

Dispatches From A Pandemic

By Members of the Rehoboth Beach Writers Guild



I. Our Shifting Landscape

Paul Dyer, Don Roth, Jane Klein, Victor Letonoff, Jr., Walter F. Curran, Eugene Anthony Garone, Jeff Applebaum, Maureen Rouhi, Judy Catterton

Mardi Gras

By Paul Dyer

As a New Orleans neophyte, I'd assumed that Mardi Gras was a *day* of celebration. Fat Tuesday. Seemed self-evident.

Incorrect. A complete misunderstanding of The Big Easy mentality. The first hint of the celebration is two parades on Twelfth Night in early January. Things go quiet for the rest of the month—quiet being a relative term in NOLA where the party never really stops.

February brings weekend parades, culminating in the last week before the big day—a constant riot of costumed social clubs called Krewes marching through town. My instant favorite is the Krewe of Cork, a wine-soaked affair whose leadership wisely plans a parade of only a few blocks through the French Quarter. I have petitioned for membership.

The day itself, February 25th this year, the big Krewes roll, Zulu and Rex, with the King of Carnival enthroned on his float. The celebration ends at midnight when the mayor rides horseback through the streets of the Quarter.

February 26th. Hangovers aside, the warm feelings of a hugely successful Mardi Gras linger. No dread hanging in the air. Covid-19 not yet on anyone's tongue. One million visitors from all over the world heading home. *From all over the world.*

Two weeks later, the dying starts. On March 16th, the edict comes down. On March 17th, the artists are gone from Jackson Square. Bourbon Street is vacant. My footsteps echo on the deserted streets, and Willie is in my head singing,

"Turn out the lights

The party's over"

Go Nats

By Don Roth

My wife Jackie and I are ardent Washington Nationals fans. We both were looking forward to attending one of their spring training games at the new stadium 15 minutes away from our Florida home. As March 2020 came, Jackie started running a fever, accompanied by chills, a sore throat and stomach pains. After trying a Z-Pack that did absolutely no good, the doctor's orders were quite clear: "Stay away from Don, schedule a COVID-19 test at the new ballpark drive-through, and call me when you get the results."

It took four days to get an appointment. After 62 years of marriage we took alternate turns in the kitchen, and hid from each other, terrified in lonely opposite ends of the house.

When the test day finally arrived, I didn't need directions. I'd driven by that parking field so many times. How ironic that we were coming to where the Nats train and play on this grim mission. We lined up in one of the four lanes approaching the first of three tents. The National Guard men and women policing the lines were a blend of helpful, friendly and deadly serious. At the first tent they checked ID and wrote on the windshield. At the second tent they produced an envelope to match the ID and tucked it under a wiper blade. At the third tent, the only one where we rolled down a window, a nurse in protective gear took the envelope and administered the test. The only words spoken were "you'll hear in three to five business days."

Six more agonizing days went by with Jackie dashing to answer every time her phone rang. At last, she came running to my end of the house, wrapped her arms around me, and kept repeating what ironically was the best word I have ever heard: *Negative, negative, negative.*

The Aliens

By Jane Klein

At last, the aliens described in sci fi novels have arrived, and we weren't ready. Although we see pictures every day of how they appear, the naked eye can't detect them. The wars we imagined with hand-to-hand combat and futuristic weapons are nowhere to be seen. It's what's unseen that's stalking us, robbing us of what we seem to feel is our right to freedom. Not in America, we say.

Only Bill Gates can prove he imagined this new world in which we live. He warned us in the TED Talk he gave in 2015. Most of us have never given much thought

to how life worldwide might change if a novel virus couldn't be contained. Enter COVID-19.

Now we have the terms and concepts of social distance: six feet apart, self-quarantining, wearing masks to protect others, twenty-second handwashing, drive-by pickup dinners at the fanciest restaurants, boardwalks and beaches closing, hugging stopping, handshakes banned, and whatever you do, don't touch your face! Then there is toilet paper hoarding, meat disappearing, not enough Lysol, scarce hand sanitizers, and here is one of the creative new good things: Zoom happy hours. No haircutting or coloring, all nails growing, no need for fancy clothing and no jobs or school. Stay home.

It's hard to imagine all this change occurred in 2020, which is only four months old. We can't see the aliens, but at the moment they're in charge and have changed our lives forever.

Out-of-State Refugees

By Victor Letonoff Jr.

March 31, 2020: The City of Rehoboth Beach has police officers conducting check points at the entrances to the city, stopping vehicles with out-of-state plates, making sure that whoever is coming into town is aware of the 14-day quarantine. The problems: first, it really pisses people off; second, it exposes officers—and possibly their families—to unneeded contact with the public.

April 1, 2020: I receive an e-mail from the Chief of Police to drop by an address where people from New York are staying. I am to inform them of the mandated quarantine for out-of-state visitors. The man who comes to the door is in his mid-thirties. He tells me he came from 23rd Street, New York City—the current epicenter of the virus. He has a sophisticated air about him, but he isn't pretentious, only scared, seeking shelter for himself, his wife and two small children. He is doing what a husband and father should do. He tells me he is aware of the quarantine, that his family has already been quarantined for five days, and will continue for nine more.

Later that afternoon as I pass the residence, I see two small girls jumping rope on the porch. Their giggles echo, then burst into joyous shrieks, and I'm struck by the realization that they aren't shouldering any of the burdens their father is, that in this moment they can remain carefree, unaware of the fear their being here has created.

Dealing With It

By Walter F. Curran

Loneliness is a state of mind.

I've been lonely most of my adult life. Sailing in the merchant marine, away from home, wife, and friends for three months or more at a time.

Working 24 and 48-hour shifts on the docks in Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Jacksonville and San Juan.

Coming home only on weekends for the last 10 years I worked.

But knowing there was always someone there waiting to hug and kiss me was the saving grace. Not a cure. There is no cure for loneliness. Reunion is only a balm, a palliative, easing the pain.

On the first day of my retirement, I sat my wife down and said,

“This is your house.

“This is your life.

“I have been a visitor to this house and life for a long time.

“Now, I’m no longer a visitor. I live here...full time. I will do my best to respect your lifestyle, but, as much as I try, I can’t read your mind. You need to tell me if I am getting in your space; on your nerves. Don’t presume I know. Tell me.”

Until COVID-19 disrupted our lives, her sweet voice was silent...stoic. Now, lovingly, she tells me...sometimes more than once.

Now, after 51 years of coping with loneliness, we grapple with togetherness.

Togetherness is infinitely more difficult.

But we persevere, remembering the loneliness.

Getting By

By Eugene Anthony Garone

At first, we were afraid,
now we’re petrified.

We keep thinking how we’ll all get by
just staying months inside.

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How will we get along?
Would our love just fade or grow?
A day or so was what we thought,
but somehow now we know.

It might be weeks, it might be months,
or even several years;
quarantined at home they say
diminishes our fears.

The bars and diners all are closed
We can't eat out any more.
The only place where we can go
is to the grocery store.

Together at the store we shop.
Six feet we have to stay.
If we wash and scrub our hands with soap
they say we'll be okay.

We grab a cart and wipe it down
to pick up things to cook.
Better follow arrows on the floor
or we'll get a dirty look.

No bleach or tissues on the shelves.
Not like it was before.
And toilet paper can't be found.
There just isn't any more.

So let's stay home, I'll take a pill.
We'll make love day and night.
If the virus doesn't kill me first,
a heart attack just might!

Going Viral

By Jeff Applebaum

Lower Slower Delaware. I came for the food and stayed for the mood.

A magnificent natural environment with a relaxed yet very active population in an aura of tolerance, caring and respect. Wow! These folks make eye contact, are considerate, and so happy to be here. I felt at home. And bright. And safe.

The ocean waited for my visits. Hand-holding lovers levitated down The Avenue. So many smiles from those happy to share their time and cheerful feelings.

Not all was idyllic, though. Full-timers anguished over in-season density with tourists dragging along attitudes, traffic and long waits. But I learned: \$3,000 a week for your rental property made the despair easier to bear. Anything was tolerable for a few months.

Or so we thought.

Then came February. Like an interrupted hungry lion drooling over its fresh kill, “breaking news” pounced often and vigorously.” Coronavirus! Coronavirus! Coronavirus is spreading world-wide human and financial catastrophe! Stay at home! Do not touch! Disinfect! No beaches, no restaurants and no visitors at home or hospital.”

Welcome To Delaware Beaches signs were replaced with “Go Away” checkpoints and quarantine mandates. Businesses, jobs, education, elections and worship were tagged “non-essential” or dangerous. Drones overhead and on the airwaves bellowed alerts and threats and panic. Separate! Isolate! Alienate!

Yes, I am irreversibly attracted to this environment and its residents. But it became real, too, that if I die soon, I will die alone in what was once, for me, tranquility in Lower Slower Delaware.

