

WNYC's National Poetry Month Challenge

Week 2: "Answer the question that you wish someone would ask you right now. (Make that question the title of your poem.)"

The following poems were submitted during Week 2 of WNYC's 2020 National Poetry Month challenge and are shared with permission from the poets. Thanks to everyone who shared a poem!

[Click here for a special curation of kid-friendly submissions](#), which sorts out darker, grown-up themes.

We're moving on to our final poetry prompt of the month: *Lessons learned*.

Submit your "lessons learned" poem on Instagram/Twitter using #PAUSEpoetry, or email it to mywnyc@gmail.com. Can't wait to read yours!

If you like poetry, you might want to check out [the responses to Week 1's prompt: "What a Difference a Month Makes."](#)

Our Favorites

"How 'bout a play date?
Words I'm desperate to hear.
I miss my old life."

-Dashiell Cornell, 11 years old

What could New York have done to keep you from leaving?

a rent freeze first of all

been living in here long enough
for my child by this City to be in
junior high school, explaining how
the price of everything went up

living made breathing hard

the cost of artmaking cannot be
traced by DOL algorithms who can't
fathom why we'd cast our lives out
like wet market nets selling an
animal of ours to make a living

i was already beyond means

an artist's life cannot be writ
as one clean, safe, social, secure
guarantee of survival when there's
no work to keep close to dreams
and debts not one would believe

so very long, for now, New York
no asking me to where i'm going
it's not here...so why's it matter

-Alanna Blair in Astoria, Queens until 4/30/2020

When did time start to slip?

I am at a loss
couldn't tell you where
to press the pushpin into the map.
Where it would fall,
its place in the trajectory.
Couldn't name the day
of the week. I know
the date I last took the train,
last crossed the East River,
last time I sat
next to a person closer than 6 feet.
Our Conversation not muffled by fabric.

Fabric is what I think of first.
The perfect thread count.
The cradle of cashmere.

The full body warmth of a hug
from a dear friend
that radiates out from the core,
like the first sip of a manhattan
on a bar stool somewhere south of 14th Street.

I am at a loss to recall
the anticipation of touch,
like the moment when you raise
your head out of the bath water,
the sound of the ocean in a shell,
unexpected warmth of a candle
from inches above. I can't do it justice
but I'm slowly leaning in
for a first kiss. The charge in the air
on a spring evening, just before
the wind picks up and all at once torrents.

-Derek Warker in Crown Heights, Brooklyn

How do you feel about your husband going back to work?

Well... *since you asked*

I feel like he has made a life and death decision to go back to work.

His decision...

and possibly

my life

(his life too, but you asked about me!)

Like many Americans

We have been staying at home

Binge-watching shows on cable television 'till all hours

Acutely aware of the sirens going by

Wondering about the passengers inside

and hoping they will be OK

Going out masked and gloved, only to get groceries

Or to drop the clothes off to the laundromat

(and once or twice to see our grandson in the park!)

My husband has been hinting about going back to work for over a week now
expressing his concern about the rent and other bills

I understand his need to provide
To take care of things
To keep us afloat
Like many Americans
We are one pay check away from being homeless
Unable to save anything or to own anything
Staying at home is a luxury we can ill afford
Besides, he has used
 his sick leave
 and his vacation pay
 to shelter in place
Now what?

The time has come to go back

Intellectually, I understand why he wants to
 why he must
But there is more to it than just money
There is a bigger issue here
 that speaks to the character of the man
You see, *my husband is a Boy Scout!*

Case in point:
Before the tsunami of layoffs in 2008 and 2009
 he was working on Wall Street
He had been there for 33 years
 and was there when the World Trade Center Towers
 came down
Almost immediately,
 Mayor Giuliani wanted New York City
 to get up on its feet
 dust itself off
 and get back to work
The bosses couldn't make him go
but then again, they didn't have to
Without hesitation he **volunteered**
 to go back down there!
To go Ground Zero and help get the New York Stock Exchange
 —or at least the company he worked for—
 up on its feet and running

Now, he is an “essential worker” of a different sort
He is a United States Postal Worker

He feels a sense of duty to deliver the mail
to the citizens whom he serves
in this new Ground Zero called Coronavirus

*"Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night
stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."*

Oh, he is all about that!
And I love him for it
But he is also sixty-five
and African American
and has an underlying health concern
I would think that should be enough
to continue to keep him home
and

US

Safe

So how do I feel about my husband going back to work, you ask?

