

The Spread

Many living things spread from place to place,
and nature doesn't differentiate,
or care which will live or die.

In spring birds migrate, nest and mate,
like they do every year.

Things spread we'd rather not think about,
viruses do just fine using us to spread—
like the 1918 flu pandemic
which spread from birds in Europe
and travelled home with troops,
but there was little doctors could do
without antibiotics or vaccine,
and death spread from place to place.

Like dark flocks of starlings it spreads its wings,
we can't see or hear it
can't know who carries it,
a virus that spreads when we speak,
which may kill us unless we wear the mask—
There are some who live in medieval times,
question the need for vaccine,
don't believe disease can spread,
would rather die than quarantine,
perhaps they'd rather live in 1413.

Black birds flock and hover,
spread from place to place,
wait in treetops and on rooftops,
day after day we stay at home and wait,
knowing nature doesn't differentiate.
Except for chirping birds,
streets are as quiet,
as if we were already gone.

What We Don't Know

Downtown Montpelier, first day of spring,
at noon few cars parked on the street,
hardly any wait at the traffic light,
so quiet at midday,
and so easy to find a parking space.
A woman in a red fleece walks
a brown and white Corgi,
she passes a man walking
a black and grey Keeshond,
they smile as if they know each other,
but step far apart,
though their dogs sniff like always,
it all seems so ordinary,
English sparrows peck around trees,
perhaps happy for this warmer day.
We don't know how long, how many, or where.
A woman with her baby in a backpack,
a child holding father's hand,
in a store window a *closed* sign and a heart,
the child watches her reflection in the window,
sirens and a train whistle in the distance.
We don't know who or how many,
we can't know a virus,
like we can know a dog or a child,
or even a sparrow.
A cat scoots down an alley,
far away a dog barks—
sleet falls now,
people and dogs hurry along,
how peaceful and quiet it is,
birds, dogs, children, cat, empty spaces,
even the sleet.

Viral

It's not the first time there's been a disease
that took out flocks of humanity,
a virus which can't be seen,
and for which we have no immunity—
polio, bubonic plague, influenza—
we can't believe it might kill us—
a few scream and resist quarantine,
carry large black guns,
say they don't believe in vaccine,
but bullets won't protect them from a virus.
Day after day people cough and die,
it won't be the last time there's been a disease
and this one will probably leave
most of homo sapiens still alive,
despite those who'd rather rant, chant and pray,
and pay no attention to science.
Perhaps the next pandemic will be the one—
the one that will spare nobody,
neither the righteous nor the sycophant,
neither the prisoner nor the priest,
one by one each will be taken down,
until there are none left to care for the dying.
Humans will be another extinction,
like the archaeopteryx or woolly mammoth.
Everything we loved and created will be left behind:
Elizabeth Bishop's *Complete Poetry*;
Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*;
Frank Gaylord's bronze sculptures of soldiers;
a pastel yellow 1958 Edsel;
a Rolex watch still keeping time.
It was not the first time there had been a disease.

A last patch of snow

lingers even as red maples flower,
even as daffodils and purple trillium bloom,
despite the warmer spring,
despite the month turning to May—
though snow knows seasons not months—
it's as if a part of us can't let go
of that cold time in March
when everything fell apart.
Song sparrows sing,
easy to hear them,
since so few cars pass on our road now—
silence lingers after their song.
We must live apart,
even from our nearest neighbors,
whose lighted windows
we see from ours—
perhaps they hear the same sparrows,
they can see that last patch of icy snow
which recedes into the lawn,
and will soon be gone.
I wake up each morning,
wonder if it's still there,
wonder what will come next.

Many Ordinary Things

continue despite a pandemic,
continue still, despite wars, drought, fire.
Somewhere a boy gets up and urinates,
somewhere a man changes his baby's diapers,
somewhere else a child cries, the mother
awakens slowly and goes to the crib.
In the morning while it's still dark someone
turns on lights, cooks eggs, makes coffee.
Somewhere else there is weeping over a death,
a white sheet is drawn over someone's face,
somewhere else it is dark, curtains are drawn,
lamps are lit like they are every night,
somewhere after dark a dog barks and barks.
All these are ordinary things,
but nothing seems ordinary.