

*THE*  
*NALUBAALE REVIEW.*  
*ISSUE THREE.*

Table of contents

*Word from the editor*

*Poems*

*Short stories*

*Poems*

*Call for next issue*

*Be part of The Nalubaale Review Community*

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/nalubaalereview/>

Twitter: [Nalubaale Review Literary Magazine \(@NalubaaleReview\) / Twitter](#)

Website: <https://nalubaalereview.wordpress.com/>

WhatsApp: +25675395371

**Edited by Nakitto Irene – Kampala - Uganda.**

# *POEMS*

### **This Too, Shall Ebb.**

Fear abounds,  
In crowded cities,  
And in the little hamlets,  
The world, is scared stiff,  
Hopelessness is all we feel.  
It's here,  
A rogue affliction,  
Ravaging us like a fire.  
We want to escape,  
But, whereto?  
It's all upon the world,  
Can we win against it?  
Well, it might serve us,  
To relook at our past.  
We,  
The intelligent human species,  
Have been bedeviled before,  
By disasters so detrimental,  
But haven't we risen up?  
And lived better than before?  
Take heart,  
Be of good cheer,  
This insidious tide too will ebb.  
Keep on acting,  
Upon all that our medics tell,  
For a day is coming,  
When normalcy will again grace,  
Our beautiful shores!

### **Dear Covid-19 BY Sunny Eddie Crawford**

How have your adventures been so far?  
From China to Italy,  
From the States to parts of Africa  
What souvenirs have you collected?  
How many lives have you come across?

And how many have you taken without a miss?

How smiles have you put on faces, with your notorious visits?

It's a question you don't deserve to answer!

For you're a dread to many nations

A fear that kills the faith in the hearts of courageous men!

Your name is a fearful combination of beautiful letters,

A sweet savor with a bitter scent.

You're that terror that disconnects

The bones of one's spine.

The thought of you grieves one's spirit

As you toss many between life and death.

The smell of you is more dreadful for

A taste of you, Coronavirus, is a taste of death!

Because of you,

Nations are facing ceaseless confusion, countless crises,

So many deaths are on peak and still rising.

As countless lives are returning home daily.

You don't deserve to live,

Extinct is what you should be.

It is a lockdown.

We are told to stay at home.

Our parents can no longer go to work,

Our children can no longer go to school,

Or heave out their stress in their playgrounds.

We are told to stay safe,

Stay indoors till further notice!

A notice that might even forever be; but still,

We are afraid you might locate our houses,

Knock our doors with your creepy unwashed hands,

And then make us the new cases to be left quarantined.

Tears I shed,

For the number of lives lost daily

For the homeless people,

Who have no homes to hide from your deathly visit!

For the health workers sacrificing their time,

Energy and life just to fight you.  
For the countless number of people  
Who because of you, are separated from their families.

For the stigma and the fear;  
As the fearful thoughts of you  
Wrestle against our faithful hopes.  
We will overcome you, together as one,  
even with our little words of prayer,  
And our glimpses of dying hope.

One day;  
You'll be history,  
A solemn tale  
To tell the unborn  
When you forever extinct.  
Until that day,  
We'll take our precautionary measures by heart,  
And execute them with vigor  
Wash and sanitize our hands daily, we will.

We'll stay home if we feel sick,  
We'll sneeze and cough into our elbows  
We'll wear our nose masks  
We'll also pray for God's mercies  
As we await His answers to our cries,  
Because only He can redeem us from your wicked hands.

Till then!  
Yours grievously,  
I remain.

### **This Mortal life by David R Mellor**

This mortal life  
Seems thinner now

As we move away from  
old and sick relatives

Keep a safe distance  
See everyone as a potential disease

This mortal life  
Seems thinner now

And in a darkened room, all alone  
She sits tapping her fingers,  
Hoping the bell will ring  
Or someone will call

Her mortal life  
Thinner now  
Passing away  
All alone.

### **The Daily Count of Lives by David R. Mellor**

746 (six fell in love more than four times)

673 (twenty had no regrets)

714 (five could still feel their first kiss)

643 (twenty-seven looked at photos of their loved one each morning)

547 (seven had a contagious laughter)

517 (hundreds regretted that their beauty had faded)

468 (thirty-five had worked in the same job all their lives)

573 (eight had won awards for their service to others)

375 (seventy five had been broken hearted)

817 (had touched a million souls)

917 (all had been loved by someone)  
Behind every number...

### **The bells aren't ringing.**

The bells are ringing  
With a deafening hum

No one at the graveyard  
No one at the birth

The bells are missing  
In a chamber of lies  
No one knows the real death figure  
Because all governments lie

The shrill bells are ringing  
In our lonely tortured bed  
The virus multiplying in our heads

The bells are falling silent  
As forgiveness spreads  
Our lonely citizens are  
Crying out instead.

### **We Live by the Hands of Others.**

We live by the hands of others  
Not seen by you or me

They pass the parcel  
Stand at the till  
Nurse the wounded  
And keep order.

We live by the hands of others  
Not seen by you or me

Our hands scrubbed clean and safe

But...

We live by and are grateful to others  
Who have to live day by day with that terrible fear.

**Parabola by Fizza Abbas.**

I still remember physics class  
at school,  
'It's nothing but a plane curve  
that works under the influence of gravity',  
my teacher said.

I did not know curves need armour too,  
often I wondered.

Now, when they tell me the death toll,  
I create an imaginary line,  
joining the locus of points  
but it doesn't become a curve.

Perhaps the ball is still ahead of the curve!

**Through The Covid Era by Ahumuza wa Kanyomozi.**

I fear for the elderly men and women,  
Who have already forgotten warning.  
They touch here, there, this, that -  
This disease's everywhere.

I fear for the young children  
who have not even heard that a person  
was bye-ried by men in white,  
white men with their ebombas.\*

I fear for the middle-aged women and men,  
Who have heard, seen;  
Who have truly understood the deathly hollow that is Covid-19.  
Yet they still adamantly refuse to follow guidelines.

I fear for us who don't fear disease  
Yet we fear wearing a face mask!



\*ebomba - spray (Ugandan dialect)

### **The Modern Trigger by Nahabwe Edna**

Trickling bullets  
On lives -  
Covid;  
Another Cancer  
Cancelling  
Lives

Advance to war with a shield -  
The mask  
Only God can  
Revitalize us  
He alone can  
mask us up

For the pistol is unmasked  
In the Covid-era War.

### **Once This Is Over.**

Once this is over,  
I shall run into the arms of each morning  
and take in the deepest breath;  
My eyes will make friends with birds and flowers  
and cars and buildings and clothes;  
I will fill my nostrils with the boisterous scent,  
of bread from the bakeries  
in Bavaria;  
My teeth will shine brightly at everyone  
who looks my way!  
I will wave frantically at strangers;  
I will give the warmest handshake anyone  
has ever given.  
My skin will hug the rays of the sun.

When the cold wind comes,  
I will not complain;  
I will dance bata with the rain.

I will make the night sky my ceiling  
and slowly swim with the moon and the stars.  
Once the iron gates are open,  
Once these walls are broken,  
I will be free again.  
I will walk the streets like a  
proud king.

Once this is over,  
You will see a new me.

### **Covid-19 Lockdown by Kenneth Cheruiyot**

We never fired a bullet but we are dying  
We never corked the gun but we are wailing  
A Monster with Monsoon bearings is a death-mare  
Tearing the world apart, a frightening nightmare.

Bred lockdown for a total knockdown  
Every happiness is now a Pindown  
Majority of activities are in Shutdown mode  
Every day's sundown is a life blow to Covid - 19breakdown

Towns are now a ton of emptiness.  
Market places a mark of plasticine echo.  
The streets, a streak of silence stupor.  
The dry leaves drip drop along the highways in isle ways.

The birds bask in the middle of the roads with rocky tunes.  
The silence in crowdy places, a rowdy rogue.  
It's deafening, it's sickening, it thickens the atmosphere with utmost fear.