Proud, yes
but cautious...

I claim my right to live and tell the tale!

-Yvette Heyliger in Harlem

Our Top 170 Favorites

*What Still Matters Now; What Doesn't?
What Should I do Tomorrow Morning?*

What still matters:

My family
The people I wish were my family
Flowers in springtime

Sitting down for meals with my boys
Reading, writing, texting, talking—words in any form
My dogs, cats, lizards, the beta fish—anything living
Walks, fresh air
Growing things
Coffee with milk and Splenda in the morning
Wine in a stemmed glass at night
We have enough to eat
(And a few of our favorite things left)
Wish I still had a job but we are all in this together
Wish I could see your smile through that mask
More testing
Staying isolated
Staying on a schedule (most days)
Google classroom meet-ups
Reaching out to make sure you are still there

What doesn't:

That raise I was waiting for
Creamy vs. chunky peanut butter
(We will eat them both)
Waking up at 6:45 am
The laundry
Jacob, I don't care about your grades in Algebra
(But don't tell your teacher I said that)
The stock market
Matching socks
My hair cut (color would be nice)
How stupid that show is on Netflix, I will still binge it anyway
Toilet paper (really, life went on before we ever had it)

What Should I do tomorrow morning?

Walk the dog
Be thankful we are still here

-Michele A. Miller in Bedford NY

How would I know

that everything had changed, was the question
she asked herself each time she emerged

through her front door. Would I know
now, crossing at this street corner? Or how
about now, noticing the arching of pear boughs,
dipping outward over the sidewalk like a diver's
first curving toward water. No, none of this.
It was only possible to know when she passed
another person. Who had weighed privately a set
of calculations before concluding, as she had,
that this stroll, or this run, this trip to the store,
tipping the long way to encompass the nearest park,
was worth the risk. Some wore light blue masks.
Others gloves. Some also paused beside a bed
of daffodils, who emerge, like this, fully-formed, but
once a year.

-Ashley Mabbitt in Brooklyn, NY

What time is it?

Good morning.

Good afternoon.

Good night.

Was any of those right?

-Alan Saperstein in Greenwich Village

Have You Gone Out Today?

Ten floors up. Today is one of those days
I just want to sit and look out my window.
Ferry boats rock in the harbor
like cradles. And the bare threads
of the branches in the little park below
seem slightly out of focus turning green.
Some trees, I don't even know what
they're called, are covered with blossoms
and when the wind nudges their shoulders
petals fly up like flakes of snow. I could sit here
all day until every shadow grows long

as a telephone pole at dusk on an empty street
and drop whatever it was I thought
important and instead pretend not to care
about anything else.

-Brent Pallas in Battery Park

Do the birds who wake me each morning know? The red fox, the big coyote or the chipmunks?

The standard poodle knows. She has eaten half a hiking sock and stolen a stick of butter.
She says
Hey, what is the matter with you?
I would tear the thing that scares you apart if only I knew what it was.

-Ellen Doherty in Cortlandt, NY

Can I Give You a Hug?

