problems—a dead outlet and light switch, a leaky faucet, etc.—but he was unable to solve any of the problems. He called when he got home to console me and keep me from thinking that my house was doomed to burn down due to the faulty outlet. He told me how fortunate I was to have such minor house problems, and I found myself bending down to knock on the hardwood floor as he said it, sure that if I didn't, I would find a flood in my basement the next morning.

My family is relatively superstitious—my gram and uncle do the salt-over-the-shoulder thing. I blame it on the Red Sox (baseball in general) in which batters need to go through a ritual of gestures and motions before committing to swinging the bat. We Red Sox fans are some of the most superstitious sports fans out there, believing strongly that the “Curse of the Bambino” was the cause of our 86-year losing streak at the World Series. For many years, my gram couldn’t watch the games, thinking that her participation somehow caused the team to lose. I remember watching the end of the curse in 2004, watching the game (with my gram) late into the night at my grandparents’ house and then listening to the finale on AM radio on the ride home. It was a glorious night. And I think superstitions have been glued into my psyche ever since.

That was the week of Friday the 13th—literally the last weekday before life shut down and our students were sent to remote learning (cringe), and I found myself doing all sorts of rituals to prevent bad luck (so much for that). I was teaching in our high school’s STEAM program, and one of my co-teachers and I were leading a morning icebreaker.

“Today is Friday the 13th,” I started. “What superstitions do you have, if any?” I asked. We circled up, and students spoke up about their various superstitions. Many of them said they didn’t have any superstitions at all, which made me wonder if it has something to do with age. My co-teacher (a scientist, mind you) described his

superstition, and I talked about my superstition that the more we say “snow day” before a big storm, the less likely it is that school will be canceled. Just a point of interest—our district no longer has “snow days” because due to COVID-19, we just go “remote” for inclement weather. So, guess I was right; all the times we whispered “snow day” are coming back to bite us in the ass.

I guess it all comes down to our coping mechanisms and how we handle crisis. I’ve discovered through all the tribulations of the previous year that I handle crisis through rituals. I know they don’t mean anything, but somehow they make me feel in control when I know I’m absolutely not.

And when I drive by my high school and wave, I think about that wave and how nothing will happen as a result of it. I also think about the good things that I secretly hope will happen because of it. And I can point to all the good things that have happened since I started waving at that school road—paying off some debt, buying a house, staying healthy, feeling (mostly) secure in my career, the birth of an amazing second niece. I know, rationally, that none of those things came as the result of my waving, but my brain tells me that they did, demanding some sort of control over this chaotic world, in the face of a pandemic and “hybrid teaching.” In the face of a terrifying political divide and a fragile democracy. And so I continue to wave, telling myself it is for any reason other than my superstitious, magical thinking, but knowing all along that I have no control over what happens in mine or anyone’s life.

Bethany Bruno

Normal, Please Return

Missing you

Long days complete

With certainty and grace.

Grieving you

And quiet nights filled with beautiful hope

Of all the worthy things to come.

Assurance

Taken for granted normalcy

As well as serenity of order.

One day you shall return

I achingly await

With eagerness and conviction.

Kelly Hegi

Again

There will be a time to start again
There are pieces of a life everywhere
An anathema to the American way
Sitting in the ruin

There are pieces of a life everywhere
No bootstraps are left
Sitting in the ruin
It's all shattered—all dust and sharp edges

No bootstraps are left
Time to camp in the destruction
It's all shattered—all dust and sharp edges
There is no rebuilding—not with dust

Time to camp in the destruction
An anathema to the American way
There is no rebuilding—not with dust
There will be a time to start again

Suzanne Johnson

**The Pandemic Red Zone: Bravery,
Apprehension, and Fear**



Alexis Melson

Facing Life During a Pandemic (2020-2021)

After Amy Uyematsu's "Juggling Excess and Imbalance in a Time of Drones"

Deadly virus with no cure + Worn out students + No
in-person learning =
Students who dropped out + Students with severe mental
health issues

People who have died from COVID >
People still left on the front lines

People who don't believe COVID exists + Not enough
ventilators/ICU space =
Nurses left holding hands of dying patients