The Sunrise seems to be a sin tide.  
The Sunsets is a subset of twilight.

It's no longer agile, more lively.  
The days are no more lovely, they've turned into rivalry.  
A disaster is distancing us apart.  
Apartments are a part in silence.  
Its now a Silo world Siphoned in deaths.

### **A Laurel Vocabulary with Death Vocals by Kenneth Cheruiyot.**

A laurel vocabulary with death vocals,  
A laurate monster taking away precious lives virally,  
Stormed the world with spiral infections,  
it's invivo...only the earth understands its invitro consequences,

Lockdowns and curfews are its prevention strategies,  
Quarantine and isolation are its curative measures,

Lockdowns have reunited families,  
And strongly bonded future lilies,  
They are is slowly breeding new daisies,

Students now learn from home,  
Working from home is now a skill to hone,  
Staying at home is now an indoor tone,  
Staying safe is now a mandatory tune,

Businesses have experienced forex losses,  
Daily activities are experiencing failed doses,  
The world is not on its normalcy,  
COVID19 is treating the world with no mercy,

Lockdown will soon knockdown this monster,  
Quarantine will bring a quorum of COVID19 winners,

Soon, everything will bounce back into place,  
Soon, the world will be on its feet,  
Soon, the world will be on its couragous tides again.

## **The world is weeping By Ashaolu twemitope.**

When you are present a trip to America, Italy and China,  
You jump and dance like a newly wedded bride,  
And in loud voice,  
You sing beautiful and melodious song from your mind.  
And with your hand, you wave like an angel at the bank of a river.

But how are we to say it, that we accept not an offer of visiting a long dream land again,  
That we forechoose where our head keep burning in rain,  
That we admit to where our voice is being left to tomb every day.

Not that we didn't wish to live in where moon reside,  
Or not that we didn't want to visit peacock in its paradise.  
But every palace is just a land that carry same plague in different quantity

So which bird will visit a nest with greater death?  
Which furnace will hold a date with a land with vast pool?

Although we once pretend to live like flowers with enough water,  
But media won't hesitate to remind us-  
That the world is still sipping the black coffee  
And all land is still weeping like a lad that miss his way to abode of clemency.

### **Artemis.**

The world has stopped for you.  
It holds its breath in fear of you.  
Centuries-old traditions abandoned overnight  
- like they were nothing -  
for you.  
Education, trade, even terrorism —  
put away in boxes  
for the one who truly unites.  
Hear your name on the lips of hospital emergency rooms!  
Hear the silence on the streets.  
Schools are empty. Cemeteries are full!  
Holy grounds and community grounds, deserted for you.  
Airplanes, hung away like clothes!  
Homes turned into prisons, all for you.

All walls lie flat at your feet.  
The prize is won, Great Queen.  
Your lessons have been learned and  
etched on our hearts.  
Rest now, Artemis,  
Please rest.  
Stretch your wings and fly back to your  
sweet, feathered nest.  
And let the world breathe  
again.

### **Virus by Debasis Tripathy.**

A wired peculiar brain  
and curious iris  
acquire fear

Severe precautions,  
Desperate measures,  
However, the virus still flies,  
From embarrassed vectors.  
It reproduces, replicates,  
No cure, whatever,  
wherever.

Another round  
Of roaring rumours  
Captures the ears,  
Hysteria rules!

Before truer  
Horror releases  
The rich and the poor suffer.

Over bracketed  
Regions, races  
preach freedom -  
Chorus terror together.

Break the brotherhood,  
Arrest, restrict, quarantine,  
Enter prisons.

All of their own  
Desire and own creation.

### **Masked by Kaitlyn Perrin**

A stone's throw  
from the old home  
present in the past  
motions like an echo  
bouncing back in a space  
that feels so vast.

### **Covidéjà vu by By Jean Pierre Nikuze (Rwanda).**

Unhand that twig  
& recede  
into your tenebrous tub!

Backtrack, creep  
in reverse. Sibilate!

Like a funambulist  
hinged,  
the gasping close by  
notwithstanding,  
back- pedalling

On a duly oiled  
unicycle, silently  
as time, en route  
as time unlapsed,

Career backwards  
& grow into your death

as the rouged user  
of a concave mirror  
colors her vim.

Tumble back first  
heel into curb,

miss the ground's receipt  
of your inion, only  
a figure of speech  
you levelled bastard.

You bleeding-out beast,  
cursed owner  
of a  
staunchless wound.

The compound  
good-as-dead;  
in three syllables: carrion.

Glide, wriggle, convulse,  
rousted by the tail.  
As in an ill-matched  
tug of war.

For though  
the wild goats are as  
close as Wales,  
all who'd been to Eden  
died off  
with the memory  
of whereabouts.

### **Windows By Jean Pierre Nikuze (Rwanda).**

Bumbling behind masks,  
the world's on the wrong side  
of a beekeeper's suit.

Provisional signatures of eyes  
for God-knows how long.  
Each blink a flag  
by which we hail & respond.  
Call it a promotion.

For lack of competition  
from the facial household,  
they've become that  
we always ascribed to them.  
Also, chimneys, doors, balconies...

### **Six Feet and Under by Peter Vasic.**

No matter what your dwelling may be,  
knowing the challenge that we face,  
now is not the time and place,  
to walk free.

Sticking close to home,  
Straying not too far,  
staying with the family,  
Now supplies run low.

Making a trip to the grocery,  
Choosing an aisle, very carefully,  
But within seconds,  
A rather large congregation, takes form.

Contrary to the general populace,  
The privileged ones,  
Somewhat ignorant  
Going against the norm

Those with no concept, of what is six feet under,  
With them I can no longer remain discreet.  
Makes you wonder!



### **Covid-19 by Rampari Piet.**

A virus spreading from copious realms  
A deadly plague that has fallen on us  
Yet no cure, no medicine, can we trust  
A world wide illness that has spread its wings  
Many cures tried yet to no avail  
How long will it last? This deadly virus!  
This plague that was unleashed upon us,  
When can we turn that final bend  
Signalling we are finally nearing the end.  
We wait and hope with our prayers  
With optimism, will not take years...  
Lockdown  
We are distant  
But we stand together  
We can't touch  
But we still reach out  
We hunker down  
But we still rise up  
Our bodies are attacked  
But our spirits fight back  
The enemy is invisible  
But so many of our heroes are now seen far and yonder  
Weeks and weeks of isolation  
But still infinite and invincible determination

Together  
We shall overcome...

### **A Mother by Ann Privateer**

As I waited at the crosswalk  
to conquer the other side of the street  
On my way to my car  
A mother behind me said  
To her little girl, "give me your hand."  
Right there, I Was blown away.  
A hand. Isn't that really  
What we all want? A family,

Mother, father, husband, wife,  
Friend, someone to keep us safe.  
Especially in these trying virus times,  
Then I deeply felt  
The void my mother left in me.

### **Sleepy Sunday by Ann Privateer**

A cold, rainy morning  
Still in bed, after coffee  
Did nothing to revive me  
After the day's virus news  
Made me more listless.  
Maybe I could paint  
Or collage something new  
Something more red  
Than blue with tree limbs  
Criss crossing through  
With tiny birds, big ones too.  
Then I knew what I must do  
Get up, wash, dress  
And face another day.

### **Heroes We by Ann Privateer**

Fully human and defined  
More complex than red grapes  
Or wine, we marry, reproduce  
Like weeds, with passion  
Pushing animals from their  
Habitat until...we are heroes  
No longer.

## **KAFYURI\* A DREAM Nahabwe Edna**

Kafyuri, we dream to see  
Here kafyuri died  
We hear of it over radio  
That in some areas it covers  
The land, reigning over  
The shadow-of-sun,  
Here the men in camouflage  
With their guns, sit there  
In their offices,  
Whatever goes on-not their business  
And people walk, do their businesses  
Of course...