In the best of times
I am mildly misanthropic
Agoraphobic
And I don't like being touched

I ride express buses
To avoid the crush of the subway
I flinch when near strangers
Touch my shoulder
When gregarious salespeople
put their hand on my arm
In a vain attempt at familiarity

I hate that shaking hands
Is a socially mandatory
Custom of touching
Of having my hand crushed
Sweated upon
I shudder at the thought of
Hairy fingers thrust into my own
I long for the elegant world

Of Namaste

I am a survivor
And I can't comprehend
Why so many people think
They have the right to touch me

And now I live
In a state of splendid isolation
In a world
Of perfect touchlessness
For here there is no family
No children
No lover
Not even irritating roommates
Here there is nobody

Little did I know a month ago
That my hairdresser's skillful fingers
Massaging my scalp
Would be the last time
That anybody touched me

So the answer is yes
You may hug me
Please hug me
Hug me and don't let go
For I am dying
Of touchlessness

-Jocelyn Carlisle in Riverdale

How are you doing?

Ask me that but don't
expect an answer that
fits onto a smartphone screen,

it would take more characters than
all 26 letters of the alphabet,
emojis too because

I am afraid of living my dying
and breathing your pain,
losing your hand holding mine
when we run away together,

down the wet streets we used
to scatter puddles,
return home wet to our knees,
our mothers telling us
as only they could,

dry yourselves off,
before you catch your
death of cold

and when I was 10 I hated cold,
like snow it melted into my hands,
flowed up my arms
which was why, every winter morning
before I dressed I sat,
fetal like in front of the heat,

so ask me how I'm doing
now while I still have an
answer we can laugh at.

I'm waiting,
Next week is almost here.

-Andrea L. Alterman in Hastings on Hudson, NY

Could I have this dance?

A poet sorts his thoughts into words;
in 2 words (the only 2 words): *surreal* and *absurd*.

The city subway runs pulmonary –
a communal lung, fragile and involuntary,
with bronchial rails that rattle when sterilized
by a bleach so foul it re-routes 2 trains to the Five.

The damn numbers keep changing.

Common denominators and new contagion
ferment exponentially
on uncalculated tongues, blistered by disease –
those that incredibly refuse to heed the danger
as willingly they talk freewheelingly to strangers.

A poet sees this and searches for words in his heart;
in four words (the only four words): *remain, six, feet, and apart.*

Weary with interdependency,
a poet misses his friends. Believe you me,

he misses strangers, ShowTime, and touching his face
in this familiar shelter that is no 1's place;
here, 1 can only hold fast
to the cold stares coming from behind self-made masks,
the sort we thought did no good at the outset –
before we were drafted to combat a threat
against which we cannot immunize.

He forgot his mask and must now apologize,
left himself defenseless 2 some man with beautiful eyes.
Here, he admonishes himself for being horny and not serious;
here, he's sorry for being human at a time like this.

A poet bets his words on a nickel's chance;
in five words (the only five words): *Could, I, have, this, and dance?*

Fluorescent tape on the floor beside lost prophylactics –
tried and true barriers that help him proactively practice
s a f e s e x a n d s o c i a l d i s t a n c i n g
at a time when no one is in the mood for dancing;
when taking 1 step over
is a step away from 1 yet towards another.

It's a complex twist on the subway shuffle
in a disco city that has lost its hustle.

A poet can only smile in self-deprecation,
the sort that has always ensured human duration.

Even when a reciprocate smile is just mathematic,
affection returned is pandemocratic.

O, but wouldn't it cause a delicious panic
if Adam and Steve were the 1s to repopulate the planet?
Sure, not through function, but by inspiration -
each of us paused in a touch of separation,
like the cradle of parenthesis in a crisis season,
like 2 oxford commas in the Garden of Eden.

A poet forges, therefore, his words into sword;
these three words (the only three words): *I, love, and you.*

-Wyman Meers in Jersey City, NJ

Should I go to the left or to the right?

State your preference, I'll do the opposite
and pass you as you pass in apposite
directions. Should I speak do not listen
to the words – stay safe – the current lesson
not what I mean. I mean thanks, your salience
in speaking up and risking my silence
at a point where voices meet before breath
is light in a shadow left unsaid, breadth
of your spirit incarnate in your feet
keeping far to a side, not tempting fate
with the regulated distance. Allow
me more than is required by a law
and I'll be glad to cross an avenue
For you.