Number of people going to Target for a "wine run" >
People who haven't left home for anything except the
essentials

Worn out students + Zoom University + More work than
before + No spring break =
Students barely holding it together

Fully stocked stores – Toilet paper and paper towels –
common sense =
A national coin shortage

George Floyd + Breonna Taylor + Jacob Blake + Andre Hill
+ Rayshard Brooks + 1 white cop =
Months of Black Lives Matter Protests

Number of people who stormed the Capitol ÷ People on the
no-fly list =
A single brain cell

Hedge funds + Stocks + Bored people on the internet =
Reddit destroying hedge funds over GameStop stock

The world – Chadwick Boseman =
Jeopardy – Alex Trebek =
Supreme Court – Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Movie theatres closing + Minimal releases in 2020 + Worst
box office in years =
Streaming services jack up their prices

Dry California brush x Gender reveal pipe bombs =
California wild fire of 10,000+ acres

Acres lost in the wildfires of 2020 =
Number of masks thrown in the ocean

Groundhog day + Punxsutawney Phil + Shadow =
6 more months of lockdown

My pandemic experience ≠
Your pandemic experience

Megan O'Connor

Approximating Peaches to Pounds: I Shopped for Instacart During the Pandemic and This is What I Learned

That spring, I learned how to brew kombucha, bake sourdough bread, and identify wild mustard greens. I listened in on my roommate's virtual writing class on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. I painted a picture of the Cliffs of Moher. I started a painting of a sunflower, but never finished it. That spring, I learned about mask efficacy, mass graves, and the death of a New York City emergency room director. Suicide. Presumed cause: 15-hour shifts couldn't save them all.

That spring, time could have done us all a favor and stopped for a bit. Let us catch our breath. Still, the crocuses pushed through frozen earth. I turned 23 and finished graduate school. I did not attend virtual graduation.

Over the next few months, I suffered through ten Zoom interviews. They were paralyzing—the grid of expressionless faces, the beady eye of the webcam. And me, sweating through my button-down. Unconfident, inarticulate, inexperienced. Out of view, I'm sure you'd discover that even the principals wore sweatpants. What if we had all stood up and laughed for a while? Imagine that.

Rejection emails started to feel more relieving than disappointing. If I could hardly handle an interview, how would I ever be able to step foot in a classroom without falling apart? So I gave up for a while. I stopped applying.

Instead, I drank and walked around directionless like a ghost, mourning the comfort of pre-pandemic normalcy. I researched alternative careers, PhD programs, and communes accepting new members. I read self-help books for women in a quarter-life crisis. When I did sleep, I dreamt of death.

I began to gauge time through missed deadlines, empty liquor bottles, and accumulating apartment filth. When my lease ended on the 31st of May, I begged my landlord to let me stay for a little longer. I had no idea where to go next.

Although I had a part-time job as a cashier, I wasn't making enough money to continue paying rent. Drawn by the freedom of flexible hours and the distraction of constant motion, I signed up to be an Instacart shopper. It was as simple as downloading the app and filling out a few forms. The bright green credit card came in the mail a few days later.

It's amazing how quickly things change when you have a reason to get off your couch. Perhaps delivering groceries around Windham and Tolland Counties was not my "calling," but it was sure as hell better than rotting in front of the TV. Eight hours of Survivor reruns a day can only do so much.

Consider this:

A reason to roll down your windows and let the sun's warmth thaw you back into yourself. Perhaps, pulsating through the speakers, a tune on the radio that conjures

memories of skinned knees and strawberry stains. Of barreling barefoot across your front lawn to borrow a cup of sugar from a neighbor. A tricycle wheel wobbled loose. A pair of strong arms lifting you off the concrete. The wind blows back your hair, and everything feels okay for now. Even during a global pandemic. And you're getting paid to feel this—to drive around, from supermarket to house to supermarket to house. To be reminded that late spring always feels like late spring.

Grocery shopping for strangers can feel quite intimate. Anti-fungal cream, tampons (they're out of super—is regular okay?), prune juice, Depends. A birthday card for a grandfather. The house was easy to find, because there were balloons tied to the mailbox. You are a lifesaver, the woman said. This card is perfect. He will love it.