Kafyuri, they said,  
Stops the disease from flying  
With ease into people's noses  
But here the disease makes way,  
From trucks, from shops, from walkers  
At night,  
To us who have seen on TV  
Graves of people overseas that the disease has 'beaten';  
But who wants to care!  
Kafyuri, we dream to see.  
Over shadow-of-sun, who Mans?

\*Kafyuri – localized version of the word curfew.

## **I Miss The Spring by Tonmoi Das Kashyap**

I miss the spring,  
the rain,  
the orchids bloom.  
Caged in my own home,  
isolated, and  
cut-off from the world,  
my mind goes mundane.  
The loneliness  
the momentary mood-swings,

disturb my sanity.  
I miss the open air,  
the sun bathing, and  
the birds visiting me in the park.  
Yet hope persists,  
at the bottom of my heart,  
as I wait for the morning,  
when the curse shall be broken  
and freedom shall return back to our lives.

### **No Face Covering, No Service by Jack G Bowman.**

The plague reaches epic proportions, hides in unsuspecting red caps  
drowns the Dakotas in disease  
fills up the beds amid snow and rural landscapes  
the four men on the mountain cannot help,  
save for provide inspiration to be strong and keep going,  
but they are images cut into rocks  
and below the people find out  
they were once again lied to  
which they will forget  
by next November.

### **30 Minute Break by Jack G Bowman.**

His head hangs over,  
the comfortably lit room,  
yellow, orange, brown surfaces  
almost natural illumination,  
ironic, given no windows, only a false sky light,  
his own trembling fears and  
a few firmly challenged insights.

Frank enters the trance-like state  
aided by Satie and centuries-old paintings of Parisian streets  
displayed on Youtube.  
He lets the music pull him along  
a river of melodic despair and

coldness brick, cement, asphalt  
hard shoes.  
He hears clicks down on the road,  
Flowers, wine and smiles  
he knows there is only  
this café chair to sit, watch, be invisible  
as Eric's music plays  
on the Victrola in the corner  
and the cool soft air made fragrant by flower carts  
move up and down the street.  
The music stops, the street sounds abate.

He returns to his office chair,  
takes two deep breaths before rising  
and going back to the time clock.

### **A Letter from Covid-19 by GUTTABINGI**

Dear lover,  
It's barely a week  
Since this affection sparked.  
I've set my base in your lungs, veins and duct,  
The future seems bright.  
You are an ocean that gives me buoyancy,  
Racing through your blood streams.  
Harmonising in the key of loneliness.

Sweetheart,  
You look tired.  
Maybe a shade too red  
And your heart isn't steel.  
I can't pick your scent  
Amidst this haze of sanitizers.  
These building reeks of soap  
And fluorescent dyes of PCR machines  
Are wrecking me apart.  
Your throat too moist to keep me in.  
You want to break my heart,  
Just like my past lovers

Who dance up your thoughts  
Whenever you cough me up.

I never sailed oceans from Wuhan  
Resisting seduction from Spain and Italy  
For you to reject me!  
I spent sleepless nights  
Studying the Geography of your body  
While you sneezed me in tissue,  
Dumped me like something you picked up by accident.  
You masked your soft parts,  
Filling up all cracks  
That would let me in.  
I dressed you in the moonlight  
And now you are blooming  
In another man's garden.

Baby,  
You and I are congested in your love  
But he forces his way into your mouth;  
I bite his tongue  
So that he bleeds with me,  
Tries to cough me up  
But I won't let go.

Did you have to run pale  
With fever on a deathbed  
To know that I love you?  
Did I have to speak in metaphors  
For you to start listening?  
don't you think it's only polite  
That I get to meet your friends?  
Why this social distance?  
Why don't you love me back?  
I will take you to heaven baby-love. Me!  
I will make you an angel, a star-love. Me!

Darling, don't pray me away;  
Choking me up with incense,  
Entangling me with rosaries.  
Don't write me away

Because the last time I checked,  
I am not fiction!!

I am real, too exposed to be unseen,  
Devouring hash tags and, stupid memes.  
Do we have to do this?  
PDA? Really?  
They all demand for my attention  
Grabbing parts of me that once belonged to you  
And now you are rotting in dirt,  
Making me miss you, crave you, love you;  
Making me desperate,  
For another lover!

### **A Letter from 2020 to 2050 By Guttabingi Mary Prisca**

Dear 2050,  
How are the daily struggles of life?  
-breathing, smiling, living-  
Do not grin till your charred lips  
Crack from this repetitive exercise  
You like calling survival.  
Do not force it  
Because right in our cemetery  
Is a mould of humour that rots  
-sorry- rolls relentlessly.  
We even have potential jokes like the cabinet  
And a now-powerless-covid-bully.  
It's not all about pandemics and worms  
Like they all claim.

By the way,  
You are cordially invited to our land  
Where we finally absconded  
with a new "no social distance" rule.  
Here, we are family;  
Constantly rubbing shoulders like Siamese twins,  
We are inseparable like that!  
So why stick to your grief-stricken generation?

A sad era with happy selfies?  
We used to be genuinely sad.  
We can't tolerate your sarcasm  
from our lockdown graves.

Furthermore,  
There's no hate we give,  
But rather love that's threatening  
To burst out of us like water through a dam,  
But you are in self-denial,  
Feeling apalled.

Since absence makes the heart grow fonder,  
We shall wait for you  
Like Christians for judgement day!  
And when we finally meet  
In a mortuary, your sleep or a car wreck,  
It will be more of an explosion  
Than the kiss of death;  
A bomb erupting between the moment  
Our lips make contact,  
Fusing us together  
Like two atoms in a nuclear reactor.

This sort of perfection  
Deserves to be immortalised.  
Who says no to dark paradise?

Yours,  
Patient lover.

### **Night and Day**

At home during our first lockdown  
it's as if the end has come  
the whole world quieted by the plague  
businesses closed, people sent home,  
in some countries hospitals overrun  
and death at the corner...



us, confined in the house  
musing what's to be done,  
doves calling at sunset,  
and there was evening  
with its glinting star  
and morning —the first day.

People separated across the globe,  
sky and sea at dawn and dusk  
become our elemental friends,  
we enter a realm we little know:  
the homeground of our mystery life,  
we start to feel our own drumbeat  
and with our hearts begin to run,  
and there was evening  
bejewelled with crescent moon  
and morning —the second day.

Open commerce is outlawed  
many suffer lack of food,  
we find the earth again, and trade  
in new ways, our gardens seem  
lush and green, we revere  
our planet blue, in temporary respite  
from our mismanagement,  
looking fresher in our absence;  
and there was evening,  
ablaze with fiery sun  
and morning —the third day.

With schedules and programs cancelled  
as humanities progress is stopped  
sun, moon and stars again  
become our shining clocks,  
at night the open heavens hang  
with jewels of iridescent fire  
Corona Australis and Orion shine,  
across the bay, Cape Point  
lighthouse flickers faithful  
for those still at sea,  
and there was evening

light-clouded luminescent  
and morning —the fourth day.

Halted, in our tracks  
by anti-contagion laws  
we look up and see blue cranes overhead  
still on course as we're locked down,  
out on the yearned-for sea  
birds throng the spray-filled air,  
dolphin and penguin cavort  
above the glittering creatures of the deep,  
their dying reefs and seas briefly  
reprieved from their master, expelled  
now even further from Eden's gate,  
and there was evening  
with full rosemoon  
and morning —the fifth day.

Futilely searching for the manual  
To all of this, cut-off, we attempt  
to connect by zoom, tik tok and whatsapp  
seeking the safe centre,  
the how, what and why in countless  
burning digiscreens, one-world windows,  
We open them to love and hate,  
falsity, truth, we can't resist them now:  
chipped with the apple, scared of the doctor  
and the dark laboratory churning under,  
even as the antelope roam savannahs free,  
we're the planet's freaks now  
shivering...broken/hopeful in the lonely wind,  
and there was evening  
with shattered neon cloud  
and morning —the sixth day.