Or maybe it's because I knew
you're feeling older than I feel myself
today, or walk with a cane or a stiff
gait, perhaps negotiating a child,
or carrying groceries, heavy or chilled,
or your dog has smelled something in the grass,
or I'm facing traffic, or found the grace
to move for one behind you on this side,
or following me on that one, or shied
away since you're working.

Our occlusion
opened by a distance made occasion
to be social, a thing more surprising
to me than a nation that's appraising
walking as essential activity,
something we New Yorkers knew already.

-Steve Carlin on the Upper West Side

HOW
will I spend
my "stimulus" check?
Let me count the ways...

(Talking to myself:
Say what? Oh, please!)

When it comes to counting,
that can be done
on one hand.

On the other hand,
living hand-to-mouth,
'tis a painful task;
Don't ask.

The real question is
WHEN
will I get
my "stimulus" check?
Let me count the days...

(Says I to myself:
Really? It's a hoax!)

When it comes
to counting,
this takes
more than two hands.

And counting.

Still counting.
'Cause I don't count.

-Janna Peterson in New Jersey

Can I Hold Your Hand?

Can I hold your hand please?
It feels so long since I was in that safe place, that place of togetherness and warmth
Can I hold your hand?
I will sit and wait amid the silence of the city until I can answer of course you can...

-Yvonne Connolly in Gramercy

How many people live in your household?

Bureaucracy is inane.
The Census Bureau
has threatened to come to my door
(Really? Now?)
if I don't reply online.

The news tells me
they are counting the dead,
not the living, these days.
Has anyone told these people?
Are they more isolated than most?

I am the only one in my household.
Tomorrow that number may decrease by one,
but I don't want strangers coming to my door,
or even neighbors and friends.
I fill out the form.

I wonder how soon the powers that be
will realize their count is waning
even as they are counting,
threatening prosecution,
stressing the import of this process.

-Deborah Morales in Barnegat, NJ

How will it end?

And then, the machine stopped;
the sky began to clear
when the great gears
groaned to a halt;
the ground ceased
its shivering,
stars appeared
and beasts emerged
in our absence,
wings cast shadows
over empty streets.

In the gnawing silence,
a distant siren
reminds us of a gruesome tally;
we peer from our doorways
for a ray of hope,
long to walk the paths
we barely noticed.

In the ebb and flow
of life and death,
we inhabit the low tides,
a scant respite
from irresistible waves.

After a time,
most will return to normal,
become mired in old assumptions
and petty desires,
to the ways that failed us,

But a few will awake
to find that the world
kept turning
and changed:

They will walk into the sun
And shed their masks.

-Robert René Galván in Astoria, Queens

Are you ok?

Sometimes better than ok. Solitude
Frees me from the daily mortifications
Of office politics. The virus crisis suddenly offers
What I've craved: the pure transcendent joy of creative work that matters.
Plus I like alone. I like routine. I like my 5 pm appointment
With Cagney & Lacey and my stationary bike.
But I can't visit my mom in hospice and
Areta's in Sloan Kettering with corona.
Every time my landline rings, life hangs in the balance.
The hospital social worker hounds me for funeral paperwork.
Areta's doctor cries. I console her.
When I ask for comfort, a friend starts to inventory
What she wants from Areta's apartment.
No, I am not ok.

-Phyllis Eckhaus, Greenwich Village

When is the "Renaissance?"

It is 9/11, everyday
We are hitting a triple
For the death toll; it's not yet a ripple
So, certainly not time for "hooray!"

The air is cleaner, fresher, crisper
No planes, no flowers.
No answers from "The Powers"
We grow poorer, but feel richer

The strollers along the river
Pay witness to a future spared

Hope is raw, but not scared
The desire is to act, not dither

We leap into our memory bank
Filled with laughing daffodils
Perfumed roses on the windowsill
In retrospect, they now “pull rank”

Red tricycles, blue skateboards
Green treetops, Kentucky grasses
Sweet lemonade for the masses
Are “springtime’s” lithesome chords

A waltz, a stroke of yellow paint
Sing a tune, grab a sunbeam
For our new “apart” team
Strange, but new, which is the point.

