

The Covid Era

Covid Spring Picnic

The daughter measured two metres
from the outer corner of the garden table

to the weathered bench. She backed away
so her mother could carry the picnic tray

and set their dishes in the places marked.
When they were seated, about to eat,

the daughter sang out, 'Happy Mother's Day,
my mummy who has to do everything herself

and won't let her big daughter help.'
The mother said, 'Don't let your food get cold.'

It was cold with wind so icy it sent the mother
back into the house. She parked herself

behind a window, and speaking through the glass,
recalled her mother inviting her own buried mother

to be with them on Mothering Sunday.
The daughter asked, 'And grandma's mother?'

'And great-grandma's mother,' the mother said.
The daughter nodded, 'All the generations together.'

They looked at one another through the window,
the daughter outside, the mother inside; and they laughed.

As their farewell, they hugged themselves, rocked,
kissed their hands, threw and caught each other's kisses,
and tossed them high above the branches to the absent.

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Covid Bread

A neighbour left a loaf of warm sourdough
wrapped in baking paper. It waited while I slept
and while I walked into the early morning dark.

It waited while my footsteps echoed and the street lamps
cast grey shadows, mine changing as I moved.
Other shadows followed, rising from the pavement

to be embodied. They came with me.
When I reached home and unwrapped the loaf,
they crowded close. I held it high so all could see

it was mounded and crusted golden brown
with a dust of flour tucked between the ridges.
It fed us all and still was whole.

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Covid Household

He's standing at the back beside the tool shed.
Reaching up and out, he stays in place.

I'm at the other end at the garden table,
my books, papers and a pot of coffee

to last the morning. Now and then, I gaze at him,
the scale of him, the breadth of his smooth trunk,

his indifference to strips of bark peeling and dropping off.
He's tall and strong and goes on growing. Magpies nest

in his high branches. I look up at him and see
one of them, white breast, black head, black tail

with a metallic sheen. The bird dives down fast,
then strolls around the garden, eating what he finds.

Cats come round and squirrels, who've forgotten
what they've buried, while paired up pigeons waddle

across the grass. I look up again to see my fellow spirit.
He's watching as I'm watching the world that's here,

the two of us together in a lockdown Spring
under a sky that's empty and washed with blue.

Zoom

i. International Community

I'm strangely moved to see the office in America
with the programme manager and her wall-size chart
for scheduling us, and on this side of the Atlantic,

the director of the sister site in a medieval village
in the south of France. Forty-three of us participate
from here and there, and also India, Argentina,

and Vancouver Island. A poet reads, an artist
shows new work, a singer sings a chanson,
and squeezed in as extra, a performer turns

her camera on her feet and does a quickie tap dance,
chanting, 'Joe Biden yes! We won!' We're laughing
as a sign comes up, 'The host has left the meeting'.

The screen reverts to let me feel what came
and went. I feel I love us all, which can't be true.
Some of us, I've never even met and do not know.

ii. Care Home

On Sundays the staff sets their mother up to zoom. She has dementia. The doctor warns the daughters she could die at any time. They remind each other

this is what their mother wants. But the nurse repeatedly assures them, 'Your mother's doing very well.' So it goes. After years of visiting

in turns and rarely seeing one another, the four sisters are together on the screen. They remind each other to speak up and to speak clearly

so she can hear. She seems to hear and she speaks, but what she says comes from somewhere else. Where she thinks she is, they've no idea. Suppose

they stopped. The nurse allows she sleeps a lot. Sometimes during zoom, they watch her dozing off.

iii. A Family

The older generations can't talk to one another,
or they don't because two grandchildren take over.

A boy who's ten impersonates his teacher, performs
magic tricks, turns his camera on a lego feat,

and using terms like 'phylogenetic', embarks
upon a lecture on how to date long buried fossils.

Now his sister, seven, pushes in to take her turn.
She makes a face, pouts her lips, slurs her words

and slows them to an exasperating crawl.
Abruptly, she switches to top speed, talks too fast,

especially for grandparents to catch. She shows
her hairdo, which she did herself with mommy's help,

and the choco cake she baked with nuts and raisins
for the family meeting, which soon times out.

Churchyard Walk

Winter rain strikes like pebbled stones
on my umbrella roof. I'm transported

to the ocean's hurl of grit. It repeats
in the suck and throw of gusts that shake

the leafless branches. I walk among the dead
and think of Dante, his points of light,

each a human soul. I'm on his island,
far from home among leaning gravestones,

tombs, marble monuments and blocks
that bed and form a path beneath my feet.

I walk, and I'm indebted to the poet
for my vision of a ship of wonder

sailing high and carrying a cargo
of the rescued. I sense his presence

among the dead, who keep time anchored,
and within a life in me that rises
like a deep-sea swimmer gasping into breath.