And then I felt the soothing sun  
reflected on a crystal sea...  
I saw vast shining mountains rise  
above a foaming chasm... across  
the cries from earthcity, stilled  
nothings to be done but rest...

new music drowns the creaking gears of earth  
golden songbirds fill the air,  
the plague and all disease  
war and famine forever gone,  
and there was evening  
lit up as bright day by dreams and hope  
and morning —the seventh day.

### **For This Nice Kentucky Guy.**

For this nice Kentucky guy who rings  
Up my plants at an “essential” store  
on a bright Sunday...

He’s polite and friendly, I’d like  
to shake hands, but we don’t  
do that now.

Mask to mask, we speak,  
my words caught in fabric.  
When people break

apart, we say “Stay safe”  
As if safety is a castle  
we can lock ourselves into.  
We hear rumbling beyond  
the drawbridge. Something  
keeps trying to break in.

Still, an exchange of kind wishes  
means much. Especially  
among strangers who can tell  
each other what it was like  
when the sun came up  
and darkness had  
to slip away.

## **Humanity Paused by P.J. Reed**

Sometime in March  
the world stood still,  
humanity placed on pause.  
Faces masked and scarved  
as sanitized hands slowly dried  
and a million people died.  
Open borders closed their gates,  
land bridges failed to land.  
Houses labelled 'social bubbles,'  
sat with gates chained shut.  
Summer journeys went unwalked,  
as Corona bought a first-class ticket  
and flew across the world.

## **I am the Undertaker's Enemy By Atuhairwe Grace.**

I am not the gynaecologist,  
I drive the ambulance.  
The machine is as dilapidated and anciently dangerous  
as the asbestos hospitals in the town within a city. But it is  
Like a gold bar in this lockdown.

I drive that ambulance and take hers to gift this nation  
With bundles of future taxpayers for shady leaders who  
Hopefully, will change the narrative; and  
Make roads easier to navigate  
So that me and other essential workers  
can arrive at the labour wards  
In less than seventy hours; and,

Rush to the kiosk and calmly order and eat lunch  
Knowing that the machines will run steadily on constant power.  
And if the ghosts of our waters perform a private dance for the moon,  
And the dams have taken a break from pumping energy into light,  
The babies will come out powered by hot generators.

I drive this cold ambulance.  
I am espoused to the job and paid ages after the ob-gyn

Has been given his crumbs from the national budget  
Which says that a gun can take on pneumonia and corona  
Better than a syringe.

I am the ambulance driver  
Whose wife cannot use my tools of trade  
When she labours to give birth to our twins –  
Who eventually need oxygen to survive their infancy.  
I pretend to be aloof but I see corpses  
At the Referral Mortuary and they hate me  
For using their unused adult diapers on my twins.

I just drive the damn ambulance.  
I don't prick with syringes.  
I don't measure BP but I generate it  
With my maniac driving skills on Jjaja's roads.  
I don't give prescriptions.  
I just know the guy who does; and  
If you play nice and darken my world with a chimp,  
I just might lead you straight to the only decent doctor  
Working during Lockdown.

### **Though Distant, Unified We Will Win!**

Beyond,  
A century later,  
We are there again,  
A season of falling off dead,  
Like the leaves in their winter.  
Mysteriously,  
We've been caught off guard,  
Now we are in a protracted battle,  
Against an unknown enemy.  
It's silently tearing apart unions,  
Our small units of love,  
That always keeps us in good stead.  
We are here,  
Staring at each other,

As strangers would,  
Like we are so cross,  
But we smile more often,  
Hoping to cheer each other on,  
Waving is our way of greeting,  
We know we will win,  
One way or the other we will!

### **They've Never Concerned Them with Facts By Linda M. Crate**

They've never concerned them with facts  
they all stride in  
most complying,  
but these ones they have  
no masks even though  
we have signs up everywhere  
that say: no mask, no service;  
as if they should be exempt  
from the rule—  
we're privately owned  
so our rules are the rules if you  
want to enter the store,  
and I am so exhausted of walking past  
these careless people;  
seeming to think that they are safe  
when I have felt unsafe for an entire year  
hoping and praying I don't get this virus  
or spread it to anyone I love—  
also it's "survival of the fit" not  
survival of the fittest,  
but they've never concerned themselves  
with facts before;  
why would they be interested  
now?

### **Don't Tell Me You Cannot Breathe.**

I live in an area  
that doesn't

yet have the vaccine,  
and I cannot believe  
how careless some people are;

Pandemics don't go away  
just because you're bored  
precautions should be taken—

If you play with fire,  
don't be surprised  
if you get burnt;  
that's just the way of things  
you have to be prepared  
just in case—

We're all connected & it's not that  
hard to breathe with a mask on  
I had an anxiety attack in one and was  
still able to breathe so don't tell me  
you cannot breathe.

### **The Type of People You Are by Linda Crate.**

I remember everyone thought this  
would only last a few months  
look at us now!

Everyone insisted on going out  
last march  
even though the weather sucked  
and there was lots of snow because they  
just couldn't be told to stay inside,

And my anger rises when I think of this;  
when I think of how many deaths  
could've been diverted and how quickly the  
virus could've died if people hadn't been  
so determined to keep moving  
yet they deemed their right to go out

more important than the lives of others and I will never forgive nor forget their selfishness;

This could all be over,  
and I will never let them forget it—

You want to worry about Lil Nas X  
reclaiming hell and slaying satan,  
but you don't want to put any real effort  
in ending this virus;  
shows me exactly everything I need to know  
about the type of people you are.

### **How Many Deaths Is Enough? By Linda M. Crate.**

How many people  
must we lose  
before some people  
take this threat  
serious?

I know four people who have  
gotten covid-19,  
and thankfully they've all recovered;  
but one now has a permanent heart condition  
she didn't have before she got hit with  
this virus—

I just get angry thinking  
of all the careless people  
who go out without masks that threaten  
the lives of those around them for all of their  
ignorance,

Just want to be able to breathe again;  
not have to worry any time I have to go out  
again—

How many deaths is enough?



### **I Want a Better and More Progressive World By Linda M. Crate**

I have hope when the sun  
dances through my window,  
glints with the promise  
of better tomorrows;  
I don't know if I can trust humanity  
for that  
I don't hold my breath  
when it comes to relying on others  
have always had to do everything for  
myself—  
every group project,  
I ended up doing the entire thing  
because no one else would;  
I just want this virus gone so we can  
live our lives with a world that is hopefully  
better and more progressive  
than before because what we were doing  
wasn't working.

### **An Anxious Mind Locked Down By Milly Roy**

My lockdown story isn't one of glory - but certainly one to share  
There is so much I've learned, so much I see, but still what I say here might not be  
extraordinaire  
Or is that my general anxiety that is speaking  
A mind that is constantly observing and seeking  
There is much more time to think, I never know what's in store  
Am I doing enough, am I enough...the anxieties certainly drift off from the Nalubaale  
shore  
A busy mind is possibly the worst kind  
It is peace, even on good days, that I'm looking to find  
During a lockdown, the narratives and loops return  
It is hope, joy and commitment, for which I yearn  
We arrived before strict measures were instilled  
A life back in East Africa was what we were looking to build  
Being confined, so to speak  
Has encouraged me insistently to refine my technique  
Pick a fight, learn something new, or send a text

What, damn it, should I do next?  
Yes, we are lucky, I do not blink  
Busy with work, this or that... but also to out-think  
So what I've done is put it on paper, I feel I'm slowly becoming somewhat of a shaper  
The process is to reveal my authenticity again  
It is the real, light side of me that I believed was slain  
It is writing down the belief in myself, daily promises, gratitude  
The self-defeating thoughts are becoming progressively stewed  
And slowly do I see some light within this internal feud  
Perhaps there is opportunity in this seclude  
To be with your thoughts, your doubts, galore  
So that when lockdown is lifted, with myself I am no longer at war

### **Be Still, All Will Be Well By Agatha Malunda.**

These warm hands I used to greet with  
have become an instrument of death.  
I can no longer hold my face,  
unless I want to be the architect of my own death.  
Life was something I took for granted  
but now I have learnt to cherish every breathe I take.  
The earth was once at peace  
until we received this disease from the east.