-Mary in Sutton Place

How Does This All End? (or: “The Other Half of the Devil”)

I wake and sit into darkness
Pick up my phone from where it’s charging beside the bed
Light from the lock-screen raises the dim ghost of the room
3:33
“That number is half of the devil,” I think, just half awake
We have all been waiting for the rest of it—the full arrival
We can feel it coming
But don’t know what adds in to make the sum

Even clichés have lost their easy fit
Misshapen and shrunken in context—insufficient like most things now
“Waiting for the other shoe to drop” is one that comes to mind
But can I assume a pair?
Perhaps a mountain of cold cinder and stone broken boards and mud comes falling after
Or else just torrents of sad rain

A drowned or buried non sequitur, that poor shoe
It had nothing to tell of what followed it

Holding my phone I lie back
And stare through its bright tiny window
Sweat dampening the tangled sheets
I'm straining for the view that can't fit this frame

In the palm of my hand
Rebel soldiers fight government loyalists on the streets of Tripoli
They crouch opposed in grey rubble of ruined buildings
Trading bursts of automatic fire from their AK-47s
Both sides wearing surgeon's masks to keep safe

-Mark DeChiazza in Red Hook

How do U deal with the anxiety?

Colleagues say, "be well!"
And at the start of the email,
"Hope you're healthy,"
But dive into business before pausing
For an answer, for a thought.

Do they really want to know?
No. Because my answer is uncomfortable.
It does not fit. Like a shrunken sweater,
Itchy and nasty and scratchy.
Are you okay's just the outer me.

But since I'm not coming back anyway,
I'm not dealing with it. Thanks for asking.
Anxiety's this disease beginning in the
Middle of my abdomen and running up to
My abandoned brain, my first & last thoughts every day.

Jobless, pointless. Like a line of ants coursing
Through my esophagus, my intestines, they've
Invaded me, the fear & trembling, my eyes always wide,
Except when they're squinted from tears, scarlet,
Puffy, scared mirror of what's inside.

-Renee M. Kenny in Gladstone, NJ

Will You Stay?

Anchors to earth:
Six feet under,
six feet away-
One makes a border,
two is a place.

Talk of tomorrow,
busy our day;
turn back the clock-
Master or servant:
Will you stay?

-John Macdonald in Forest Hills, NY

Must

I now Go Viral?

Earthquakes,
hail and ominous skies
Refugees
with haunted eyes
Mountains
slide, and waters rise

Must

I now go viral?

My
word is plain to those who seek
I
do not hide, nor play for meek-
Creation
trembles and SHOUTS to speak

Must

I now go viral?

Condom
challenge, Tide Pod too

Cinnamon,
duct-tape, whoop-ti-doo
(What
is this nonsense we pursue?)
Must
I now go viral?

Cardi
B and Baby Shark
Kylie's
lips and Arya Stark
(Could
it be we've missed the mark?)
Must
I now go viral?

Find
me now in this pandemic
Rend
your hearts, of late ischemic
Know
what's truly pathogenic

My
spirit must go viral.

Nb: All of the above references are for people or things that have "gone viral", most of them completely absurd.

-Macaire Osmont in Middletown, NJ

YOU OK?

In this quarantine marathon
morning is evening.
Hours poorly punctuated,
like a run-on sentence,
suffer from adjective flooding.

long
frightening

sad
sunny
dreary
endless

Innocent verbs
face the danger
of domestic abuse

wake
cook
sleep
shower
wash
eat

The family chatters
on a zoom-packed screen,
eyeglasses steam up over masks,
droplets and aerosols
swarm like summer's no-see-ums.

April arrives,
cherry and apple trees bloom,
daffodils sparkle in clean air,
mockingbirds imitate screaming sirens.

How small the difference
between noise and song.

My love, look up!
The sun rises and sets,
the moon reassures,
we're okay.

-[Anita Pulier](#) on the Upper West Side

When may we return?