Praying with Dad

By Maureen Rouhi

At 2:30 p.m. my phone rings. I talk to my Dad for 45 minutes. This is now a daily item on my schedule. We say the rosary, pray to St. Michael the Archangel and our guardian angels, and pray for the Pope and the beatification of Legion of Mary founder Frank Duff. Dad sits before a makeshift altar for the Virgin Mary he sets on his bed. I walk around a lake or in the woods nearby or, on a rainy day, around the dining room. Above all we pray for the atonement of sins and relief from the pandemic.

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At 95, Dad is healthy but with poor hearing and little vision. Sheltering-in-place eliminated his already-few outings to IHOP and Giant. Worst of all is not being able to visit Mom's grave to clear the weeds, refresh the flowers, and light candles. Nevertheless, prayer remains constant.

Since Mom died, Dad has prayed daily for many people, souls in purgatory, and others who have no one else to pray for them. I used to join him in his room every other week. When sheltering-in-place became necessary, I suggested the phone call. Now we are together in prayer more often than ever. The company gives him joy. I've become his regular prayer multiplier, amplifying his supplications for the end of the pandemic.

Stop Calling Me “The Elderly”

By Judy Catteron

I know I'm old. I can do the math. Most baby boomers were in diapers when I was in high school. It's been decades since my mid-life crisis. I see the changes in my body and my mind. My mirror reflects the years I've faced.

The list of things I can no longer do grows longer by the month. Running became jogging; jogging became walking.

When I gather with contemporaries, we joke about what we can't remember. Three of us share cocktails and try to recall the name of that famous actor on the prow of the Titanic. Sometimes a conversation halts until one of us can either remember a simple noun or get the answer from Mr. Google. It's a guessing game: what's that thing in the kitchen that warms your food? The green herb you put in pasta sauce is called? We laugh, all the while knowing it's really no joke.

But no matter how I add up the number of my years, no matter the tally of my losses, I feel there's still much life to be lived.

So, please don't remind me of my advanced age 100 times a day. Don't talk so dismissively about “the elderly” on T.V. and tell me how much at risk I am or worse, make it seem I'm expendable. Ok, my age *is* a pre-existing condition that might make me more vulnerable to this virus. But you actually make me short of breath when you call me old.

II. The Way We Live Now

Willie Schatz, Denise Clemons, Carole Guerard, Renay Regardie, Sharon Hoover, Mary Ann Hoyt, Carl Frey, Judy Wood, Gayla Sullivan, Ginny Daly, Karen Ferguson, Meg Ellacott, Rita Nelson, Sarah Barnett, Karen Schneiderman

Safe at Home?

By Willie Schatz

Home
but not alone
Home
where the heart is
because it must be
Home
where tomorrow,
demain,
mañana,
grows more precious
because you fear
you won't
have another
Home
where the promises
you've put off forever
become urgent so
you can cross
them off
The List
Home
your last refuge?

Lather, Rinse, Repeat

By Denise Clemons

Each day feels like the instructions on my shampoo bottle: lather, rinse, repeat. Without structure and order and obligation, my life has an amorphous quality. I can't feel the edges. I don't know whether I should expect the Sunday comics or the Wednesday food section when I open the newspaper.

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Outside my window, the natural world persists in the familiar cycle of bloom and green, oblivious to the fundamental shift in our experience. It seems such a contradiction for us to mark the relentless numbers of dead while trees and grass and flowers flaunt their exuberant life.

Although I have unencumbered time, I can't seem to summon the energy to use it wisely—write a poem, knit a scarf, photograph the odd slant of light in the marsh. Perhaps I should write to my distant friends or call my family, to share my bewilderment and look for hope.

I am not complaining—I have food and shelter and, so far, my health. I will continue placing one foot in front of the other, run another load of laundry, feed the cats, sweep the steps, vacuum the living room and wash my hands again.

And tomorrow, after coffee, I will take a shower. Lather, rinse, repeat.

Alone

By Carole Guerard

“Play Sunny Radio,” I request in my normal voice. No response. I try again in a louder, more authoritative voice. “Alexa, play Sunny Radio.” Within seconds my favorite station starts playing. Alexa will not respond unless I call her by name. Seriously? She is the only other voice in this house besides me. To whom does she think I am speaking? I do realize she is not a person. I haven’t gone that far off the deep end—or have I?

“You are absolutely stunning and look how you’ve grown,” I say proudly to ZZ. Again, no response, but none was expected. ZZ is one of four houseplants purchased back in the normal days of January. Despite the minimal sun these plants have received lately, they are thriving. I talk sweetly to them and encourage them not to give up. Do I wish they could respond with similar accolades? Well, maybe I do. Is that so wrong?

Who couldn’t use a few strokes right now?

“Hey, you got dressed before noon—way to go.”

“Kudos to you for emptying the sink of dirty dishes (even though you have a dishwasher).”

“You finally got off the couch after bingeing on Outlander...smashing!”

Not hearing any such praise from these voiceless housemates, I resort to internal dialogue. Internal dialogue can become external at times. No worries. Only the plants and Alexa witness me talking to myself. Wait, Alexa can’t hear unless I say her name—or can she?

Game On

By Renay Regardie

It's 4:30 in the afternoon. We push ourselves off the sofa in the den, toss aside our Kindles, and move to our game table. Some days the sun is shining, sending dappled streams of light over the table, but more often it's overcast, throwing a pallor of greyness around us as we set up the backgammon board.

Maybe the bleakness is because the terrace, stretching the width of the living room behind us, is unkempt, the plantings half dead. No one has tended them since the irrigation system was turned off last winter. Vines spill untamed out of pots. The bamboo planted along the windows, now a mix of green, yellow and brown, has grown haphazardly, minimizing the light that filters into the living room. The plants will stay like this until the pandemic is over. Only owners are allowed now in our condominium building, and my husband and I are clueless as to how to tend a garden.

We sit across from each other, adversaries at the game table. I'm in the seat facing the terrace. We've been dueling at backgammon for over a month. At first, we jabbered a lot, but now we play silently, determinedly. The score is eight to four, and it's not in my favor.

I know there's a virus outside our door and I don't want to let it in. In these moments all I know is, I want to win.



The Rhythm of Days

By Sharon Hoover

The regular flow of days in “lockdown,” the quality of not being disturbed, pleases me.

The mockingbird flits from holly to garden to gazebo back to holly, swooping deep into the center to feed its young. Again and again. Passels of chirping young sparrows fly in a small mass along the eaves. The house finches are missing. Perhaps they are sitting on nests. I see only the male cardinal occasionally now. I eagerly wait to see young ones. The heron gracefully arcs onto the pond.

The green leaves of the winged elms fill the background between earth and blue sky.

But I need to leave off the leisure of watching the day. I have work to do.

Every day, I stretch with online yoga or do outdoor tai chi with six of us or work one-on-one with the in-house trainer.

Every day, I find time for writing, reading, playing each of my recorders, listening online to music lessons and to Piffaro, a Renaissance band.

Every day, I take time to send letters and texts to grandchildren, children, close friends, those compromised. I feel more closely connected.

Chores, too, enter the rhythm of days—water the plants, do the laundry, make meals, housekeep.

Where did I find time pre-lockdown to lunch with friends, practice with ensembles, wander in the library, sit on the beach? Those things are wonderful.

But wonderful, too, is knowing the relaxed rhythm of days that follow days in a grounded fashion.

My Essential Trips to the Grocery Store

By Mary Ann Hoyt

I used to enjoy going to the grocery store just around the corner. I'd go in for pork chops and end up hanging out with the Hallmark cards. And because I'm a marketer's dream, I'd leave the store with the newest shade of L'Oreal blush and the latest twist on salted caramel ice cream.

Now, my weekly *essential* trip to the grocery store is a dreaded work-in-progress. It was helpful when they made the aisles *one way* and painted arrows on the floor for people like me. Trouble is, I forget to look down. I walk fast to begin with, and now

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with the pandemic, I walk faster in the grocery store to escape the germs. Last week, I nearly caused a ten cart pileup by racing in the wrong direction, as I was about to round a corner. Everyone seemed impressed with my quick reflexes in making a U-turn.

I've been wearing my homemade mask out of a pillow case I saw on the Internet. I proudly sent a photo to our kids on my iPhone and was told it looked like a diaper. I guess that's why nobody could hear me in the store when I asked a question; and probably why I was gasping for breath by the time I left, with everybody running from me as if I had the virus.

By the way, to my fellow shoppers—the mask didn't cover your eye rolls.

Where Has the Day Gone?