These interactions were brief, but pleasant. Exhausted mothers with babies at their hips talked with me through screen doors. Elderly couples in rocking chairs sipped mugs of tea, breathing in the morning. Sometimes a man worked in his yard, building a fence or painting a shed. A woman on her knees in the garden, nurturing beds of vibrant pansies, petunias, tulips. Looks beautiful, I'd say as I walked by with their grocery bags. And it was always genuine. These are the ways that people create meaning in their lives. It keeps them going.

As for me, I spent that spring approximating peaches to pounds. I took the time to care; checked for bruises, picked the prettiest. I addressed customers by name when I

suggested replacements for out-of-stock items. By the end of the summer, when I stopped shopping to focus on my new teaching job, I had accumulated 52 five-star reviews. I remember thinking that I'd never again have the chance to be so "good" at my job. Never again would I feel so free.

Now, consider this:

I loaded her groceries into the back of her van—paper bags stuffed with Lay's potato chips, Hostess cupcakes, rocky road ice cream, ramen noodles, Ibuprofen. We were at the end of her driveway, sheltered by a canopy of trees. My husband has cancer, she told me, I have not left the house at all since March. Too risky. But I'm so lonely, ya know? Can you imagine? Her pain was so palpable, it took my breath away. Her eyes never left the dashboard, but I let her talk uninterrupted for another five minutes. I listened.

I nearly missed the house, so I slammed the brakes, catapulting a watermelon, in all of its 20-pound oblong glory, directly onto the blunt edge of the window scraper lying in my car's backseat. The rind cracked open, and chunks of watermelon guts exploded everywhere. Sweet stickiness splattered crumpled CVS receipts, granola bar wrappers, Dunkin' Donuts bags, abandoned notebooks. I pulled into the driveway. Hardly had time to assess the damage before the front door swung open. Heart racing oh god what will they say I'll offer to go back to the store they can take away my tip I just hope they won't get mad and yell at me oh god. I looped my mask over my ears and offered my massacre to its recipient—a frumpy, middle-aged

woman with frizzy gray roots and laugh lines. Oh honey, don't worry about it. I'll just have to eat it right now! There's still plenty left! Exhale out. If this piece was fictional, I would have invited myself in to share it with her. Spit seeds into a napkin. Let juice run down my chin.

The elderly man, who called to explain that his house never shows up on Google Maps, but not to worry—he would stay on the phone and give me directions while I drove to him. He told me when to turn left, when to turn right. His daughter in the background, laughing. Dad, I think she can figure it out. And then him: Don't worry Megan, I'm not going to hang up. I won't let you get lost... I won't let you get lost.