Waves humming gently stroking stone mountains
Eager seagulls prancing through rainbows of color

Enraptured by blaring blue, white and yellow heavens
When may we return to a day of glory?

-Hazel Feldman in Stuyvesant Town

What Do I Miss?

I Miss Seeing You

I miss touching things with my hands.
I miss fresh fruit.
I miss my mom.
I miss seeing you.

I miss getting close.
I miss road trips.
I miss the subway - how crazy is that?
I miss seeing you.

I miss my job.
I miss feeling safe.
I miss walks without masks.
I miss seeing you.

I miss my dad.
I miss the baseball season.
I miss feeling safe.
I miss seeing you.

I miss time alone.
I miss company.
I miss coffee that someone else makes.
I miss seeing you.

I miss being able to be shallow.
I miss the ordinary stuff, you know?
I miss picking out nail polish.
I miss seeing you.

I miss my friends.
I miss sharing my office.
I miss dinners out without end.

I miss seeing you.

I miss theater.

God, I miss theater.

Oh, I miss my theater!

I miss seeing you.

I miss Sunday walks through the art galleries.

I miss the library.

I miss lingering over the cheese section.

I miss seeing you.

I miss good anticipation.

I miss live music.

I miss people watching.

I miss seeing you.

I miss traveling.

I miss the ocean.

I miss seeing you.

You're what I miss

-Dipti Bramhandkar in Hell's Kitchen

What's so great about productivity?

What's so great about productivity

What if, for once, you eschewed that proclivity

To do and to see, to listen, to be

To write and to read, to do squats, bend your knees

To clean and to cook

To act and to look....

I feel like a schnook, a slog--

A hog in a do-nothing fog.

I don't mind at all staying in (tho' I do miss the kin).

This feeds into my AD and D

I think I've got nothing done

Oh my and oh me--I'm blinded, you see

I imagine the day is still young.

Is ambition over-rated?
Need we constantly be sated?
Must we be entertained?
Can ennui be sustained
and for how long can we do this
without thinking: I knew this
would be a sad tale.
Still, it's no fun to fail.

I look through the mail and I think:
What IS all this crap--bring me a drink!

And at last the day ends.
I look at my sink full of dishes and pots
I look at the books scattered, the clothes on the chair.
I'm tearing my hair out, soon patience will wear out.

It's true, it's seductive
to think: Be productive!
Clean out the closets, the cupboards, the shelves!
Nah. Spring cleaning's a bore--bring in the elves.

Someone to sneak in at night and clean up,
A kiss on my forehead, fill up my cup,
leave me a chocolate, fold up the shirts
Wash all those dishes, heal all the hurts.

That's what is missing. That's what I meant.
The music's still playing, tho' the day is still spent.
My head on my pillow, another day gone,
But tomorrow I'll be here--and play a new song.

-Elisabeth Scharlatt in the Flower District

Can we sing it again, Ms. Tarby?
What's that instrument? Can I play it first?
Will we rotate and play them all?
Will you be my partner?
Can we play it again?
These questions in my memory. I imagine they are asked instead of "Where is the link?"

-Becki Tarby, a music teacher in Edison, NJ

Please, somebody, ask me,
"When can I call you?"
My walls are pretty
But they're closing in.
My fridge is full
But I'm hungry for human contact.
Don't you feel, as I do,
That connection is everything,
Everything now?

-Susan Lapinski in Murray Hill

"How Would You Like Your Steak Cooked?"

Medium rare, please -- and the sauce on the side, I tell the server.
"Nails round, or square across?"
Square across, please. Yes, please cut the cuticles, too, I tell the manicurist.
"Would you like some ground pepper with your entree?"
No thanks, I tell the server at a different restaurant.
"Are we doing highlights today?"
Yes, the full Monty, I tell my hairdresser.
"Could you buy some more Soft Scrub before I see you the next time?"
Sure, anything else I should pick up? I ask my housekeeper.
These are some of the mundane, non-cosmic questions I long to hear, and to be able to answer.
"When do you think you'll get to Brooklyn?"
Soon, I tell my love. Soon.