By Carl Frey

My quarantine time is so chock-a-block full I can hardly catch my breath. First, I have to get up in the morning after a mere nine hours in bed. It takes a good twenty minutes to rise, wash the sleep from my eyes and select my wardrobe for the day. The blue sweats or the gray? Slicing a banana over a bowl of cold cereal takes a while. I really must sharpen this knife one of these days. After a leisurely breakfast I login for an online free write. Employing my hunt-and-peck typing style, developed over years of self-training, means an online write takes a lot longer than the five minutes Tom allows when we meet in a room, most likely swirling with viral particles. At a real free write, words just flow from my pen—at the keyboard, not so much. Is it lunchtime already? Over a painstakingly prepared sandwich of peanut butter and jelly I watch the sanitation truck slowly empty curbside trash containers. That's always entertaining. I blocked off two hours in my schedule to read a few chapters of a turgid Russian novel I've been plowing through. Supper. I'm glad my wife has taken charge because I don't think I could rouse the energy required to prepare chicken and vegetables and rice and have it come together into something resembling a meal. For relaxation I watch a clever, black and white Noel Coward movie on TV. This excitement is killing me. Time for bed.

Missing

By Judy Wood

My husband is sitting at the table finishing his breakfast and studying his phone. "Have you seen it?" I ask him.

"Have I seen what?" His eyes never move from his phone.

“My smile. I’ve been looking for it and I can’t find it.”

This gets his attention. He looks up at me and without hesitation says, “Now that you mention it, I haven’t seen it for a while. When did you have it last?”

“That’s just it. I can’t remember. I know I had it on my birthday because we had that fun family party even though it was on Zoom. Maybe it went missing when the Safeway announced special shopping hours for the elderly? Or maybe I lost it when the governor closed the beach and the boardwalk? Oh, I know, I’m sure I haven’t seen it since our daughter-in-law’s dad cautioned us not to let the grandchildren anywhere near us because they might kill us.”

Now my husband is fully engaged. “How hard have you tried to find it? It can’t have gone far. I know, have you tried laughing? I’m pretty sure it’s impossible not to smile if you laugh.”

“Great idea. All I have to do is to think of something funny.”

I try. Nothing. I make another attempt. This time I make a sound, but it’s not a laugh. It’s more reminiscent of the noise the crows have been making outside our window, a high pitched, raspy caw.

I post a plea on the internet. Lost: a smile. Please contact me ASAP.

Colorado COVID

By Gayla Sullivan

The Rocky Mountains loom large over my town, and unlike city dwellers, I can step outside of my home at 7,500 feet and find solitude on a hiking trail within minutes, breathe cold mountain air and temporarily forget about the ravages of COVID-19. Like other educators who have been thrown into the world of online teaching, I feel exhilarated when I press the Leave Meeting button on Zoom after telling my six year-old students one more time, “No, I don’t want to see a tour of your house” and “Please don’t show me how you do a back flip off your mom’s bed.” For some reason, staring at a screen of colleagues during a meeting arranged in a grid like the Brady Bunch seems less exhausting than being in a room full of people. I can wear just sweatpants (or no pants!) and only the top half of me must look decent enough. I can press mute and no one can hear my husband from the bathroom calling for more toilet paper! I can press the tiny icon of the video camera to “off” if I need to scratch my nose or readjust my bra. And finally a perk of living in the mountains of Colorado—if you want to just leave the video session and your image blinks to black—well, people just assume it’s your lousy Internet.

Page from a Pandemic Diary

By Ginny Daly

Months into a pandemic and I've been spending time purging.

May 1. A bittersweet day. Always.

May 1, 1987: the day we found my beautiful sister Eileen had taken her life. Unspeakably sad and traumatic.

May 1, 2006: after a long line of boys, niece Tara named her baby girl for me. Humbling and over-the-moon joyful!

May 1. A big complicated day. Always.

Late April 1987, I bought 10 pairs of cute striped knee socks with colorful toes to give to my sisters, nieces, friends. Eileen loved hers! Thus began "The Sisterhood of the Striped Socks."

Eileen was quite the lady but had a mischievous streak to go with the twinkle in her blue eyes. The Sisterhood decided nothing would do but that under those formal funeral clothes Eileen should wear her striped socks. We did. She did.

In 2015 we buried my sister Markie in her pair.

Every May Day I wear my sisterhood striped socks. I take solace from this odd sort of memorial touchstone to my sisters.

Today the socks virtually attended my namesake's pandemic-style birthday party, a noisy fun drive-by parade, adding a happy wacky event to their long history. The socks are then hand washed and tucked away until next year.

So what to keep after this Universal Pandemic Purge? Mom's sterling silver? Well, yes.

The copies of everything I have ever written? Nah, probably not.

My striped Sisterhood Sox? Hell, yes!

They're going to the grave with me.

Making Do

By Karen Ferguson

Making do—a phrase my Depression-era mother used. Oh, how I understand that now. I wish she were here so I could tell her. I used to roll my eyes when I'd watch her preserve the smallest piece of onion or the heel from a (stale) loaf of bread. The

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refrigerator used to be full of the tiniest morsels of leftovers, hardly enough for even one person.

Mom would actually get emotional if she saw me throw out what she saw as completely usable—plastic bread bags, potpie tins. I remember being embarrassed in restaurants as she would slip remaining lemon wedges into her napkin to take home.

But now I find myself keeping absolutely everything I can in case stores run out or I can't get to them. I'm down to two "meals" a day, sometimes eating leftovers for three days. Not much variety—it seems I'm always missing at least one ingredient in even a simple recipe. Mealtime has become more about sustenance than enjoyment. Once in a while, I order take-out or delivery—it's Christmas!

Who knew all the stories my mother told me about the Depression would resonate with me now. Yet, there is relative abundance—I'm not down to a stale piece of bread.

Amazingly, gratitude kicks in.

Girl Scout Cookies

By Meg Ellacott

I know I should be reaching out to friends about feeling lonely, but I can't. As the days tick by, I cower inside my home. Instead of shopping for groceries, I'm afraid to step foot inside the store. Instead of taking trail walks, I second-guess every decision. What happened to that brave young woman I once was? What's wrong with me that instead of focusing on important things, all I can think about is Girl Scout cookies? Perhaps I know if I focused on the big things floating inside my head I might fall apart.

I tell myself the Girl Scouts needed me to buy their cookies. I *had* to do my part, *had* to buy not one, but *six* boxes. Girl Scouts depend on their cookie program. I know because I was once a Brownie, then a Girl Scout. I remember beaming with pride when chosen to carry that giant American flag in the annual Brownie parade. I remember how invincible I felt leading our troop into the camp grounds.

When the cookies first arrived, I thought of how, in the beginning of the pandemic, I vowed to remain strong and healthy. I would eat salads and fruit. I would use this time well.

This pandemic shows us who we are. What we're really made of. Right now I don't like what I see in myself. I need to find the strong, unflappable girl I once was.

And I will...once I finish this box of Thin Mints!

Pandemic Pandemonium

By Rita Nelson

I have found that showering once a week is acceptable because I don't sweat, don't roll in the dirt, and no one has told me I smell. My morning pajamas are bright and cheerful to keep my spirits up. My nighttime pajamas are plastered with the calming figures of sleeping emojis. I had to cut back on my meals from three to two and am thinking about going to small snacks once a day because I am porking on the pounds. We'd moved all the furniture around so we could social distance in the house, until the governor said we didn't have to do that *in* the house. Thanks be to God because I had to ask Ralph to sleep in the bathtub. I go out begging neighbors for spare rolls of toilet paper and paper towels, but have given up on hand sanitizer so long as my bar soap lasts. I have decided when/if this is all over, I will ban the word ZOOM from my vocabulary because I'm getting eye fatigue from all those ZOOM meetings, church services, and not-so-cheery messages from my governor. I have found online shopping now takes half a century for anything to get delivered, and in-store grocery shopping is a one-way, one-at-a-time nightmare with more empty than full shelves. I may have to start eating the grass outside, and pretend I'm a cow. Moooooo.

Will You Look at This?

By Sarah Barnett

March 22—I should write. Instead, I watch video of an adorable yellow dog nosing a blanket over a sleeping baby. I'll write later.

How easily “later” becomes “too late.”

Thursday, maybe Friday—Am I living the same day over and over? Even Blue knows our morning walks are pointless. Outside he stands motionless, considering, *Where might we meet a person, another dog?* Some days he howls in loneliness.

April already—Empty boxes on my calendar. I'm a born introvert, a life-long social distancer. Lighthouse keepers and forest rangers spend months in isolation. Could I live like that? Or would loneliness eventually overpower the peace of solitude?

Second Friday—I keep a “fauna diary”: *robin with worm; two ducks asleep by the pool; neighbor walking dog makes Blue happy.*

Sunday or Monday?—Neighbors being neighborly. One brings sugar cookies with a “Happy to know you” post-it attached. Another delivers three daffodils to my door.

Late April. Half-hour before sunset—Sunlight streams through layers of dark clouds, illuminating random objects, turning this modest neighborhood into a museum

painting. A square of light frames one window of a darkened house. Stop sign exhibits eerie radiance. Backlit by the sun, the sparse leaves on the trees glow gold against the streaky sky. Later, puffy clouds turn cotton-candy pink.

