

We invited you to share your poems about how we live through and respond to crises.

We were delighted with the response. Your poems covered the initial confusion of being in lockdown and strategies for coping with confinement. You also wrote about new customs and behaviours, trying to do our best to help, finding solace in reading, as well as ways of coming to terms with and adapting to these extraordinary times.

We also have two poems looking at how societies and individuals have addressed similar pandemics in the past.

We conclude with an “optimistic” nod to the future.

Sun’s corona at home

In the delicious isolation
sky stares blue, empty of white writing

puzzled birds loss of fret
unsures their carry and scuttle,
freight or rush

Rush and sedge
at the empty edge
wedge whispers in empty hollows

as fledgeless children forget to shriek
uncertain at their endless blue freedom

Julian Barker

Enforced houseboundness

Timeless house arrest;
catch up - chores, books left aside?
Too busy; no time.

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Cabin fever means
confinement to some, but to
others abstinence-

-from what may herald
confinement nine months hence - when
we are unconfined?

Timothy Chambers

Head-space

As safe as houses
Large gardens, country lanes
Social distancing on the edge of town
Replaying familiar routes whilst staying home.

Cocoon, bubble, family unit
Endless weekend feeling
Wifi, Netflix, Houseparty, Zoom
Underlying guilt...

Overwhelming community spirit
Online groups, grocery deliveries
Clapping at 8pm with neighbourly echoes
Poignantly emotional connections.

Visceral reality: news headlines
Work deadlines, frontline colleagues
One bedroom flats, public transport
Public parks, food banks, furlough.

Avoidance, anger, fear, fury

Hope?

Briony Hudson

This poem by GP Jenny Stephenson reflects on the devotional Christian writings of John Donne from 1623 while he was in isolation with a feverish illness. 'No Man is an Island' referred to the fact that in normal circumstances people live closely together, and that we learn to feel each other's pain, making each other stronger by mutual support. GPs are doing most of their work by phone during this pandemic in order to contain its spread.

A Poem of the Pandemic

Every man is an Island now,
Against our natural thought;
Surrounded by deep, deep water
Two metres on each side;
'Stay at Home' the slogans say
'To save our NHS'
To not be selfish in times like this
Or love our neighbours less.



I sit alone with a cup of tea
My computer at the ready -
The conduit for the flow of woe -
My patients at the end of phone
With their quests and queries, fears alone
Needing advice, diagnosis, support and care
In a way without seeing them, as if
Suspended in the air.



This silent assassin prowls about
Seeking whom he may devour
Assess, act quickly, advise or reassure
And trace a path for if things change
Acknowledging my lack of
Omniscience.
Hold tightly on while things move apace
'Till islands join the mainland of a better place.



Jenny Stephenson

His Friends

Are they his friends
as they in their way
over many a year
so befriended him?

In sleepless nights
his worries usurped
by cleverly contrived
convoluted plots.

Or in his
youth pacified
imaginings of
sexual pleasures.

Or occupied
his restless thoughts
on lonely walks
retracing events long gone.

Or in that time
craving for knowledge
generously provided
but perhaps too much.

Or those which
filled his leisure
such now a treasure
of past times still

They are his friends
and so will remain
for reasons legion:
his much loved books.

Alan Emery

Broken

Gliding, drifting.
Savouring dreamscapes,
But focused ahead
Clarity on a crisp, bright morning.

Staring, reacting.
A reservoir of time,
Before the stillness.
Disbelief wrapped in fragile aluminium.

Escaping, stumbling.
Flashing lights
And calming voices.
Resigned to the inquisition of strangers.

Lying, breathing.
Helpless whimpers
Of a restless soul.
Mirrors reflect a shadow of 'self'.

Falling, sitting.
Fearful determination
And unyielding support.
The fog sits heavy on the horizon.

Hoping, imagining.
The mind ripostes.
The body yielding,
Glimpses of illumination.

Susannah La-Touche

Carolyn Henry was a respected Australian artist whose images were popular on greetings and get-well cards. She died in hospital very recently with end stage cancer and, because of the covid virus, was only able to receive visits from close family.

An Ode to Carolyn Henry.

For people recovering, and as fractures set,
Undergoing chemo and wondering what to expect,
One looks through your cards for a greeting to send,
With all good wishes, for success in the end.
And now to you, Carolyn, that message is sent!

Peter Burke



The island of the Lazzaretto Vecchio, Venice. From the first onslaught of the Black Death in the 14th century, Venice set up an Archipelago delle Malattia, a shield of islands to protect her from infections. This island once housed a church, St Mary of Nazareth, corrupted to Lazaret and then Lazzaretto, the origin of the term. Sailors, travellers and merchandise passed forty days here before entering Venice, this being the time thought sufficient to see if they would develop the plague. Suspected patients were brought here from Venice for the same reason. The arriving merchants' wools, cottons, woods and spices were passed through smoke medicated with juniper and rosemary. Letters from plague-countries were doused in vinegar. Sailors and ordinary travellers were accommodated in the vast teson, or halls. Noble and rich travellers stayed in some luxury in the mansion of the priora who managed the island. The teson are now restored by the priora's house remains a spectacular ruin.

The question of the worm

Modern pilgrims, each with his own God,
a consultant in infectious diseases
two specialists in contaminated mail,
an architect, the man from Conzorzio Venezia Nuova
and me, I sell words
all slipping over a sea that glisters like spilt molasses
under a moonwhite sun. Our boat snouts into a jetty
tottering on children's legs. We cross a bridge held up
almost by metaphor alone into Plague.
The island's so deserted that even death has left it now.
We walk the empty teson of the lazaretto,
shallow ripples of conversation flattening
till only the tall brick walls speak,
thickly: written in red ochre, the names of ships
and tallies of ghostly goods.
Outside vines and grasses clutch soil and stone,
roots feeding on ten thousand corpses, thanking them
with the perfume of sage and bruised petal,
while cicadas thrum the plans of the wistful dead.

The architect pulls aside a plastic curtain
'Eccociqua,' he says, 'Here we are'.
It is like a surprise party and we are the surprise.
The other guests sit seriously in plastic crates,
piled in towers, a miniature city.
We lower our heads and cameras
want to laugh, want to cry, anything
but meet each others' eyes. Three hundred of them,
a broken fraction of the island's buried treasure brought to the light.
Suddenly we're naked without a stitch of an excuse,

we are disinfected of our curiosity, cleansed by proper shame.

That night, when I pulled my shirt over my head, a worm
inched down my arm, a snipped thread of green so intense that
only ten centuries of ancestral eating could have distilled it.
The thread bent itself into a questing question-mark.
But the questions were mine. Had it made a bid
to rejoin the living? Or did it beckon to me to join the dead?
Me, I told the worm, I sell words.
Give me time, and I'll write you an answer.

Michelle Lovric



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The Ebola Crisis, Liberia, 2014

A mother gives birth in the street,
People stand idly by
not helping, snapping on their phones
while she and the baby die.
Even a Pharisee would have passed by on the other side.

Others collect the bodies
for burial or cremation,
risking life and reputation
for a job that has to be done –
Good Samaritans, every one.

Frances Lee

Submission

Blue skies, sun shine smiles
Birds singing at notes too high
Hand in hand, a walk, a sigh
Will this reality let live or die

For those alone, my heart weeps
A change of freedom, cannot speak
Cannot see the pain or fear
Rejection, isolation does not hear

Submit I must, survive I will
I trust the time will be here still
Will I be different when you see me next?
I suspect, I will. I will, I suspect.

Maria Thomas