But be still, all will be well.  
Tomorrow we shall have stories to tell.  
We shall play with mud.  
But for now, let us wash our hands.  
We shall kiss and hug  
but for now, let us keep a distance.

Let us walk with caution  
As we prevent Corona's deadly poison.  
We have lost so many souls  
we cannot afford to lose more.  
Finding a remedy should,  
be our goal.

### **BREAKING FREE by Agatha Malunda.**

The slavery of free men has began.  
A ruthless queen has risen from the east  
and she, unlike the sun, is harmful to man.  
Each day she exhorts the power of death,  
many are struggling to survive;  
all living under fear of losing their lives.  
The world is under attack.  
And lockdown has become Noah's ark  
To protect us from this fiery flood.  
We cover our noses and mouths with masks  
We've become accustomed to this task.  
Large gatherings are restricted  
our feeling of togetherness is afflicted.  
Handshakes have become illegal.  
A goodbye to brotherhood.

The sun shines but we admire its beauty,  
through our curtain windows.  
We can no longer feel its rays on our skin.  
We spend all day listening to news  
hearing how the masters of science  
are struggling to find an antidote.  
But this pain won't last forever  
we will fight it together.  
The reign of Corona will be gone  
a new era will be born.  
For now, safety is all we shall practice,  
We shall wash our hands like it is breathing itself  
As our weapons to defeat this enemy  
Life is sweet and we will not let Corona  
still the honey in our bodies.

### **Time Will Write History on You By Guna Moran.**

(Origin: Assamese. Dedicated to all those perished in Corona pandemic)

Time how cruel you are  
My devotion is still far tougher than it

Fighting on  
I would continue penning  
on your bosom  
The history of my triumph

You would remain a spectator  
To my indomitable entity  
You would remain a listener  
To my fame and glory  
You would turn into history  
To carry to my progeny my motto

You would lose on the brink of winning  
I would win on the brink of losing

I would stay alive even after dying  
You would die even though living

You'd rise again  
Like Phoenix from the ashes  
Our Progeny would fight again with you  
Pages in the  
history of triumph would keep added on  
countless diyas would blow on my altar

Time how cruel you are  
My devotion is still far tougher than it

Fighting on  
I would continue penning  
on your bosom  
The history of my triumph  
You just watch

Translation: Bibekananda Choudhury

## **The Day it Dawned on us by Phoebe Nortey (Ghana)**

I remember, I was in school  
We had a paper soon, so not cool  
Then the first case dropped in the land  
My parents panicked but I didn't understand  
"What do you mean I should come home, I've got a paper to write! "  
Later I realized I didn't have to put up much of a fight  
The paper was canceled and we were all sent home  
For some reason, that day, the clouds looked like foam  
Impromptu vacation, everything was fine or so I thought  
Every day and the new cases it brought  
The nations of the world, brought to their knees  
Covid 19, not listening to their pleas  
I was coping, that was at first  
And then like a balloon, I burst  
I know I'm no Frontline worker  
But the lockdown seemed too much for me  
All the days blurred into one  
And suddenly I became weary of waking up to the same routine  
The soldiers and doctors are heroes  
I hope they get their reward.  
The e learning assignments, so many  
I don't even have time to get bored  
I decided that instead of moping  
I'd take another chance at coping  
I decided to better myself  
Learn a few more skills and place them on my shelf  
Kudos to all those working for us and my condolences to those who've lost family  
members, to those who've been infected, I ask you to stay strong and to the survivors, I  
say live well.  
Wear your masks and wash your hands  
No matter your social size, please sanitize  
And I'll sit at home, learning to design  
While I wait for when everything will be fine  
Again.

### **Once this is over.**

Once this is over,  
I shall run into the arms of each morning  
and take in the deepest breath;  
My eyes will make friends with birds and flowers  
and cars and buildings and clothes;  
I will fill my nostrils with the boisterous  
smell of bread from the bakeries  
in Bavaria;  
My teeth will shine brightly at everyone  
who looks my way;  
I will wave frantically at strangers;  
I will give the warmest handshake anyone  
has ever known;  
My skin will hug the rays of the sun.  
When the cold winds come,  
it will not complain;  
I will dance Bata with the rain.

I will make the night sky my ceiling  
and swim with the moon and the stars.  
Once the iron gates are open,  
Once these walls are broken,  
I will be free again.  
I will walk the streets like a  
proud king.

Once this is over,  
You will see a new me.

### **The Meeting**

A pandemic meets an old man on the road.  
Who is this who is not afraid of me? It asks.  
You must be religious, I believe.  
Which of the gods do you worship?

I am not religious, the old man replies,  
I must go about my business.  
You must be immune, then, the pandemic says,

or perhaps you have found a cure?

I really don't care, the old man groans,  
my business is urgent, I must go.  
Then surely, you are foolish, the pandemic retorts.  
Have you not heard the reports?

I am hunger, the old man began,  
I've been here since the world began.  
Wars and diseases, they come and they go.  
None has lived as long as I have.

You burn at both ends; your end is near.  
I burn slow like fine firewood.  
Keep them indoors and fill them with fright,  
but when I knock, they come right out.

Your reputation precedes you, the pandemic responds  
and bows before the old man.  
They kiss, hug and shake hands like old friends and  
smile knowingly at each other.

The old man takes his leave and continues his routine -  
knocking on doors and turning knobs.

..... **end of part 1.**

# *SHORT STORIES*



## A Sad and Tragic Anecdote

By Marcelo Medone

Everything I'm going to tell you is strictly true, even though I am a fiction writer. First of all, I am a doctor and a human who has been greatly affected in many ways by the scourge that is Covid-19. When news of a deadly virus outbreak in China began to arrive, we did not think it could affect us who are located on the other side of the world. Literally, the geographical antipodes of the city of Wuhan are in a small town in the province of La Rioja, called Castro Barros, less than a thousand kilometres from where I live, in Buenos Aires. Let's say that China and Argentina were always historical antipodes and this time that undeniable fact was not going to change.

However, what seemed like distant news in the southern summer of 2019 and in 2020 had, in a short time, become an apocalyptic horror film taken to the plane of palpable reality. We doctors remember SARS, MERS and even Ebola. But Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia, the Congo, Sudan and Uganda were always far away. This time around, sadly, we were twinned together by the pandemic.

In March 2020, the quarantine officially began in Argentina. We had to incorporate new terms into our daily language: coronavirus, Covid-19, Wuhan, pandemic, quarantine, "mandatory preventive social distancing", "mandatory preventive social isolation", face mask and hand sanitizer.

As an on-call doctor in pediatrics, I began to see and treat children with this new virus, most of them over the age of 12 as well as get in touch with their relatives, who were often the ones who had infected them. We doctors began to dress as if we were astronauts; special acrylic face shields, gloves, caps, gowns, shoe covers and surgical masks of various degrees of protection became the norm.

In addition, we experienced a rapid change in our social customs and our way of communicating. We said goodbye to handshakes and pecking as a way of greeting each other. Many of us stopped meeting with our friends, our family and our loved ones.

Soon our colleagues, friends, close people began to get sick. Most of them made a full recovery. Some could not cope with the disease and so succumbed to it. Others partially recovered, with sequelae even to this day. At the same time, the calls to write about this new reality multiplied: they asked for stories about the pandemic, its quarantine, the isolation, the changes in habits and behaviours and the expectations for the future.

I wrote and published literally dozens of stories and poems on the subject: about people who suffered the loss of a loved one, about others who were traumatized by the confinement, about the pandemic from the point of view of a toddler, about an astronaut, unknowing of the pandemic, returns to Earth, about an alien conspiracy to end humanity, about humans mutated into zombies by the virus, about a dog locked up in quarantine and even from the perspective of the virus itself.