“Will you look at this?” I want to say to someone. But no one is around.

Confronting the Terror of a Cherry Dip

By Karen Schneiderman

It's a late spring day like any other—no, not really. We're living in a new normal. A new normal with my sister and brother-in-law lying in adjoining ICU rooms. We're antsy with worry piling on top of quarantine fatigue. And the grandchildren, four and eight, need a distraction. We, my daughter and my husband and I, need a distraction, with eight family members vying for space in the same house.

We circle the ocean block of Rehoboth Avenue. The front of Dairy Queen is open wide. Yes! No door to touch. Perfect. Perfect too because the kids recently discovered the rapture of a DQ Cherry Dip. We study the situation from the car. We can't go in yet—there are three kids milling about without masks. Maybe they're waiting for sundaes? I put on my mask and get out to survey the situation. Okay, they're gone, but now another couple has gotten in line. My daughter gets out of the car. “We have to find out if the server is wearing gloves and a mask,” she says. I squint from the perimeter. He is, but then he takes the gloves off to take some cash. Germ-ridden cash? Alarm bells ring. I wait and watch. Finally, he washes his hands and puts on new gloves. Relief. But I can't hold back the tears. Is this really our life now? How can I face everything else when I'm so afraid of buying a cherry dip?



III. Life On Pause

Irene Fick, Ellen Collins, Kathryn Racette, Kathleen Martens, Ellie Maher, Patty Bennett, Shelley Kahn, Kevin Fidgeon, Carolyn Fidgeon, Barbara Hames, Marjorie Weber, Maribeth Fischer

The Prolonged Pause

By Irene Fick

“I’m re-writing my obituary,” I announce to Ed, who looks up, nods, then continues reading the paper.

Like so many these days, I am focused on mortality, living with an undercurrent of fear. An ordinary ache morphs into unease. Is this the dreaded virus? Fear shadows all of us, strips us of our usual conceits.

Despite the feeling of fragility, or maybe because of it, I am savoring the lockdown, this prolonged pause in our lives. Such a bizarre bubble of free time. More boundaries, yet ironically, more breathing room. A slowing of the pulse.

I cherished my “old” life and know it will return once this passes. For now, however, my inner introvert has emerged, embraced the respite. I don’t miss days jammed with commitments, don’t miss rushing out of the house most mornings for Pilates, don’t miss juggling schedules with Ed to plan dinner together.

Surprisingly, I don’t miss my habitual vanities: make-up, haircuts, dye jobs, nail polish. With “home” as my universe, the wardrobe has been pared down to pajamas, sweat pants and soft socks.

My days have blurred into a repetition of easy routines: long walks on nearby trails, poetry, page turners, connecting with family and friends. Our big outing: weekly supermarket trips during “senior hours.”

Once the lockdown ends, I wonder how I will fit in the pieces of my old, calendar-packed life. I wonder whether I can keep the peace and spaciousness of what I have now.

Make-believe

By Ellen Collins

Outside in the bright spring sun, two little boys
ride their scooters and bikes around
and around in the cul-de-sac, helmets
on their head, their voices sounding
like children's voices always sound,
and I believe for a second
that all is normal, that their dad
is at work, and later they will run
in the park next to other children
and climb up the slide backwards
while their mom talks to the other moms
sitting on the peeling benches, the moms
who hug each other when they leave,
dragging the tired boys home, the boys
who give high-fives as they take
their separate paths, and they will keep
the imprint of each other's hands
on shoulders and palms and it will be just
part of what they do every day
under the high benevolent sun.

Sheltering in Place

By Kathryn Racette

I'd been watching classic thrillers. Hitchcock and the like. Suspense for the sake of suspense. Improbable plots with vectors strong enough to suck me out of the vortex of breaking news, executive orders, and pandemic projections. One day, I crossed genres and found myself traipsing across desert sands and continents in an epic saga of forbidden, tragic love. The next, I was into a nouveau-noir crime pic following two hapless hitmen from London to Belgium to bloody mayhem.

This was not simply time-filling entertainment. Sequestered for weeks on end in my house, save for tethered trips to the grocery, I was finding solace in empathy with characters who, like me, were trapped by unyielding circumstance. I became one with the terror of a fragile, young, blind woman ensnared in her basement apartment by ruthless thugs looking for contraband mistakenly stashed in one of her closets. I chewed on the moral angst of a surprisingly bookish and dignified assassin tasked with taking out his own partner, an endearing naif who had bungled his first hit. I dove into

the charred skin and endless suffering of a grieving lover gone down in a fiery plane crash—my heart sang with his when a compassionate nurse delivered the merciful overdose of morphine he longed for.

In the end, my avatars are always released, somehow, from their virtual prisons. Thus, for a few moments, am I. Then the lights rise, and, with them, the four walls of the living room, in sharp relief.

Things We Keep

By Kathleen Martens

I'm busy doing nothing during this Pandemic, berating myself for doing nothing, then forgiving myself for doing nothing. With all the time in the world, why do I feel I have no time?

I'm seeking simplicity during this rare opportunity to purge and organize. Why not play matchmaker for all the lonely, single earrings quarantined and socially distanced in their velvet-lined compartments?

Launching my rescue mission, I can almost hear the studs and hoops purring as I snuggle them in with their perfect partners. Isolation is so hard these days. Amid the necklaces, I find my mother's pearls I haven't seen since she died. I wish they'd been given to someone else; I'm not a pearl girl.

My NYC daughter has never taken to swimming in the mainstream. Pearls don't pair with skulls or Guns N' Roses motifs for a college professor teaching the legacy of the witch. Maybe for Glinda the Good Witch? Nah.

Too fancy for my marathon-running sister in Seattle, or the successful COO in casual California. No brothers of that bent.

I hold the precious pearl mementos to my cheek. The scent of my mother surrounds me. I'm woozy, tremors quiver over my face; my breathing constricts as my fragrance allergies kick-in. I'll never wear them. How can I ever keep these?

Moving the oyster treasures to the giveaway pile, my heart flutters. I hesitate. A weighty guilt sets in. Then I slip them back into my jewelry box.

How could I ever give them away?

Pandemic Pause

by Ellie Maher

First came sadness, which the Facebook Live sermon named as Grief. Oh that. Grief. I know that feeling, and naming it started me on a path to positivity.

Make a schedule, loosely, with activities that would be good to do. Think up a hobby to occupy time and thoughts. Find a video conference to participate in.

Plan a humble garden, ask for guidance, plant seeds. Cook meals, freeze extra, google how to do food prep things. Bananas now last two weeks!

Create an exercise regime, enjoy sunshine, take naps. Boardwalk is off limits for us, and seagulls have adapted by moving to Chick Fil A. Try a stroll at the Outlet mall. Eerily abandoned, fashions soon out of season, and sidewalks still playing shopping Muzak singing ‘where happy happens!’

Realize that my skin continues to be touched. By sun and wind and rain and temperature. Okay, that’s better.

Supermarket shoppers wear face masks and avoid eye contact while skirting past me. I notice workers changing SKU’s in every aisle. Food supply chain is shifting while we buy extra for just in case.

A few driveway visits. BYO everything. Leave before rest room is needed.

Farewells have changed. *See you later, take care, bye bye*, replaced with *be safe, stay safe, wear your mask, wash your hands*.

I wonder if the ocean notices we are missing.



Wishing for Water

By Patty Bennett

Attention All Members: In order to comply with the Governor's Guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic, the YMCA will be closed until further notice.

For the average person, this is frustrating, but not the end of the world. For me, it IS the end of the world...almost. I have Multiple Sclerosis and I am mobility-challenged. I can only exercise my whole body in the water. By not being able to use the Y pool, I'm not exercising most of my muscles. I can go for walks with my rollator to exercise my legs a little, and use my hand weights to exercise my arms, but the rest of my body is not moving at all.

I usually got to the Y five days a week, for an hour each day. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays are Aerobics days in the shallow end of the pool. Tuesdays and Thursdays are for Aquatic Boot Camp in the deep water.

In order to keep from gaining weight, I have had to eat less. Sounds simple enough, but NOT an easy feat for someone who is quarantined. I am a high risk individual on two counts: I am 69 AND I have a compromised immune system. My MS medication, Gilenya, keeps my symptoms stable, but kills my white blood cells, the ones that do the fighting when disease germs try to invade my body.

So take this Coronavirus and shove it! Give me a pool with germ-free water, and I'll love it!

An Interruption in Our Cable Service During the Pandemic

By Shelley Kahn

Watching that screen
For hours
Even the dog beside me
Is nervous.
She does not understand
Why everyone's faces
Are now covered.
And no one will
Stop and pet her
When we walk
In the park.

Suddenly, the TV screen goes dark.