-Kathy Burger in Hoboken, NJ

How Are You Doing?

It is a strange life I lead,
Strange and solitary,
With only memory to guide

Me through each day.

-Lester Schulman on the Upper West Side

What Are You Waiting For?

I'm waiting for a full-blown spring
I'm waiting for real life to resume
I'm waiting for a different NY Times headline
I'm waiting for Cuomo and de Blasio to embrace
I'm waiting for my attention span to return
I'm waiting for my constant low-level anxiety to cease
I'm not waiting for Godot
Or the Messiah
I'm waiting for a real life Shabbat service
I'm waiting to feel nostalgia for Zoom
I'm waiting to not end my emails with Stay Well or Stay Healthy
I'm waiting to not ration my computer paper, stamps, envelopes and checks
I'm waiting to stop curtailing deep feelings
I'm waiting for Netflix not to be the highlight of my day
I'm waiting to fly off on a tropical vacation
I'm waiting to boogie on a crowded dance floor
I'm waiting for real joy to spring forth
I'm waiting to throw caution to the wind.

-Linda Quigley in East Hampton, NY (usually in Fort Greene, Brooklyn)

What are you?

The carousel spins and lights appear
Cellophane bubbles drift, confetti falls to the ground
Fields of sunflowers and violets
Pastel colors in the sky, iridescent dreams
Euphoria dissolves and disappears

Freak shows march in as all pandemonium breaks loose
Lacrimosa plays, cellos strike like thunder
Black holes appear to create voids
I pull my hair and scream but nothing comes out

Exposure and paranoia, crying, laughing hysterically

Acid bubbles pop, dead and dried up flowers fall
Muted colors, I'm locked in a stratus
Melancholy reflecting off a pond
Everything in chaos, a waltz of anarchy
I am oblivious, I am blind, I am delirious, I am numb

-Izzy in Queens

How are you?

- Don't ask.

How are you?

-Good, thanks.

I watched a 39-year-old die today.

I don't think his kid will remember him.

How are you?

-OK, long day, you know?

I left my phone propped up against a basin so a family could FaceTime dad while he died.

There's no time to spend on the ones who are going to die. Can't help the dead.

How are you? Is it still bad?

-Every day is worse than the day before and that was the worst day of my career.

These have been the worst two months of my life.

Have you ever done something to make someone die faster?

How are you? Cuomo says it's getting better on the news.

-It's still bad, yes.

It's never going to be the OK. Two weeks isn't enough. One month isn't enough.

Is 9/11 better yet?

How are you? Thinking of you two every day.

-Baby is great, thanks!

I see him every time some kid pops up on the phone to FaceTime.

Grandma isn't coming home, kid. I just hope it's not my kid one day.

-Fiore Mastroianni, an ICU doctor on Long Island

Moving in the Time of Contagion?

I'm planning to return home.

That is, I'm moving back to the house that's been under repair from the accident — a van crashing into my porch with a slow and most terrible precision.

I'm planning it despite my promise to never move again because of too many moves before — out of chasing things or feeling a bit chased. This time I would stay put. Promise.

I'm planning when we are to be plan-less, to be suspended like the schools and hairdressers and most medieval, the funerals. Suspended — as we were on the verge of tomorrow and the next day and which one after that?

I would suspend and comply, like when I wear my mask (and rubber gloves) at the post office and shelter and dutifully listen to the President for the simple truth. I would.

But, my daughter, my granddaughters are straining to get out — from the city, where sirens at night appear closer, make their little dog fitful and turn a common dream into untimely death.

I'm planning so they can come to me in my small town where River Road runs along an actual river—where even here folks watch for the magnolias from a distance but can also count the old oaks for comfort.

I'm planning even while I'm head over heels with unbelieving and needing to believe, even while stranded between what's possible and how we're to empty boxes rioting with Covid prints from restless moving guys.