I wrote until one fine day, I got sick with the virus! I was admitted with severe bilateral pneumonia. I had two series of seizures and one cardiac arrest. I was on high-flow oxygen for three weeks, taking painkillers to lure me to sleep due to the pain that each breath produced in me. The "Covid-19 prone positioning." After two long months, I recovered and went back to work in the hospital. And I went back to writing as well.

But now, I don't joke on this topic anymore. Friends have died after being infected, which hurts me to the core. I have seen family members who have also been affected suffer at the pangs of the virus. It

hurts me. After more than a year of pandemic, I pray that this global burden is left behind and we only find it in the future as a mere or simple reference in the History books that speak of the 21st century. I wish that it becomes an anecdote. A sad and tragic anecdote from the distant past.

### **Bob and Me, Election Eve, 2020.**

They sent us home in March, due to a strange airborne disease. You think I should be concerned? They were attempting to protect the body from free radicals. Realizing that this might take a while, I decided to purchase a new friend. That is something you could do in America, at the time. It was a small Venus Flytrap named Bob that I got. He was to keep me entertained during the quarantine. It was impossible to know what was truly happening. America is a strange man. The world, we agreed, was certainly in trouble. We closed the blinds and locked the doors in order to feel safe. No matter what, there was still poetry. That is all we will ever have to love.

In the conquest for political power, it began to feel dangerous. What did I risk to tell you this? I was already locked in the orderly house, there was nothing I could do! Meanwhile, the world went on. It's not a simple world: "enjoy captivity", they said. Every day was Groundhog Day. "Build your own world", they said, "Your own ideal world while this once perfect world is warming". What a beautiful world it once was. Now, we dealt with uncertainty. Still, we wept because we knew how the story ends. We had no reason to hope. But I still got up the following morning and wrote poetry. It's amazing how little human life changes. This was once someone's dream. A sparrow communicated the New Intelligence - the latest breaking news to Triangles. We became like those who seek to destroy us. I fear their love for money. We sat and watched as the world changed. What a strange place to look for what matters! Go ahead and let the world change. I'm happy to sit among these cliffs. Looking at the mountains, I can't help but ask, "You mean, there's a President for all of this? When will the mountains and rivers and trees and animals get a vote?" We humans have gotten it in our heads that we're somehow in charge of this planet. Probably because we're the ones who can do the most damage.

We have forgotten how to speak to rocks and birds. This careening mudball. This land of hope, deferred. Concerts are canceled. Ball games delayed. Idle elevators. Plenty of parking. Quarantine. Finding time to do nothing. Fun for the Shut-In. It isn't me anymore – it is a parasite. Unqualified despair. This, too, shall pass. We were in this together. Did you choose this or was it imposed on you?

Approximately 80 percent of all life vanished in a week. The thought of moving forward kept holding us back. If this story makes you uncomfortable, wake up! Wake up, it's time to begin. What a beautiful world it once was. The world is watching. The world is listening. The world is as sharp as the edge of a knife. We are each just another being in the Big Watershed. We are all at a potluck and each of us will eventually become part of the meal. Human beings are audacious. A figure obtained by triangulation. Warding off complicity, the clocks slay time. When the clocks stop, time comes to life. The sandwich hours are neatly placed between fattish slices of work. The clocks tic-toc, but I don't hear them. The same old thing over and over. I don't hear them like I didn't hear them when the cities bustled. What a way to live. As far as the government is concerned, we only exist to

fight the wars, pay the taxes, and believe the lies. Believe us, they say. Poets have to come up with the vision. Power of the powerless, changes that brought no change. Today will be the day when we triumph over chaos and artists create society. With nothing to do, look out! We are a contingent occurrence with our own unique constitution. What song should we sing? Politically speaking, money will be no object. The stars adjust for inflation. In those days before these days, I just wanted to lie in the grass and look at the clouds. This is real news. The sky is a big responsibility. I wake to see the world go wild. Where have all the people gone? There is a rumored existence of people in a nearby county. All news arrives from a distant land. What do I miss the most? I miss the sacredness of human communication. I have learned to sit quietly, believing that I'll return again. Wilderness will inevitably return. The trees will assume familiar shapes and sounds, where silence became a thing. Who needs a radio?

It was always late in the afternoon when it felt like you were losing a season out of your life. Politically speaking, poets have to come up with the vision. As long as there is light, my pen will move across the page. Let me take the whole universe and put it on the tips of your eyelashes. I don't know what we are. We must be something. I have absolutely no idea what I'm saying but since the world is ending: 1. May I eat the cookies? 2. May I have that slice of cake? 3. May you let the credits roll. Between this and that, America is falling into History. We don't care what you think. My heart breaks like the nightly news. There is little news. History is stalking us. History pauses for emphasis. Hold me like a moment of silence. How shall I go on? Only time will tell. In the cessation of hope, I'm all for confusion. I am dying with the year. I was always one for being alone. What I love is always close at hand. Oh, my lost world so far away. Many a beast is now prowling in his own home. We wake up and receive our orders for the day. He who dares to live, has the luxury of a man with a trout stream entirely to himself. Perhaps I should consider seeking relief. Did you ever suspect a free lunch could taste so good? Hate tyrants. We are not lost. A mania keeps them on the move, unmindful of the terror and the headlines. Globus Hystericus. Politically speaking, it is an era of "you're not listening." The cardboard city collapses. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem - a place we never finished imagining. We should be grateful for impermanence and the freedom it grants us. Let me persuade more slowly.

The world is dust and dust it will become. We each have a dying green plant on the porch. Bob does not fret. The woods are full of wardens. Wild places are being contained. It is a world that learned how to work against nature. We are all endangered yokels needing protection. In the future, it will be just like none of this ever happened - many years from now, many fears from now. In America, History goes by quickly, like a windstorm. In the world of men, centuries go by leaving little trace. So what? I think happily. So, what. I refuse to live locked in the orderly house. I hear America singing. Good luck to all! Politically speaking, I'm at odds with all ideas. I think it might be a good idea for you to leave the radio on all the time now.

Soon it will be a new era with new foolishness added to the old. They ask me questions and I frown and say, "did you not read my last book? It's all in there." We have resumed our lives. A future, inch-by-inch. Now, each person stands apart. Politically speaking, I feel less toxic, prepared to start looking for truth, instead. America is a strange orange man. During Presidential debates they put real snow on the stage and fake blood on the snow. Men like that ought to stick to making money.

The world needs more sages than anything else right now. More prayer wheels, more visions, more poems, more magic. The President of the United States suddenly grows cross-eyed and floats away. Let me persuade more slowly. I have absolutely no idea what I am saying. What I miss the most, what I will do next, I will rejoice in the spring as if no spring had ever been before.

### **Dream State**

By MP Toman

Some mornings when he wakes there is an instant where his dreams merge with his consciousness, and just for a moment he exists in two realities at once, and as he stirs, he reaches out with his mind, tries to hold onto the fleeting sensations of his dream state, but the harder he tries, the more he grasps, the more quickly the visions vanish, and he feels a moment of emptiness as he realises the world he imagined doesn't exist, and he is plunged into reality once again.

So he rises from bed with the feeling that there is something beyond him, something that he almost grasped, but it has moved beyond his comprehension, disappeared as quickly as a mirage in the desert, an illusion in the real world. As the day descends, the feeling fades; as most dreams do, and he moves on.

.....

George left the house in darkness, the dream forgotten other than a lingering sensation. Ahead of him lay his work day at the hospital, planned out to the minute. Once at the hospital there was no margin for error. As he rode the train to work the sky began to lighten, at first a pale yellow that promised a clear day, but by the time he neared the hospital grey bands of cloud had descended. So, while there was light, George was denied the sun. The other commuters sat alone in their seats, enshrouded by their facemasks, staring at their phone screens. Typically, by the time he had travelled half the journey to work it was standing room only in the train carriages, but since the pandemic the numbers had dropped, to almost nothing. Whilst the density of passengers had thinned due to people working from home, George couldn't help but wonder how many seats were made vacant by premature deaths, his fellow commuters sighing out their last breath plugged into oxygen in an ICU or coughing their lungs out at home. It was the stigma of the infected. He'd read that as many as half of the people who had contracted the virus stayed at home rather than report to the authorities and have their case reported. As such, it was hard to know how many people were actually sick. All George knew was that there were plenty of empty seats on the train. He could spread out his bag next to him and spread his feet up on the seats opposite.

