

POETICS OF PANDEMIC

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Any pandemic is crushing. COVID-19 is no exception. It strains cognition and emotion. It tanks economies. It disrupts communication. It alters psychology. It breeds panic and paranoia. It kills. What follows is an elegy that glorifies grief. In the debris of devastation, the foundation of art and creativity is built. Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/ La Frontera* cites the following Mexican proverb: "Of pain, poem; of sorrow, song." It's too early now to assume how this pandemic will affect and enrich the field of arts and letters. This much is already obvious, though, that we humans are

has freed us from the prison of our time-driven lives that had begun since the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century. We've gradually slipped into a frenzied lifestyle that defines time in terms of speed and productivity. Time is no longer a personal possession to be used to rest and reflect. Time is, instead, capital as well as a commodity driven by market forces. When we lose autonomy over our time, as was the case until the pandemic locked us down, we become prisoners of our jobs, our money, and our ambitions. We become workaholics. Work is obviously important, but we

simmers in anxiety and apprehension. It can't imagine, dream, and explore. And it can't be prodded to be productive, as Irish statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke famously said, "The march of the human mind is slow." It needs occasionally, as a farm does, to lie fallow. It replenishes only when it does nothing in particular. When the human mind rambles through undirected, divergent, and un-purposeful thoughts, it soaks in creativity. Lightman cites Carl Jung and Gertrude Stein as validating examples. Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist, did his most creative thinking and writing when he took time off from his frenzied practice in Zurich to go to his country house in Bollingen, Switzerland. Gertrude Stein, an American novelist, needed similar stimulation. In the middle of a writing project she would wander about the countryside looking at cows. Religions (Hinduism and Buddhism, in particular) and psychology abound with further examples and explanations to indicate a connection between creativity and tranquil reflection. With the forced slowing of life granted by the coronavirus, we can re-think about our involvement with and management of time. Several of us have used our stay-at-home time to do creative things with our families, and in a surprising number of cases we have produced music, poetry, art, or video that millions of other people have enjoyed on Youtube. We have time, finally, for the poetics of pandemic.

The ancient Greeks had thought along this line millennia back. They had two words for time: *Chronos* and *Kairos*. Both the words stand for "time" in the English language, but with different connotations. While *chronos* refers to numeric, chronological time, *kairos* refers to a proper and appropriate time of action. *Chronos* measures time in such as terms as seconds, minutes, and hours, but *kairos* judges time in such terms as time for rest, for reflection, and time open to epiphany. Ideally, as life unfolds, it embodies both the versions of time. Unfortunately, however, because of the hedonistic drive of modern life, the *kairos* time is all but missing. We're helplessly stuck in a vicious equation where time-equals-money. Henry David Thoreau, an American philosopher of the 19th century, claims in his famous essay "Civil Disobedience," "Absolutely speaking, the more money, the less virtue." So, we've gradually shifted away from ethics and

aesthetics into greed and gratification. The virus may have used this fault-line to expand and attack. So, we're stopped. Time on *chronos* hasn't stopped, but we still can it pace it down a bit by intervening with the *kairos* time.

Like time, space too is critical to creativity. One of the finest writers in the annals of American literature, Marjorie Kennan Rawlings, validates that. She was born in Washington D.C. in 1896. Since her childhood, she had taken herself seriously as a writer. She, however, could not accomplish anything until 1928 when she moved to Florida at the age of thirty-two. Her move from Washington to Florida, incidentally, spurred her creativity, for she churned out novels to establish herself as an accomplished writer in the U.S. and beyond, culminating in winning the Pulitzer Prize for her novel, *The Yearling*, in 1938. She articulated what she discovered about life in many of her writings: "for a person to find lasting happiness or fulfillment, it is essential for him to find a place with which his spirit can live with harmony." Until this radical relation between place and happiness as well as fulfillment is developed and sustained, she contended, one can't activate and actualize one's creative potential. Similarly, influential postcolonial scholar Edward Said speculated about "poetics of place" in *Orientalism*, where he argues that the objective place of a house becomes less important than the imaginative and figurative power it possesses to kindle one's creativity. No place is pristine and romantic these days. We live in a sterile wasteland. The harmony between humans and space is diminished, so our creativity -simmered in imagination- is no longer unbidden and abundant.

The world was so fantastic before the pandemic that imagination was hardly essential to the modern world. Things beyond imagination had already happened. We already have had a world of silver jets stitching together cities of towering skyscrapers and a globe of soaring markets and smartphone connectivity. We've reduced the whole world to some dots and digits and bytes. Now several months into this disease and it's all tottering—the jets grounded and the cities silent and the markets reeling. No bytes of virtual space capture the magnitude of the horror the virus has unleashed on us. We've experienced a complete credit crunch for our civilization. The pronouncement of Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*

reverberates, "It was the worst of times." Indeed, it is! Our shiny world was not sturdy. It was operating on a thin margin. So, it falls apart. Was that consequence so difficult to imagine?