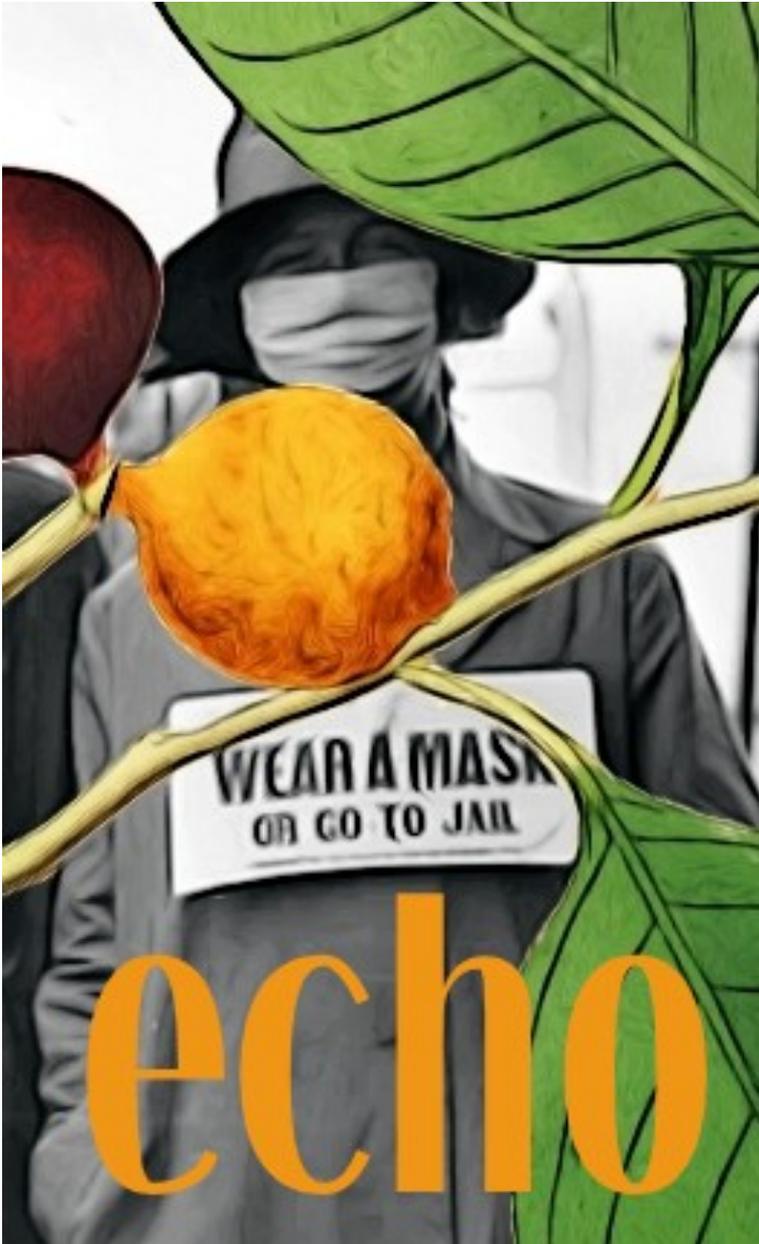
Ashely Parker Owens

Cursed



Ashely Parker Owens

Echo



Eloísa Pérez-Lozano

A Child's Pandemic Despair

My son's reaction after spending a few precious moments inside my parents' house for the first time after months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I'll never forget the look of wonder in your eyes in the play room of my parents' house as you rediscovered the toys you played with before COVID-19, asking us if we remembered them as if you'd lived a lifetime since your last encounter, skipping down memory lane like a teenager looking at drawings from kindergarten.

But you're only three and a half years old and while it's been seven months for me, it has been an eternity for you since we've been inside these familiar, cherished walls so fifteen minutes is a short and cruel taste of normal before I remind you we're only inside with masks because it started to rain and now it's time to go home but you ask for more minutes and I give you three and then another three, putting off our inevitable exit.

You don't want to go home because I can tell you want to soak up every second, not knowing when we'll be allowed back inside of the house you've practically grown up in but I tell you people are still sick and we have to go

but you stomp your little foot and yell, “No!” before
declaring,
“I don’t want the mask!” and defiantly ripping it from your
face.

You start to shriek at a primal pitch, months of frustration
and quarantine finally bubbling up and exploding
as you refuse to accept the truth that we can’t be here
before your father gets a rapid test that removes our doubt.

I see the tears falling from your innocent, little-boy eyes
as you give into the immutable futility of this moment
like a butterfly whose wings are not unfurled enough to fly
and all I can do is hold you close in a hug of helplessness
as my mother and sister look on, wanting us to stay
yet understanding we should go.

I lift you in my arms, your own draped around my neck
as I walk both of us outside and the rain drops join
your tears in their descent, but still, you scream
a flood of feelings finally released, rushing out
as wails of deep despair echoing in the night.
When I buckle you into the car seat, a final wave
of anger breaks over me and I stumble back,
your piercing cries like bullets to my heart.

Francine Rockey

I Ask this Poem to be Warmer

Outside the branch heavy with ice cracks.

I'm sending an air hug

says the teacher in the small square

of the small square, and she clasps

her arms in then flings her arms out.

Did you feel it?

And all the small faces

in smaller squares nod, some pointing

their thumbs up some clutching

their arms in. Did you feel it?

Me neither.

All the hugs I've sent out should fall

from the bright sky.