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Is it the end?
We briefly wonder...
But no.
The cable guy refuses to come by
And the Customer Service Representative,
Insists that the outage in our area
No longer exists.

After a week passes without TV,
My husband and I decide
That we will risk infection
To take in those pesky cable boxes.
After all- we have been paying for the
Upgraded service without getting it.

Just last night our “possessed”
Cable boxes suddenly
Begin showing the correct time and
Then start simultaneously
Receiving signal data.
And we are saved from ourselves.
It is a “pandemic miracle.”
But the news is on again
And so we now consider
Turning off the television
For good.

A Pandemic Love Story

By Kevin Fidgeon

It's a quarter to two, and nobody's in the place except you and me. It's been 50 years and still here we sit, locked in our little house, one day after another.

Sleeping more, arguing less, the days seem to slide by, each one more like the last. Weekly outings include a trip to the grocery store by her. I'll take care of the wine supply. Well stocked up on paper products, we could last forever in our cozy home.

The phone rings, a pleasant interruption to the quiet of our day. Children and grandchildren call. No one has much to say. Conversations are short but warm, ending with pronouncements of love and shared hopes that we see each other soon.

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Exercise now consists of riding a once rarely-used bike through the flat but curved roads of our neighborhood. A little shaky at first but getting better with each daily ride. Narrow back alleys can be a challenge, resulting in one run-in with a parked work van, no real damage done.

A helmet now became a mandated piece of equipment. It makes me look like a stupid old man, according to my favorite young poet, Erryca. The real problem is the difficulty I have in opening the helmet latch. It is impossible despite the WD40 sprayed on it. I sit on the couch, watching television, wearing the helmet on my imprisoned head until my loving spouse squeezes the latch and frees me.

It's a quarter to three, and nobody's in the place except you and me...



A Pandemic Lament

By Carolyn Fidgeon

It's a quarter to three, and nobody's in the place except you and me. It feels like we've been locked down in our tiny house for 50 years.

Less sleep, more bickering, the days crawl like a sloth. I get to do battle at the grocery store for chicken and toilet paper. He goes to the happy store for wine (and probably sneaks snacks). Coq au vin every day!!!

The phone rings constantly, breaking the leaden silence. Children and grandchildren, whining and complaining they can't get their nails done, can't go to the

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lacrosse finals and, worst of all, Firefly is cancelled. I tell the monsters I created that I love them and no need to call so often.

I do my Zumba in the kitchen religiously. My favorite video is Beto, the founder of Zumba, himself. I can shimmy, I can shake better than baking a cake.

He used to go to the gym but now flies around our little neighborhood on his resurrected bike, crashing into parked cars and work vans. Erryca says he looks like a stupid old man. Every day I come out of the shower to find him sitting on the couch watching TV with his helmet on because he can't open the latch. It is *deja vu* all over again—I have a five-year-old child.

It's a quarter to two—OMG! I lost an hour—there's nobody in the place except me and you...

The Lovely Joys of “Lovejoy”

By Barbara Hames

In a time when the world we knew has disappeared almost overnight, nothing can be more comforting than tuning into a TV show where life centers around the trials and tribulations of a rakish British antiques dealer whose devil-may-care attitude to life and love frequently get him in hot water with his competition, the police, and the women in his life.

Anglophiles rejoice! “Lovejoy,” a staple of late 80s-early 90s Brit TV is now streaming on Acorn. Sit back and admire the scenic countryside, stately homes, old churches, and quaint cities of East Anglia. Marvel at the lack of social distancing in cluttered auction rooms, cozy pubs, and bustling high streets. Chuckle at the comic timing of Lovejoy and his business associates, the hapless heavy-metal fan Eric Catchpole, and the dapper, usually inebriated Tinker Dill. Enjoy the mild flirtation between Lovejoy and the married Lady Jane Felsham, a straight arrow who is nonetheless secretly entranced by our hero. Puzzle out the often-circuitous plots (one featured a fake of a *fake*) and witty dialogue.

With the plethora of video entertainment choices available, why has this non-PC piece of nostalgia become a nightly addiction? That's easy. In a time of uncertainty and fear there is great comfort in watching Lovejoy and his friends extricate themselves from their often-self-inflicted predicaments in under 60 minutes and enjoy a good laugh *together* at the end. I want to live in Lovejoy's world!

A Different Spring

By Marjorie Weber

It takes some getting used to, this new routine.

No appointments. No classes. No shopping. Just a day that stretches ahead to be filled however I choose, that is, within the confines set by a virus that has turned lives upside down.

The world has shut down. I have never seen anything like this.

There are suddenly imposed rules, pandemic rules, life or death rules—stay at home except for trips for groceries, for beer or a bottle of wine, a letter to post, a bank deposit, a walk in Cape Henlopen Park. Don’t forget your mask!

Today, a kiss good-bye for my essential worker husband, fingers crossed he stays well, then a morning walk round the neighborhood. I push back worries, for him, for our families in New Jersey where the virus rages.

I think of those who have lost jobs, who anxiously line up at local food banks, who wonder how they will pay next month’s rent. Twenty-five years ago, that could have been me.

Today, the neighborhood is washed clean after heavy spring rains. It is quiet, no cars starting up, no planes overhead, no construction trucks grinding gears in the distance. The morning sun slants across the pond, warms my face. Against blue skies, grass glistens with leftover dampness, rainwater puddles in the road as birds chatter. The air smells of mown grass. Cherry trees bloom pink, daffodils unfold.

In the backyard, the willow is greening and bluebirds nest in our River Birch.

Woodford Oak

By Maribeth Fischer

In our garage, I stare at the piles of floorboards delivered two days before the world shut down. Neatly stacked boxes of “Westend Apple” for the hallways, “Woodford Oak” for my office and our bedroom. A third of our house—getting new floors. All winter we’d talked of this. The night we put down the deposit we drove home in the rain, holding hands, imagining our newly-elegant house.

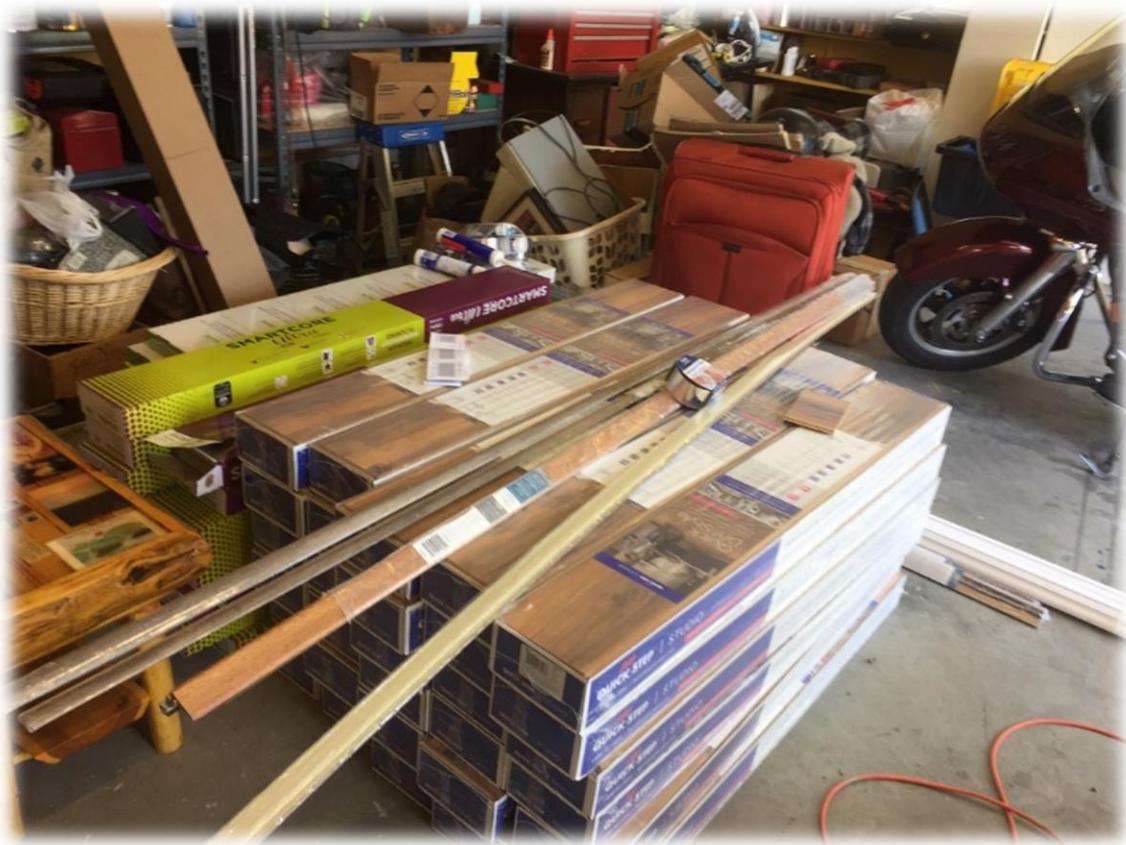
In the weeks before the flooring was delivered, we packed up books from the floor-to-ceiling shelves in my office and bedroom, emptied dishes from the glass-fronted cabinet in the hallway. We jammed end tables, chairs, credenza, bureaus, a futon, the now-empty shelves into the living room. It looks like a warehouse. The other

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rooms feel ransacked, dismantled. It's how our lives feel too: boxed-up and contained, nothing where it's supposed to be.

