



POETRY



A Man with A Cane

DILRUBA Z. ARA

The man walks
Bending on his cane, picking
Pasta, potatoes and a box of sardines. Other shelves are
Gaping empty.
Searching eyes roam back and forth.
Suspended between anxiety and necessity,
He interprets the message in its complexity —
An immigrant from a faraway country.

We expand our sense of time,
Reminding ourselves of what mother Corona
Has been prescribing. Maintain social distance,
Have one or two pills of solidarity.
Life is not a ride on an aeroplane,
Go slow, like a man with a cane!

His fingers shake at the cash counter. The wallet
Falls with a thud on the aisle, emptying its contents.
His belly and knees wouldn't let him gather his money.
I offer my help, but he declines.
My hands have become everyone's enemy.

Dilruba Z. Ara is an internationally acclaimed Swedish-Bangladeshi writer, novelist, artist, educator and translator. She lives and works in Lund, Sweden, and writes from there. To know more about her, visit www.dilrubazara.com



The love birds of Pabna

AHMAR MAHBOOB

If only I had stopped her from drinking!

She did say that the water tasted funny;
And it looked yellow, and smelt of metal...

Why didn't I stop her; why didn't we fly away...

Yes, it was hot and we were thirsty;
But I should not have let her drink!

The poison spitting vehicles, the sewage rivers
Black belching factories, the plastic killers
Chemical plants, the garment dyes
Coal power plants, and unidentified crimes...
We knew what fed that water;
And yet I let her drink!

Where will I fly to now? With whom?

I have known no love but Padma;
And now she is gone.

A death robbed of its solemnity

AHMAR MAHBOOB

Ha, there you go, this is how you suffer:
The virus that killed you is yet to die himself
And, already, those alive are thinking beyond you.
You, who were not all that divine, in ways you know best,
Are now no more than a stat, a part of a number,
Of yet another epidemic,
That future historians and academics will research
To make a living.

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MUSINGS

Viral Miseries

MOHAMMAD SHAMSUZZAMAN

I always knew that life is unpredictable. But between February and April this year, I started to discover what it truly means to live an unpredictable life. One morning this past February, my hard-drive didn't open. I have been using the hard-drive since 2012. It never behaved that way. I thought that there were bugs in the system, or that the desktop at my office had a glitch. I switched to another computer. It behaved the same way. I panicked. I rushed to the IT cell of my university. They pinned down the problem—the hard-drive was corrupted by virus. They assured me that they would try to retrieve the data, but they also cautioned me that recovery would be unlikely unless I ended up being exceptionally lucky. I wasn't. The virus gutted about 365 GB of data. The hard-drive had just too much in it for me to part with. Eight years of my professional and intellectual activities had fallen between the cracks. The loss was consequential. The virus disrupted my life. Nonetheless, I tried to bounce back to my regular life.

It never happened. The culprit is yet another virus, COVID-19. It doesn't damage data; it, instead, destroys lives. It has already brought the whole world to its knees, by infecting and killing peoples across continents. It favors none. It stops nowhere. The World Health Organization (W.H.O.) declared it as a pandemic on the 11th of March. An uncommon medical term has become a common currency across the world since. People still wonder whether the term, pandemic, captures the contours of the crisis the virus has already unleashed on us. It seems that we've already lost our claim on the world to an armada of viruses. Our safety is a delusion. Our formidable intelligence is a myth. Science is a gimmick. Our social, economic, and cultural structures are shaky. We live on mercy. Our existential threat has always been eternal. The virus sends us a grim reminder about this, as flu, cholera, and plague did in the past. As a result, to wise and worldly observers, this pandemic is mayhem with some meaning.

Arundhati Roy, for example, claims in her recent essay, "The Pandemic Is a Portal," that the virus is definitely more than a virus. It suggests evolution. Our species will evolve anew following the pandemic with new visions and missions. We're on the cusp of new normals. Our protocols and priorities of survival and success will be re-adjusted. Referring to pandemics occurring throughout the history of our species, she claims, "pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and to imagine their world anew." Why shouldn't we imagine a new world now as our past has led us to the present



situation, when death is everywhere and death is everything? If this is not God's punishment for living a rogue life, this is a retribution for our collective ignorance and inertia. We perhaps could have averted this sudden walk to hell had we listened to Bill Gates when he warned us about a lurking pandemic in his TED Talk in 2015. Now that the pandemic befalls us, we must accept it the way Arundhati Roy does: "It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next." So, are we living in a transition now?