Not really! However superstitious I might sound, I'll hazard to sound like a quack psychologist or a voodoo scientist with the following anecdote. Back in the 90s, I consulted some books by Norman Lewis to enrich my vocabulary in the English language. He would split a compound English word into its basic constituents to uncover its Greek or Latin root to show how the same root has contributed to creating many words in English. When he was dissecting the word *disaster* and was discussing its origin, I was struck. It combines a negative prefix, *dis*, and a Greek word, *astron*, which stands for "star" in English. The ancient Greeks used to look at the alignment of the stars in the sky to predict luck. When the stars were in bad alignment, it presaged a disaster. Years later, it was déjà vu all over again for me when I came across the similar ancient Chinese concept, *Feng Shui*. *Feng Shui* harmonizes cosmic and spiritual forces with houses or surroundings that humans inhabit to ensure happiness, success, and creativity. The import of both *disaster* and *Feng Shui* is clear: Humans can't force themselves to be happy or creative until they reconcile with the forces and factors around and above.

The pandemic, however, is an opportunity for us to slow down to restore our inner self, as Professor Lightman suggests in his article in *The Atlantic*. Our beliefs and values seem problematic. Our understanding and management of time and space require modification. We must stop pretending that we own the world. We must acknowledge that we're a tiny part of an ecosystem that is complex and organic. We need to have a harmonious coexistence with the spatial and temporal cycles of our life. When that happens, we can draw upon a collective fount of intelligence and empathy. We're, then, empowered to weather this pandemic. So, the pandemic will pass. In the meantime, I say my earnest prayer for all of us, as T.S. Eliot did in *The Waste Land*, "Shantih Shantih Shantih."

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jolted to pause and ponder so that we will be able to molt anew. Scientists and psychologists as well as poets and priests are now grieving alike. Everyone, however, is not completely consumed by their helplessness. Some of them do look forward to the times ahead to remind us some of the silver-lining of the pandemic.

A crushing pandemic is not all bad, not even COVID-19. Professor Alan Lightman, a physicist at MIT, in his recent article, "The Virus Is a Reminder of Something Lost Long Ago," in *The Atlantic*, claims that the pandemic

are more than workers. We're social, emotional, and cognitive creatures. We need unstructured, beckoning time to imagine as well as to socialize. Whether menial or white-collar, jobs these days overwhelm and turn someone brilliant into someone dutiful. Now that the pandemic has slowed us down and has given many of us back full access to our time, we can waste some of it for the first time we can remember.

Wasting time is as important as utilizing it, as Lightman claims in *In Praise of Wasting Time*. Our mind fatigues. It needs to rest. A restless mind

POETRY

Like a Blink of an Eye

SYEDA SAMARA MORTADA

One year goes by in the blink of an eye
But the memories remain as livid as ever.
Like silver handcuffs, they remain encased
Like cold metal, biting into fresh flesh.

The beeping machines, the white wish-wash
Clasped to perfection, sterile blue gowns like machine guns.
Your scent, there too I smelt
Your Brut cologne, my familiar safety.

Sometimes rustic, sometimes drastic
The dreams I dream too real.
Like your buttoned-up shirts, crisply lined in folded shrines
In your closet, like the graves stocked up in a new graveyard.
A peck on the shoulder, as if you are standing right behind me
A silent sunlit-smile, at the end of a hard day's ride.

But this too shall pass, like the blink of an eye
This life, this world-uneternal.
And we will meet again, tomorrow or day after
At the start of a new dawn.
Like the first chapter of a book.
A new recipe waiting to be cooked.
A new grave, waiting to be booked.
We shall yet again meet, when the sand turns cold-sweet
And the grey wind, blue gold.

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Barricaded Dream, Detained Sun

YASIF FAYSAL

Now that we are fortunate enough
to be left behind,
we have time to talk gaily,
in the strange air of this summer,
of how we could be the ones
like them to go,
as we lounge listlessly
over the terrace where
a yellow cat creeps to surprise a sick rat.
The ice-cream man has stopped coming,
and now little angels within four walls cry
blind without their wings,
doors open backward into silent room,
and copper-road, like god in fury, reflects

empty sun.
Now that we are left behind,
we press clichéd lips into tired prayer,
"we will be good."
"all will be good"-
we murmur in our barricaded dream,
under the detained sun.
The delicate sky that roofs our still-
unbroken heads,
have collapsed upon millions-
to their earthen beds, they all run.

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