I suppose we could have put everything back. But why unpack and reassemble our house only to pack it up again once real life returns and the floor installers come? And so we live in chaos. Victor's daughter, Gillian, home after Oklahoma City Ballet closed for the season, sleeps on the futon in the living room. At night, I carry the coffee maker to our bathroom so its loud gurgling won't wake her.

Victor joins me in the garage, and stares at the boxes. "I can't wait till we can put our lives back together," he says. For a moment, I almost believe he's only talking about floors.



IV. Remaking The World

Tom Hoyer, Charlene Fischer Jehle, Loretta Zsido, Gail Braune Comorat, Taralee Morgan, Mary Ellen South, Mary Lou Sinkey, Beth Ewell, Jo-Ann Baca, Bill and Carolyn Newcott, Roselyne Gregor

A Moveable Feast

By Tom Hoyer

Light rain falls over mostly empty roads as we drive to Lewes, down Savannah Road, left at Bay Avenue and left again at Market Street. Kathryn's house is just ahead, on the right. Now we pull to the curb behind a gray Mercedes Benz and two smaller cars. Another Mercedes is just pulling away. Soon there's someone behind us. Two cars are stopped across the street and a third one joins them. This is the right place.

It is Kathryn's birthday. Her husband, whose party plans the pandemic aborted, has come up with a charming alternative: a birthday drive-by. Secretly, he invites us all to converge on this charming beach cottage, in our cars, at five o'clock. He puts an umbrella table populated with perfect cupcakes—chocolate with butter cream icing—near the curb. He is with Kathryn on the big front porch. They stand together, mugs of tea in hand, greeting us.

The invitation is an act of love and also of faith. Would anyone or many-ones show up? These cars are the evidence. As we wait our turn, one woman jumps out of her car. She carries a bouquet of flowers up to the table where she retrieves a cupcake as she calls out her best wishes to Kathryn. We have a gift, too, which in our turn we exchange for a cupcake as Kathryn and Mark greet us from the porch.

Alone in the Back Alley

By Charlene Fischer Jehle

It felt like the worst drug deal ever. It was broad daylight. I was stopped next to a very busy intersection. Yet there I sat nervously in my car, in an alley behind a strip mall, waiting for a back door to open. My face was hidden. Finally, a door opened slowly and two masked figures approached the car. They came with a high intensity flashlight and some medical equipment. I was shaking in trepidation as they came ever closer. I stayed on my side of the closed window as the man began to speak.

In the midst of the pandemic, my face had developed a rash. Was it stress, a reaction to a new medication, an allergy? Only my dermatologist could tell. So here I

was participating in my first drive-by doctor's appointment. I pressed my cheeks against the window. I held up my iPad with close-up pictures of my face taken earlier in the day.

To have an examination, diagnosis and medicine prescribed without entering the office or being touched was a new experience.

This drug deal was out of the ordinary. No money was exchanged, and the drugs were later purchased legally at CVS.

The Little Tree

By Loretta Zsido

There's a little tree outside our kitchen window. This Christmas my husband filled it with lights and it was beautiful glowing in the dark. We had taken a bare, gray, skinny, little tree and made it into a shiny ornament.

The little tree gave into winter's needs to put everything to sleep. "Are you in quarantine too?" I asked. No reply—it just bent and waved its bare gray arms, sulking like the rest of the world.

No Easter and no plastic-colored eggs on the tree for our grandchildren to grab for the treats inside. I swear the little tree giggled to have a reprieve from tiny hands pulling at its limbs.

The world has changed and we are virtual families now, but we always find a way to make things work. We eat out without going out. We work out without feeling judgmental eyes accusing us of not being honest about the count of those leg lifts. We work from home, are schooled from home and now there is talk about medical portals that can treat us virtually.

I think you got slightly taller, little tree, and you have a few more branches. There are tiny green leaves with white flowers on your tips and you are swaying, but not bent. You are real and not a virtual vision, and you have brought the change of a season all by yourself to little me.

Playing Cards with My Husband During the Pandemic

By Gail Braune Comorat

While we watch the world from our dining table—
cherry tree unfurling its pink flounce, an osprey
hovering in silver air, diving toward the pond—
you and I consign this hour to a game of cards
a friend taught me the year of her chemotherapy.
This is our scheduled time, a respite from
cleaning closets and unloading the aging dishwasher.
Our daily background music: Rafael's guitar CD.
The last time we saw him, we were saying goodbye.
You, fresh from the hospital, staples guarding
the incision stretching down your abdomen,
you, lighter by twenty pounds. We fled Mexico
the same day Europe emptied itself of Americans.
Came home to more doctors, to depleted stores,
canceled meetings. Now we take turns dealing.
Late afternoons are half-full glasses of cabernet,
pretzels that taste of peanut butter
and loneliness. Our new addiction.
This is our time of virtual happy hours
with single friends. *What must it be like*
to have only yourself? This is our time
of tentative gratitude, a time for guarded
conversations. We take long morning walks
in the persistent cold, return to clean windows,
to a game one of us wins, one loses.
This is the year our age suddenly surprised us,
branded us as another pair of potential victims.
We unwrap ourselves in the warm house.
Your eyes, above the mask,
different in a way I cannot name.

Dispatches From A Pandemic



In Wonderland

By Taralee Morgan

I just returned from two days in 1950's France, Monaco, NYC, and London as I ended this month's selection of my travelers' book club, a new Facebook group I joined shortly after "lockdown." The day before I started the book, I joined hundreds of English language writers from around the world for my second virtual write-in. Through my new Roku, a device that streams the internet through the TV, I've traveled to a galaxy far, far away while binge watching a Disney+ series and to many other worlds accompanied by the beautiful operatic voices of the Met. PBS has taken me all over the South to study a variety of southern dishes, throughout the Chesapeake to find the best crab cakes, and into the English countryside to solve several murders. YouTube has taken me into the National Theatre, the Globe Theatre, and a safari/castle in England. I've joined friends on walks along the San Diego beaches and for exercise classes in northern New Jersey. I finally tried grocery delivery services and ordered more things from online shops in a month than I had over the past year. My kitchen pots have simmered with dishes from Italy, France, China, Japan, India, and Mexico. When my boyfriend said with a grimace (we started using FaceTime in April), "I think you're actually enjoying social distancing because you get to explore things you normally wouldn't," I smiled just like the Cheshire Cat.

No Urgency—A Gift

By Mary Ellen South

There is no urgency,
I look out at the pond
I see new things—
Plants I never saw
A gift—nothing else to do.

There is no "have to."
What a realization.
I have all day,
I can do as I please.
No one, or nothing awaits me.

A time for actualization,
Finding who we are and why.
There are endless discoveries
All around me, a gift.

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Because I have no urgency.

Look up, look around,
There are things to find in the sky,
There are things to find on the ground
Even a blade of grass holds secrets.
Take this gift given to me as I grow.

My Daughter Ginny Calls

By Mary Lou Sinkley

and laments each day on the way home from work.
She is a cancer nurse and recalls days before COVID-19
when she met face-to-face with patients and loved ones
when she consoled through touch
leaning in close
to pat their arms
to hold their hands
to smile.

She now wears a mask and gloves,
weak shields. She faces the patient
the two alone in a room, the family in the car
listening to the consult on a speaker phone.
Other patients have telemedicine appointments.
She describes their faces,
gray as the monitor that frames them
as they discuss their treatments, their worries.

As she leaves work one night,
she puts boxes of chalk by the front doors,
a note of instructions taped above.
She selects a fat piece of chalk, dark pink
gets down on her knees
to record the first words:
Tough times don't last; tough people do.

The next morning
the sidewalk is littered with a rainbow of words—
Path of healing

*Graham strong
Thank you to all my co-workers; you are my heroes
We're in this together
We love our patients.*

Patients and co-workers arrive, a contemporary ballet troupe with masks tight to their faces. They walk around the messages as they read them heads tilted to capture the curls of a sentence. The hush is loud in this recital.

Tonight she calls to say the rain washed away the messages. I imagine them—a stream of streaked colors drenching the thirsting flowers.

Stitch Together

By Beth Ewell

Except for an occasional new set of kitchen curtains and table placemats, my 1968 Singer sewing machine tends to collect dust in the spare bedroom. But due to COVID-19, I've resuscitated my skills to sew masks for the local hospital.