George disembarked at central station and began his walk up the hill through the CBD to his workplace. The hospital loomed above him, a great black monolith of concrete, steel and glass. The clouds opened as he neared his destination, and George pulled his jacket about his uniform, the thin scrubs doing little to keep him warm as it started to rain. He skirted around the yawning emergency entrance, instead making his way to the loading dock. He checked his watch. As planned, he was seven minutes early for his shift, enough time for his one cigarette of the day. Under the protection of an overhanging roller door, George drew a lighter from his bag, protected the feeble flame from the weather, and lit his cigarette. The first puffs hurt, as they always did, but he held his breath, felt the

acid air solidify in his lungs until he could bear it no longer, and then exhaled. He felt odd, like he wasn't his normal self, as something important had happened to him that morning but he had misunderstood it, and the meaning remained intangible. He looked down at the cigarette. He knew that it was a carcinogen, that damaging his lungs in the midst of a respiratory pandemic was stupid, and that if he was caught smoking outside the hospital in his scrubs he'd be in strife, but he needed it. Without his solitary cigarette it would all be too much, and his hands would start shaking when he was on shift treating his patients. So, it was necessary. He watched the cigarette burn down between his fingers, the tobacco and paper being consumed by the smoldering flame. Before it got to halfway, George flicked it into the alleyway and made his way into the hospital through the loading dock. It was time to work.

.....

When he arrived at his ward, George had his temperature taken and filled in the online questionnaire on the tablet at the nurses' station. He had an infection test scheduled for later in the day, as always, the prospect casting a shadow over his shift. He'd had them every day for four months and had always tested negative, but infection was invisible. He carefully donned his PPE, each item designed to keep the virus from entering his body. He knew that if he was careful, he should be fine, but there was always a doubt. Today he was with the old ducks and drakes who were infected but weren't bad enough to be in ICU. For the most part they'd exhibited less dire symptoms, their blood screening showing anti-bodies and that they were shedding the virus, but they could breathe on their own. Some individuals were the rock star success story patients who were once in ICU but were well enough to be unhooked from their respirators.

He passed by Gina. 74 years old, up until her illness, living independently. Her husband died a few years earlier. Gina caught the virus from a council healthcare worker, who had in turn picked it up from a resident in a nursing home, the line of infection stretching backwards all the way to patient zero, whoever that was. George had been working with Gina for nearly a month. She initially presented as having symptoms of the infection and tested positive, but then rapidly deteriorated, landing in ICU for two weeks while a respirator breathed for her. Gina had come into his orbit when she could breathe for herself. Her first words to him established their relationship: the problem with you male nurses is that you are all gay. What I wouldn't give to be given a sponge-bath by a good-looking boy like you, provided you were interested in me. She had then winked at him, and George couldn't help but smile. Gina was asleep. Her face looked like paper that had been scrunched into a ball and then painstakingly ironed flat. George checked her chart, looked at the monitors. Her oxygen levels were fine. George was about to leave when he heard Gina's voice: Don't think I didn't notice you checking me out George. If you wanted to be inappropriate when no one's watching it would be totally fine with me. Just give me a sec to hitch up my gown. Her eyes opened. The light through the window illuminated her bright blue irises, but it was still grey outside. Sorry Gina, I have rounds to do, other patients to see. You aren't my only girlfriend, or boyfriend for that matter. Gina laughed, that may be true Georgie, but I'm your favourite. She smiled, her expression matching her eyes. George's day unspooled as he'd imagined. Multiple tasks, multiple PPE exchanges, all designed to eliminate or at least minimise the chance of infection and cross infection. At midday he was tested for the virus, and with rapid analysis, had a negative result confirmed by mid-afternoon. Another day, another bullet dodged.

George's last duty was to check the patients on his ward again, make notes on their condition, see to their needs before handing over to the next shift. He left Gina's room last. He thought of his mother, who saved witty remarks for use when bidding someone farewell. When he attended school, his mother would tell him a joke as he got out of the car, always followed by the comment: Always leave 'em laughing Georgie, always leave 'em laughing. He smiled to himself, and tried to think of some new scandalous phrase to shock Gina.

When George made it to her room she wasn't there. The bed was empty, even though her possessions were still neatly arranged on the shelf. He reached out and read the chart, deciphered the notes. Gina had experienced a sudden drop in her respiration rate and oxygen levels and been taken to ICU. He looked at the times of the notes. It all took place while he was getting tested and having lunch. No one had thought to tell him about it. They were all meant to maintain a professional distance.

George finished his rounds, clocked out of his duties. And he knew he shouldn't, that he had no reason to, but he went to see Gina in ICU. He wanted to.

In the ICU ward, in each room, there was an individual patient hooked up to a respirator and any number of other different machines monitoring their status. A clear glass window separated each person from the corridor, and the ICU nurses and doctors only entered when they had to, when it was necessary. This was no place for chat.

Gina was in the third room down the corridor on the right, plugged in like the others. Her eyes were closed, her chest rising and falling to the rhythm of the machine, her skin color white. If it weren't for the movement brought about by the respirator, she would look dead.

George stared at her, tried to see if Gina was still there. And then her eyes opened. She looked through the window at George. He could see her regain focus, register that he was there. Gina's eyes were still sharp, still corn flour blue. Her arm moved slightly, as if she was trying to wave to him.

George put his fingers to the glass, pressed the pads against the surface until they went white. There was a pause, and Gina closed one eye for a second then reopened it. She winked at him. Then she shut her eyes and was still. George looked his hand pressed against the window, the whitened pads, the pink fingernails. The hand was shaking.

George left work, walked down the hill to the station. The city was backlit by clouds, the sun trying but failing to push its way through.

.....

That night George dreamt of Gina. In his dream she was a young woman, running freely through an autumn forest. Beams of light pushed their way through the canopy, casting spots of light and shadows on the forest floor. Gina was laughing, teasing him to follow, her blue eyes smiling in the shifting light. In the darkness of his room, George's face broke into a smile. There was no one sharing his bed to hear him laugh in his sleep.

When he awoke in the morning, he knew that he had been dreaming. He sat on the edge of the mattress, consciously trawling through his thoughts, trying to catch the smoke of his dreams with his mind, but the moment had escaped. He reached out further, to at least capture the emotions he had felt, but it was lost to him. It was forgotten.

When he started his shift in the hospital that day, he checked his patient list and the ICU list. Gina's name was not present. When he asked his supervisor, she told him that Gina had died during the

night. Orderlies had already been through the room and removed her possessions for her family to collect. George nodded, watched his supervisor walk away.

In the sterile environment of the hospital George removed the surgical gloves he was wearing for his own protection. He put his thumb and forefinger to his nose to smell the odour of the one cigarette that he had smoked in the loading dock minutes before. He tried to recall how it felt to bottle the biting fumes in his lungs, to experience the burning smoke in his airway. George lowered his hands, clenched his fists. He was able to keep his hands still.