A head on a shoulder, a cheek on a cheek,

a side squeeze, arms interlaced at the elbow,

and the hot fudge of hugs, the full melt,

the warm gust of the oven when you

check chocolate chip cookies, but warmer,

the flannel blanket fresh out of the dryer

wrapped over toes aglow by the fireplace,

but warmer. The warm hug warmth of a hug.

The heat that's only that heat. I keep

sending it out the window, but it's lost.

Should be felt, but isn't. So, I ask this poem

to be more than air.

Because we need this warmth to be so!

So much. Somewhere.

Gratia Serpento

Unhuggable

Hugs

Forget those

You can't do them anymore

I can't embrace my dying grandfather

Because I could give him a death

Far worse than old age

I can't comfort my family

Who mourn the death

Of someone we will never hold again

Hello hugs

Are so 2019

Zoom hellos are the now

I can't find solace

In this raging pain called grief

Because touching could mean losing another

Six feet

Air hugs don't work

As well as a touch

Clinging to my pillow

Because I can't hold

Those I want to

I can't say goodbye

In the way I so desperately

Long to say goodbye

I love you's

I struggle to say it without

Cuddling close and showing my affection

Thank you, COVID

For taking away

Something I didn't even know could be lost.

Jennifer Shneiderman

Tealights and Gardenias

Soft, fragile gardenias fall
carpeting the concrete walkway.
I give them new life
floating pink petals in water
adding candles
bringing some beauty
to this quarantine life.

The only place I see
my ER doctor husband
is outside on the covered porch.
We are quiet
watching bees in late afternoon lavender.

We are far from normal
but for a little while
in waning light
we have each other
by the glow of tealights and gardenias.

Matthew Wester

So Distant

Working as a hospice chaplain during a global pandemic is about as fun as it sounds. Every day I wade into the needs that swirl around disease and loss. When this pandemic is finally over, I will not be the same person as when it started. And only time will tell the full impact that burnout will have on healthcare. But why, really? Death has certainly not changed since I felt the pull to become a hospice chaplain years ago. I signed up knowing the cost.

I remember sitting in a plane pre-COVID and having the stranger next to me inevitably ask, “So what do you do for a living?” I learned to anticipate and overcome the squirming silence of those blindsided by the mention of death. Occasionally I would even push my luck, trying to share openly why I felt it was worthwhile to serve the terminally sick. Hospice can actually be life affirming, a season of life when a person is focusing on what is most important to them and hoping for a peaceful and meaningful passing.

The hope most of us have is to die in our sleep, of old age, pain-free and surrounded by those who love us most. But with the coronavirus there are no peaceful deaths. The half a million people in our country who died of COVID mostly did so in isolation, unable to have loved ones by their bedside, their lungs giving out like they had run a marathon and couldn't catch their breath. One nurse I

counseled shared how she had nightmares filled with these gasping cries. She said even the color of the skin on the corpses felt off, a twinge of the wrong shade, a slight waxiness, it was hard to explain.

Many will find the paragraph I just wrote crass. But why, really? This year has not changed my perspective on the patients, death, or on God's grace, but it has changed my perspective on my neighbors. A sadness so universal should have unified us. Instead, my closest friends dismiss COVID's impact as a hoax. People living on my street elbow for their right to do what they want. When my church friends wonder why I'm not attending a maskless singalong in person, I want to tell them how many steps from the church's front door you'd have to walk to be with someone dying of COVID.

I want to understand the arguments for less caution, I do. I myself have seen individuals in their 90's contract and recover from COVID. I too find it laughable that we have to stand six feet apart in the ticket line but then are crammed together inside the airplane. My daughter started kindergarten this year and I desperately want her to have normal kid socialization; she needs that. I'm happy to share that my shoulders felt lighter when I received my second dose of the vaccine.

But two years ago I felt like I lived in a world where people would be upset if someone was knowingly passing along lung cancer, let's say, or throwing peanuts into a room where someone had a known nut allergy. I don't feel

like I live in that world anymore. What I imagined would unite us and make us empathetic has seemed to do the opposite. So much of this year felt avoidable.