Age and asthma prevent me from helping on the frontline of healthcare—where I had worked before my retirement from nursing. As the sobering news of this public health crisis blares on the television, I heed the call for help.

And sewing mends the soul. Since my teens, there's always been something soothing about sewing—that slow and steady rhythm of the needle, the feel of the fabric, and the hum of the electric foot peddle that enables me to focus behind closed doors while I drown out the rest of the world.

My friend, Carolyn, is sewing masks, too. Years ago, we worked together—nurses in the Emergency Department. And although we live in different states, it's comforting to be in touch. Carolyn is also retired from nursing.

She texted me a photograph of masks in pastel blues, purples, and greens with stars, flowers and paisley designs spread across her long white sewing table. "Beth, I cut up my cotton scrubs to make masks."

"I had to use an old set of cotton jersey sheets as a liner."

Former nurses—innovative women on the frontline, sewing masks and mending souls, one stitch at a time.



Inner Peace in Outer Turmoil

By Jo-Ann Baca

As I gaze upon the radiant Herring Creek in Lewes, in the glory of the morning, I greet red-breasted robins, ruby-throated hummingbirds, a crimson cardinal, and a bright blue jay overhead. Squirrels scurry among the branches of tall pine trees, and a great blue

heron shares the marsh with three egrets finding their feast among the brambles of the wetlands. I hear the ravenous Bonaparte gulls wailing and laughing as they glide past mockingbirds, a symbol of innocence and helplessness, blissfully singing. As I breathe in their intoxicating beauty, an inner peace washes over me and I wonder, what do they know that I don't? What do they know of pandemic, tears, death?

When inevitably my thoughts fall to those who suffer mightily, alone and afraid, the alarming contrast of the beauty of the morning and the uneasiness of the quarantine births a fire in me to fix, change, or control what I cannot. Like the widow and the penny, I have little to give, so I offer what peaceful moments I might have to them, sending them my most precious possessions, the tranquility I hold in my heart, the sounds of nature and the visions of beauty that abound. I pray that these small gifts live and linger in their hearts and memories, to heal, to lighten their loads, and brighten their souls. I send them inner peace in this time of outer turmoil.

The Dance

By Carolyn and Bill Newcott

The clock's tired hands pull themselves toward 11 p.m. Our early evening was spent wallowing in distressingly repetitive TV news and high-calorie, low-nutrient streaming—and since 9:30, our heads have been buried in our laptops, our separate pursuits punctuated by occasional “huh”-s and “take a look at this”-es.

And then the dance begins.

We have yet to isolate the unspoken signal that leads one of us to fold down that computer lid, extend a hand and invite the other to their feet. This is something new. Prior to our immersion into social distancing, in a decade together, dancing has been reserved largely for weddings (“Uptown Funk”) and bar mitzvahs (“Brick House”).

But here we are, pressed up like teenagers, caressing so tightly there's no space for the world to come between us. We swing around the room, our eyes drinking in each other's gaze, our shuffling legs miraculously avoiding the coffee table. One song a night, and we alternate who gets to choose.

“*Fly me to the moon,*” Sinatra croons, when we couldn't fly to Pittsburgh even if we wanted to.

“*Our house is a very, very, very fine house,*” chirp Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, and we smile softly. Yes, yes it is.

“*Come away with me in the night,*” whispers Norah Jones.

We turn out the lights, rest our heads together, and do just that.

Silence

By Roselyne Gregor

As death spreads its boney wings over us, I fall in love.
With silence.
I am old. I shelter in place.
Set aside, useless.
Lucky.
The kitchen clock counts the minutes as the days tick by. A month? More?
I can't remember.

Some say that if you really look, the desert is full of life.
Isolation shows me that silence is full of sound.
In the garden, the light susurration of the leaves, the faint rustle in the barn
swallows' nest that announces the arrival of new life, the nearly imperceptible peeps
from the heart of the holly tree where the robins have setup house—how did I not
hear all that before?

Was I too busy? Careless? Indifferent?
Movement. Voices. A twig snaps in the tree where the shy sugar glider hides,
and a jeweled frog on a dew-drenched iris leaf sends diamond drops splattering down
onto the grass.

Drum beat.
Heart beat.
On the pond, Mama duck clicks to her babies to follow her.
A flock of starlings rises from the lawn in perfect, balletic precision. The air
around them sighs with joy.
As dusk descends, a soft whir under the eaves means the bats are setting out
for the evening.

Dawn comes—the sun peeks over the horizon and the turkeys wake and
gobble groggily in the trees.

A new day in a world so suddenly silent.
Full of music.
Full of hope.

V. What Next

Sherry Chappelle, Maggie Burgisser, Lisa Graff, Erycca Curry, H. Richard Piet, William J. Kennedy, Mimi S. Dupont, Cynthia Gratz Campbell, Nancy North Walker, Sherri Wright, Elise Seyfried

Pan-xiety

By Sherry Chappelle

Blursday, Quarantini, Covidiot. When faced with the unknown, the scary, the uncontrollable, what do we do? We come up with new words for it. Even COVID-19 is a neologism, from corona virus 2019.

For the language lover the possibilities are endless. Portmanteau words? You aren't in charge of meeting your basic needs, but you can become a *Zoom-bomber*, and wonder about a generation of *coronials*. How about indulging your *Cuomophilia* daily or become an early adopter of *Charminoarding*.

Collective nouns? *A mountain of masks. An airlift of ventilators. A shiftload of heroes. A portapot of political promises.*

We can morph old expressions? Forget five—now it's the *twenty-second rule. Social distancing disease?*

New meanings for old idioms: *wiped out anyone? Two's company?* Spoonerisms: *we have streaming days that are dreaming stays.*

When this six-footing storm is over what will last? What will those *quaran-teens* still have in their lingo in 2035? Will we be here to explain?

Romance Quarantine Style

By Maggie Burgisser

Flash back. January 2019. San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. It was our first real date after being introduced three months before. We live 3,815 miles apart. Jan's home is in the Netherlands. Mine is in Delaware.

"What about us?" Jan ventured after our first intense 24 hours together. We almost couldn't look into each other's eyes at that moment, dipping into something so real and promisingly precious. Was the sensation falling or flying? We were jumping from a cliff with no known outcome.

Dispatches From A Pandemic

That began a whirlwind year of surprises, joy, exotic meeting places, fascination, adventure, celebration.

And now a travel ban? Never in our lifetimes—until now.

We started following COVID-19 in January while in Aruba. Date #6. Our concerns were: How bad will this be worldwide? Will we be safe? Our children? Our grandchildren? Our friends? Our businesses?

Just keep moving forward, we concluded.

We planned Date #7. Delaware. End of April. Jan would come for two weeks. But then, suddenly, it was decreed: No Europeans could enter the USA. And Americans returning from abroad would go into quarantine for two weeks, someplace.

We have each been through abrupt disruptions in our lives, some happy, some miserable, but we are resilient. Stepping off a precipice is not new territory for either of us.

Through our cell phones we pour out our nightly symphony of kisses. We look into each other's eyes. We smile.

Date #7. Where and when? To be determined.

"I'm fine"

By Lisa Graff

New purple flowers in the bed are covered with mulch like my feelings. Smothered. Masked. "I'm fine," I tell everyone I meet. My life is simpler now. My walks with friends are frequent. We reveal personal stories about our children, point out the beauty of the dogwood trees. Our laughter is genuine.

My husband Ray and I negotiate whether to turn on the news this morning.

"We watched it last night, remember?" We have agreed to only one 30-minute segment a day.

But I turn on NBC--Savanna Guthrie. Her eyes are genuine. She is interviewing the sister of the doctor in New York who committed suicide because she couldn't save everyone. Couldn't save herself. She says the virus affects the brain.

I'm fine. I will make a shrimp pasta dish. The grandchildren will Facetime. I can't touch them. I want to touch them. I need to feel them and hold them. I want to get in my car and cross state lines. Fly over the ocean alone in a powerful jet, wearing a mask.

Dispatches From A Pandemic

My flights were cancelled. People are hungry and losing their jobs. I look at the pictures on my phone. Count my blessings. I will turn 66 next month and I have had an incredible life.

I will take out the pansies in the front bed. Add pink sun patience. The pansies won't make it through the summer, but I will. Maybe my son could come visit in July?

I Never Thought the Year Would Begin Like This

By Erycca Curry

I sit down every day and wonder
why does every storm bring lightning and thunder?
Could choices we make today make better tomorrows?
Because I never thought the year would begin like this,
That we humans would help spread the disease this quickly.
Some of us listen and some of us don't, and now
we have to wear masks in stores and get food delivered to doors.
School was my safe place and it got closed down.
I feel bad for the kids who bought a cap and gown.
They did all that work to not walk across the stage.
My heart aches for the kids in an abusive home,
probably scared because they are all alone.
Also the people who deal with domestic violence—
imagine being in their place.