### **It Comes Closer still**

By Titus Green

We took note, in that fleeting, attention deprived 21st century way of the beast's escape. Like a ravenous tiger set free among mountain goats, we learned from the search engines that something biological and dangerous was feasting on the health of people in a far-off Chinese city. The internet fed us bite sized McNuggets of misery and suffering from Asia, alongside the celebrity promotion pieces telling us about how a reality television star's new thong was sending the world crazy. We saw stricken Chinese supine on hospital beds, and medics looking bloated in baggy white anti-contamination suits. We saw people dragged from homes kicking and screaming by masked, baton-wielding police. Some new year schadenfreude for the sadistic, or sick-minded maybe. Something to 'joke' drunkenly about to friends in the recesses of city bars where the remarks would escape smartphone capture and Yahoo viral ignominy. We read hasty copy about hastily created hospitals, of prefabricated quality, assembled by civic workers bulldozing earth for their country's survival. Cynics posted sarcastically under the stories. Made in China. They'll collapse in days. This was February 2020. The nouns 'hazmat suit' and 'self-isolation' had not yet infected our conversation. The World-o-Meter website ticked over, updating meticulously the statistics of death from the largest, hungriest tiger of the Asian economic streak. From Saudi Arabia, I swiped habitually for World-o-Meter each morning. I was just another lousy rubbernecker among millions engaged in this worthless morning ritual. An ESL teaching veteran of over twenty years, I'd lived through my share of strife in Asia. It would pass.

I worked on, teaching undergraduates at a vocational university. My daily job preoccupations rationed my visits to the coronavirus stories. I had a full menu of work to attend to, and grade-hungry students who could have cared less about the lethal lurgy thousands of miles and a full continent away. "China has plenty of people," said one of my undergraduates to titters that rippled around the class. The sentiment had two aspects: China can lose a few thousand souls and live and it's too far away to bother us. Grades were all that mattered to them. The titillation of the biological beast from the east was a mere finger-swipe away, if they wanted a break from the gaming apps exhausting the CPUs of their Huawei phones.

Slowly, the size, menace and destructive power of this dormant volcano of pestilence became clear. It had erupted, and the wind of inevitability was carrying its ash closer to my life. I had a Skype interview for a short summer course I intended to teach during my lengthy summer vacation.

Academic English to Chinese students; for so long the fecund financial grass that had fed the cash-cows of British universities and kept provosts in good living.

“We can’t confirm the course will run. The global situation’s unpredictable, the course recruitment might be a problem,” the department head said cagily. This was February 15th and the menace now had a technical name for the media to spin and hacks to pump into their keyboards ad infinitum. It had the phonetic qualities of an over-sold cleaning product or pharmaceutical. COVID19 Planes were still flying. Borders weren’t closing. Some people from China travelled and the virus that had muscled and murdered its way out of the ‘for minor consideration’ compartment of the world mind stowed itself on board their flesh and blood. Panic bombs were detonating in Italy. The giant, invisible vandal of health had landed and the nation’s elderly were perishing with shocking alacrity as hospitals swelled. An Italian Facebook friend with an interest in literature posted a portrait of Edgar Allen Poe and I commented that Masque of the Red Death had never been more balefully significant or its allegorical force more bruising. Who would be The Masque of COVID19’s Prince Prospero? Several world leaders were auditioning competently for this lead role in the narrative.

In Saudi Arabia, colleagues pondered for how long the kingdom could stay out of the path of the virotic meteor. Just as soon as these musings left their lips, the news that an expatriate taxi driver of unstated origin in Bahrain was infected reached us. Now, the menace was becoming less distant. Less abstract. It lurked across the King Fahad Causeway, its menacing miasma thickening like the demonic mist of John Carpenter’s film *The Fog*. When would it start floating towards us? A week later, the border to Bahrain was closed, and the first infections inside the kingdom were confirmed. It was March.

Our students were removed from the university and sent back to their hometowns. Hasty training workshops for online teaching were organized: Silicon Valley’s bells and whistles were going to be the buoyancy aids keeping our vulnerable teaching program afloat. Meanwhile, my country’s prime minister had been put into intensive care by the contagion that had forced its way into his social ecosystem and ambushed him. European death tolls rose and video news bulletins were becoming unnervingly similar to their clichéd portrayals in Hollywood catastrophe movies. Deaths. Panic. Military on the streets and lockdowns.

The malls and markets of Al-Khobar were closed and I was facing curfew for the first time in my 49 years in a foreign land. We may or may not go out at such and such a time. Masks and gloves were ‘the new normal’ (an odious expression I would like to drop into a swimming pools of napalm). This marauding disease, this Genghis Khan of sickness was crippling the economy and filling hospitals with the stricken and the healthy with terror. The morning prayer calls had never sounded more plaintive. It was April 2020 and COVID19 was no longer remote. It might have been a kilo meter or ten meters away, on my part I was in shock and fear for when it would show itself to me?



## Bridging Distances

I remember one of the private computer courses that I had joined at a time when computers were not a compulsory part of the school or college curriculum. With me in our batch was one of the senior-most teachers from my own college. But unlike other teachers, her presence was in no way intimidating for me as a student for she got along with us with such a mixture of sweetness and candour. She herself, despite her age, had showed no qualms of sitting beside youngsters and picking up the computer skills at her own pace. It was since then that I have harboured a special admiration and esteem for the elderly people of my parents' age who despite being not as expert as today's young geeks in handling latest technologies, strive to learn and try to keep pace with them. I really salute their zeal.

Years passed and I encountered many people. On later joining my job, I remember how during an orientation course, I had to guide an elderly Telugu fellow participant to prepare her power point project. When everyone of us had finished our work, here was this lady, who looking for help, came to my room in the evening. I could discern in her eyes a helplessness, akin to a child who having neglected his studies was in fear of being caned next day in the class. She too now regretted of not having honed her technical skills on time. I helped her to complete the project sitting far into the night; she at the end feeling relieved and thankful and me basking in joy of rendering what little help I could. But it was not that she was lagging in everything. The next day when she took her micro teaching class, she had done superbly well. But like most of her age, she was dependent on her children to do every little bit of technical stuff. I could thereby fathom the anxiety, of this generation, of fitting in and adjusting to the ever-changing technological advancements although there are exceptions no doubt.

The situation was no different for my parents, too. A time comes when parents, having married off their daughters or children having left for education or jobs, become quite lonely. I too perceived a similar kind of lonesomeness in my mother after we, their children, flew the nest. It was after much cajolement and by gradual means that she picked up the skills of using an android phone and began to communicate over WhatsApp. Thankfully, this enabled her to keep in touch with us and all her friends and relatives. For most new users of her age, the mobile phone, like the computer is an elusive and delicate device. Many times, it is the fear of clicking or touching unaware certain buttons resulting in wrong or embarrassing turn of events that makes the elderly shrink from exploring the device. Otherwise, like youngsters, they could have picked up learning instantly.

Things were going on well before the pandemic and my mother was busy with her social activities. But after the lockdown was imposed, she, like everyone else, began to suffer from a sense of anxiety and seclusion, which in turn made us worry. During one of my visits home, I chanced upon the idea of opening a Facebook account in her name. Well, it was really a good decision. Initially, I handled it for her and posted a few photos. At the same time, I taught her the basics of using the app. She progressed well and spent some time everyday scrolling through the news feed. Gradually, she received many requests from relatives and acquaintances. This made her happy. After a month, she was able to find, to her amazement and joy, many of her school and college friends. I cautioned her too, regarding the privacy and security concerns related to the app but didn't try to frighten her too much lest she would altogether stop using it. Then one day I found that she was able to comment on others'

post albeit using the English script for Assamese. Then I taught her how to post updates and photos which she learnt but didn't give a try. Anyway, she was developing a growing interest in the app enjoying stuff ranging from entertainment, news and happenings.

Well, I had to return to my workplace and home after the lockdown was over. And I began to suffer from guilt to leave parents behind feeling concerned for their safety and loneliness in this period of crisis. Days passed and one fine morning as I opened my Facebook account, I found my mother's post in the newsfeed -- a picture of her article published in the day's newspaper – and on top she had written a note too. Well, I thought my mother can now handle everything without my aid. I was elated and contented that now she wouldn't feel lonely having become skilled in using social media. There is nothing the aged cannot learn. Give them some time, guidance and a little support and they can outrun even the young. In a world that is shrinking day by day, the elderly too can thus bridge the distances and connect if they age with a technical grace. And thanks to the Covid Pandemic that the latent talents in people began to surface as they began to deal, in all possible manner, with the crisis.