In recent weeks my household has been watching the online worship services of a different church, one that is holding off on in-person events for now. My daughter's school is going back to in-person education and only a couple of her classmates have been traveling widely in the interim. I know we will soon get beyond this pandemic like we did polio and the Spanish flu in the past. Life goes on.

But I'm starting to worry that I will never see my neighbors and friends the same way again. I grieve that I feel so distant from persons so close. Really, why?

Contributor Notes

Taylor Aussiker is a teacher, designer, and illustrator living in northern New Hampshire. She is a graduate of Plymouth State University and the illustrator for a variety of books from authors in Vermont and New Hampshire. Her writing often focuses on the small moments that make life meaningful.

Bethany Bruno was born and raised in South Florida. She attended Flagler College, where she earned a B.A in English. She later earned her M.A in English from the University of North Florida. Her work has been previously published in *Lunch Ticket Magazine*, *Dash Literary Journal*, *The MacGuffin*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, *Litro Magazine*, etc. She's working on her first novel.

Kelly Hegi is a writer, licensed minister and active Spiritual Director living in Minneapolis with her husband, kids and dogs. She writes to explore life through a more creative lens and has just recently begun to be published both online and in print.

Suzanne Johnson is an American figurative sculptor/painter trained in a classical atelier in France. Nuanced emotions of inner resolve are embedded as a theme within her work. Suzanne's artworks have been featured in numerous International galleries and group exhibitions, and in permanent collections in Singapore, France, Hong Kong/ China, and Mexico. She is a member of the National Sculpture Society, The Portrait Society of America, American Women Artists, and other organizations.

Alexis Melson is pursuing her Master' of Arts in English at Pittsburg State University where she served as Managing Editor of the literary magazine as an undergraduate for a year and currently serves as Poetry Editor. She has spent time in Phoenix, Arizona working on her craft. She has been published in *Harbor Review* and in Pittsburg State University's *Cow Creek Review* where she won the Charles Cagle Undergraduate Prize in Fiction.

Megan O'Connor is a high school English teacher from Connecticut. When she isn't teaching teenagers how to write, she can be found indoor rock climbing, painting, hiking, and working on her own writing. She enjoys experimenting with a variety of forms and styles, but she has a particular knack for creative nonfiction. She is prone to talking too much, laughing too loud, and sharing information that is too personal.

Ashley Parker Owens is an Appalachian writer, poet, and artist living in Richmond, Kentucky. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from Eastern Kentucky University and an MFA in Visual Arts from Rutgers University.

Eloísa Pérez-Lozano writes poems and essays about Mexican-American identity, motherhood, and women's issues. She graduated from Iowa State University with a B.S. in psychology and an M.S. in journalism and mass communications. A 2016 Sundress Publications Best of the Net nominee, her work has been featured in *The Texas Observer*, *Houston Chronicle*, and *Poets Reading the News*, among others. She lives with her family in Houston, Texas.

Francine Rockey is a children's author and poet (her debut picture book is forthcoming with Yosemite Conservancy 2022). Her work has appeared in *The Mom*

Egg Review, *The Journal of Adolescent Adult Literacy*, *Kenyon Review's* micro-book reviews, and is forthcoming with *Alternating Current's The Coil*.

Fabio Sassi makes acrylics and photos using what is hidden, discarded or considered to have no worth by the mainstream. Fabio lives in Bologna, Italy.

Gratia Serpento writes about the things never mentioned in a pandemic. She lives in Oregon with her mask collection.

Jennifer Shneiderman is a writer and a Licensed Clinical Social Worker living in Los Angeles. Her work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in Indolent Book's *HIV Here and Now*, *The Rubbertop Review*, *Writers Resist*, *Poetry in the Time of COVID-19*, *Variant Literature*, *Wine Cellar Press*, and *The Phoenix*, among other publications. She was the recipient of an Honorable Mention in the 2020 Laura Riding Jackson poetry competition.

Matthew Wester works as a hospice chaplain in the greater Phoenix area and writes poetry and computer code in his spare time. He is fully vaccinated for COVID-19.

Contributors

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