I never thought the year would begin like this.
This pandemic is crazy.
In August will it end? I'm hopeful.... maybe?
So many people have lost their lives,
I even knew some of the people who died.
All I can do is pray for my friends and family.
I would cure the disease if only I had one wish.
Because what if the year ends like this?

Death in the Time of Corona

By H. Richard Piet

At 60, I was solely responsible for sixty million dollars, other people's money. At 82, that number is almost halved. Parents die. Children spend. I get to watch and worry.

Dispatches From A Pandemic

Death in the time of corona? No shortage of pundits; no need for my two cents.

I'm free to worry about my elderly charges who've saved, not spent. What will their future look like and how do I invest to provide food for those who've stepped aside so others may earn in their place?

That's not about politics. It's about predicting the future. It's my job to do that, so I sit in a Florida double-wide, surrounded by safely-distanced retired factory workers, working CVS clerks, unemployed dental assistants, employed nursing home aides, my wife (on chemo) and our exhausted dog, asking questions and guessing at answers.

How do my people buy food and pay medical bills when banks stop paying interest, and dividend-paying companies are ordered shut and into bankruptcy? Which industries will profit and which will fail? How much money will companies save if they don't need office buildings? Who will challenge Amazon? How long will this last and who has the power to decide? How many working families and farmers will go bankrupt?

How many lives will we save?

Medicare now reimburses for an online consult at office-visit rates, but who decided we need fewer hospital beds? Will that change? If so, who will profit? Can we invest in those companies?

Where did I put my Marquez?

Not My First Rodeo

William J. Kennedy

For those of us old enough to be targets of Tom Selleck's reverse mortgage ads, this isn't our first experience with a serious virus outbreak, or as Tom would say, "Not my first rodeo."

In our youth we endured isolation and social distancing without the benefit of cellphones, the internet and Netflix. As we got deeper into summer, restrictions banned us from the movie theater and municipal swimming pool for the entire month of August.

Unlike this quarantine, the rules weren't imposed by the government but by a higher authority, Mom. Mom didn't need a council of scientists to advise her. She didn't need the police patrolling the streets to keep strangers away, and she didn't need to know the reason she was doing this was because, like Pennywise, the clown in Derry, "it" resided in sewer waste and became more active in the summer. Mom just knew. She was the ultimate authority and the ultimate enforcer.

It all changed in 1955 when the polio vaccine became widely available. Families emerged from their homes and returned to swimming pools and movie theaters to deal with the August heat. Others escaped the big cities with vacations to Atlantic City or Rehoboth Beach.

Our quarantine will also end with a treatment or a vaccine. Our grandchildren will recall this period in much the same way we recall those summers of the early 1950s. They'll say, "This isn't our first rodeo." And their kids will say, "What's a rodeo?"

One Is All It Takes

By Mimi S. Dupont

I have become a black hole. I suck in everything around me, but nothing comes back out.

I read my online writing group's prompts—poems or parts of books—and the members' responses.

But I write nothing.

I read my writer friend's email prompts and the responses—witty, poignant, incisive, articulate, elegant.

But I write nothing.

I walk along the golf course, note the birds whirling from tree to tree in search of a nesting place. I note the thirteen pines in a sea of needles, the dry brown prongs poking the spring green grass. So much open space, yet the designers left this patch of pines neatly edged by converging cart paths. So much beauty.

But when I arrive home, I write nothing.

I prepare paper and pens to make a friend's birthday card. The paper sits gathering dust.

But I write nothing.

I dig out a sympathy card and put it on the pine table. Carefully I place a pen with an ink color to complement the card's face. Days later it remains on the table, pushed aside by additions to the pile.

Still, I write nothing.

I remain a black hole taking in everything around me. In. In. In. And now I am so constipated with words it's a wonder I do not explode.

So I post this.

Then comes a friend's encouraging email: "Now you did write."

One word at a time is all it takes.

A Change of Routine

By Cynthia Gratz Campbell

Change is gradual at first, and then...everything stops. The restaurants that employ my 27-year-old daughter Rose furlough employees or cut hours. Bev, her community coach, who translates Rose and her autism to others, is limited to virtual support. Anxiety accelerates. Top priority—create a schedule, provide routine. Reassure Rose that things will get better, *bit by bit*.

"Ballet Tuesdays" provides a weekly respite. I plan content, Rose and Bev ZOOM together to watch and learn. *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker*—ahhh, transcendent Tchaikovsky. Mime, choreography, *pas de deux*. Rose loves ballet and Bev discovers its wonder.

My daughter Elena (recent college grad) searches for purpose. She lives with Rose, which works pretty well when both are employed. Now 'Ohana', our family text group, is buzzing. "Elena is being mean to me." "Rose is screaming and I'm losing my mind."

"Meals on Wheels Wednesdays"—Volunteer, wait for security clearance. Drive a route to deliver food to old folks. After three weeks, the two of us are pros. I drive, Rose delivers. "Hellos," smiles, "have a good day." We need this anchor.

Finally, "Chick-fil-A Mondays"—Bev and Rose work four hours with masks, gloves and constant hand washing. *Bit by bit* things are getting better.

May 1st—Celebrate Dad's 70th birthday with 6 p.m. prosecco toast on five front lawns—balloons, cupcakes, singing the birthday song and a few silly jokes. Joy, as nine neighbors and two daughters celebrate life!

Happy Tears Handkerchief

By Nancy North Walker

My eyes moisten each morning when I see it on my dresser. The white linen handkerchief embroidered with the words “for Happy Tears.” Next to it sits the elegant black-and-white invitation for the April 2020 wedding, and a save-the-date notice with a captivating photograph that always makes me smile. My son is smooching his beautiful bride-to-be on the cheek. They’re sitting on a city park stairway. She’s leaning into him. Her face spells love. Their black-and-white dog-child is at their feet smiling too. Or maybe she’s panting.

The happy-tears-handkerchief is still in its box. My only child’s wedding has been postponed twice. The new date’s April 2021. By then, I pray, scientists will have found a way to wrestle the wicked virus my son calls “Rona” to the ground.

I imagine “Rona” as a graphic-novel villain with spiked green hair who roams the world spreading disease, death, fear and economic collapse. Her story ends when Captain Science renders her impotent with a miracle vaccine or cure. Maybe both.

Rona scares the hell out of me. I’m older, have asthma. I know the terror of gasping for air. So, I’m hunkered down inside my house. My husband gets the groceries. Amazon delivers everything else. I mount germ-warfare with disinfectants. I write and escape to worlds I create. And, I pray. I pray for Captain Science to come soon, because, as my happy-tears handkerchief reminds me each morning, I have a wedding to go to next April.



Elegy for Life Before Corona

By Sherri Wright

I miss early Sunday mornings
before the city was awake
shivering shoulder to shoulder

Dispatches From A Pandemic

with a hundred other people in running
shorts and old dirty shoes
cheering each other on setting watches
pinning on bibs waiting for the gun

And oh the aromatic produce aisle
heirloom tomatoes fresh baby kale
avocados and limes I could squeeze
fleshy peaches and orange tangerines
sweet as the cashier
when you could see her smile

To hear a playground full of kids running
scuffling kicking up dirt screaming at
the top of their lungs moms on benches
chatting sipping lattes wondering
how long summer vacation would last

I just want to go OUT I want a reason
to curl my hair line my lids color my lips
put on earrings and a nice summer dress
and for once not look in the mirror
and see my mother the way she looked
at a hundred and one

I long to read my hard-forged words
to other writers across the table
tap my pencil quiver my knee
watch their faces as they decide
to criticize or commend
knowing they'll also have to read

I'd like to see an OPEN sign
on every downtown store
walk into a restaurant sit at the bar
order happy hour oysters with
the friend I used to meet here
every other week for the last five years

I want to write an essay or a poem
having nothing to do with COVID-19

Paradox Out My Window

By Elise Seyfried

I look out the living room window at the blossoming cherry tree in my yard. Nature must have missed the memo about the pandemic. It is a bright, beautiful morning, and I'm eager for a brisk socially-distanced walk with my husband later on.

The contrast between the weather and our current condition is jarring. I remember feeling the same way on another gorgeous, blue-sky day: September 11, 2001. By rights the heavens should have been weeping torrents of rain, the sky swathed in gray. It certainly would have better matched the mood.

The weather seems incongruous again today, as we collectively face another horror. For those of us who struggle with anxiety, this is an off-the-charts stressful situation. My heart aches for my fellow sufferers, and I know that so many more are experiencing these emotions as strange and new. I count out my antidepressants, glad I have several months' supply. But meds only help so much at a time like this.

Amid the fear and confusion, the birds sing. The sun sets later every day, with ridiculously gorgeous colors splashed across the sky. Hours later, the more subtle, but still exquisite, shades of dawn herald each new morning.

“All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well,” wrote the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich. When I look out my window right now, I can almost believe it.



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