I don't know. Arundhati Roy's observation, however, is echoed by Frank M. Snowden, a professor emeritus of history and of the history of medicine at Yale, in his book, *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present*. Snowden claims that disease outbreaks have shaped politics, crushed revolutions, and entrenched racial and economic discrimination along with affecting personal relationships as well as the work of artists and intellectuals. He further claims that epidemics are not random events to afflict humans capriciously without warning. Diseases are ordered events, because microbes diffuse and expand themselves through ecological niches humans have created. Chronic ignorance of harmony

between humans, plants, and other organisms as well as between humans of various statuses, identities, and locations creates an ecological chaos for pathogens to stalk and to strike humans. Snowden, for example, claims that Cholera and tuberculosis in today's world move along the fault lines created by poverty and inequality. So, where does the coronavirus come from, our insensitivity to animals?

Yes, perhaps! These days animals are often not where they belong. They are being forced out of their habitats. We're cutting down forests across the globe recklessly. Because of climate change, perhaps, forest fires are more frequent these days. The sacred distance between humans and animals is compromised. So, the cycle begins—from bats to pangolins to humans. Outcome: COVID-19. And we still cage, can, kill, and eat animals. That affects ecology. Ecology is so organic that if one component is affected anywhere, it creates a ripple effect everywhere. This pandemic is a glaring example of this—the virus spread rapidly from its site of origin. Now the whole of our species is immersed in it. There's no such thing as global public health policy yet. Neither is any consensus emerging among the nations around the globe to fund research

to contain and cure zoonotic diseases. As the coronavirus ravages, countries around the globe are left with their own devices to deal with it. But how do we deal with a pandemic with such a parochial mind-set?

If that question puzzles you, note that sciences sometimes have an undertow. Germ theory of disease, for example, helps to stigmatize poor, as Snowden claims in his book. The medical doctrines of the early nineteenth century taught people that TB was overwhelmingly a disease of the ugly classes who were filthy and poor living in crammed slums and shanties. This perspective politicizes science to hide economic discrimination. It also separates humans into the elite and the ordinary, with the "ordinary" regarded as equal to animals when it comes to dignity and safety. *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell, becomes freshly relevant under such a circumstance, "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." Outbreaks of disease, however, have always been a democratic experience that spread across classes, races, religions, and geographies. The coronavirus has united us as a species by brazenly exposing our inimical relationship with ourselves as well as with animals. We have been living

neither kindly, nor considerably. Our frantic life warranted a divine intervention forcing us to pause.

So, we're locked down. Never was it in our wildest imagination that the whole of our species had to be locked down to deal with a medical emergency. As this has happened, some disgruntled observant might stretch his imagination to reverse the equation—the whole of our species might be locked out, too. Given the pace and symbols of development in the modern world, he might imagine that the cities around the world will grow further to dot the surface of the earth with more buildings. Over time, buildings around the globe will decay; so, they will start to emit radon gas as they generally do—a little too much. The human body is not primed to absorb radon gas beyond a certain limit. It's essentially lethal. Under such a hypothetical situation, governments around would implore their citizen to stay out of their houses, as they now in the wake of the coronavirus implore their citizens to stay in their houses. Only a prophet of doom would imagine such an apocalypse. But the coronavirus pandemic is so sudden and severe that people have been swinging between uncertainty and pessimism to embrace irrational thinking. Isn't rational thinking a luxury in the world that we live in now?

Whether we answer yes or no, we all are horrified to face an existential threat. The world around looks so surreal that the silence and isolation feel like either hell or prison. No one moves around. We're struck into slumber. The vibe and heave of our speed-admiring, time-driven life is missing. The virus turned our life upside down and inside out. We're disoriented. We're suffering, but it didn't feel like a labor pain that would soon give birth to a glorious, prosperous, and peaceful world. It bodes tragedy, displacement, and dispossession. Death is just an inch away. There's no succor at hand. Hope still hovers, but being hopeful presupposes sanity that most of us already have lost. This pandemic has already altered society, psychology, and economies. It has consumed us already, but it won't defeat us altogether. James Lovelock claims in *The Vanishing Face of Gaia* that the earth will sustain us humans for its own survival under any circumstances. Humans are integral to the ecosystem. Without humans, the ecosystem will crumble on itself, which is not going to happen some time soon.

So, relax. Stay home. Stay safe. Stay hopeful. Viral miseries are not our eternal destiny.

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