I'm planning to move when just a sigh seems as reckless as a handshake. But the railings are stained Tidal Wave and are dried by now, the girls are packed to go and the insurance company's had its say.

So I'm planning to move in the time of contagion, contagion, contagion. I am.

-Judith Carluccio in Island Heights, NJ

Will we ever kiss again?

As the setting sun signals
the turning of the earth

again,

and we awake each day
in gratitude for being here
again,

we slowly make our way
to that sweet hour
when we will kiss
again.

-Ana Varona, a former New Yorker now living in San Juan, Puerto Rico

Are You OK Without a Hug?

I dream of hugs
of approaching people to say hello
giving a touch on the shoulder

and then I wake, knowing it's wrong
and I picture myself stepping back
withdrawn to that safe distance.

When friends come to bring me food
we wave at each other
and make air hugs
six feet apart.

And then I pick up the delivery
with my black plastic gloves
and carry it inside
and wash it off with Lysol wipes.
I make no touch
where they might have touched
or some stranger could
have left the virus.
And then I wash my hands
scrubbing like Lady MacBeth.

And in the Zoom meetings of AA
when we see people we know

we wave our hands
flutters from the different squares
and when people share
and we feel their pain
we touch our hearts
or put our hands together
voices muted.
No touch.
No hugs.
Just space.

But so far
I'm ok without a hug.

-[Molly McKaughan](#), author of *Recovering Myself: a Memoir in Poetry*, West Orange, NJ

How are You?

I'm fine, but I'm not fine with the tens of thousands who have died from COVID-19
I'm fine, but I'm not fine with the even more who have tested positive for COVID-19
I'm fine, but I'm not fine that I cannot go to the office
I'm fine, but I'm not fine that I cannot visit my five grandchildren and give them hugs and kisses
I'm fine, but I'm not fine with having to wear a mask when I go to the supermarket
I'm fine, but I'm not fine that we can't see the play we purchased tickets for
I'm fine, but I'm not fine that my cousins from Cyprus cannot visit us in July as planned
I'm fine, but I'm not fine with the hundreds of thousands who are jobless
I'm fine, but I'm not fine with answering the question from my relatives overseas - how could this
have happened to one of the richest and most powerful countries in the world?

-Ayshe Murat in Whitestone, NY

Ask Me Why I'm Sad

Ask me why I'm sad
Kerouac dared Steve Allen in 1959
"No roads out of this one"
Jack slurs in my ear, my drinking buddy

The mad one is me

Thoughts clickety-clack on the corona typewriter
Fear, Anxiety, Survive!
Return carriage

Am I sad?
Truth be told, no
Ennui has no place on this page
While the death toll scrolls longer,
While my niece has no one to play dolls with,
While the birds take over the night

Ask me why I am not sad
Because the limitations of this purgatory has set me free
My madness vindicated
There is only one goal now
Survive!
Return carriage,
SHIT

This goddam typewriter just broke again and there is no place to get it fixed

-Lora Grillo in Astoria, NY

What Is Life Like In the Epicenter?

I awake to the promise of skies beyond my gated window
pure white clouds, like the breath of God
And I ponder all the souls ascending to those very heavens
as I did twenty years ago, when destruction descended from above,
and the southern tip of our island became a graveyard
the repository of our tears for years to come

Now death is all around us, prowling our streets
hiding in our bodies, our cells, our DNA
We are infected, and it is hard not to create a metaphor out of this,
a lesson to be learned that we can take with us
A way to expiate our sins so this plague never comes again

It is Passover, it is Easter Sunday
The body of Christ, the blood of Christ
yet still we remain prisoners

as heroic medical workers act as our white blood cells,
trying to sweep away the infection that plagues us all
We thank them in a daily ritual, but it is not enough
nothing will ever be enough
But still they toil, sewing hope in the fields of death

So that maybe next Easter, we can view the skies not from behind gated windows
but together
remembering the time when death lurked inside breath itself

-Carol Bugge in the East Village

"Are We Almost There?"

While we are waiting
April's Pink Moon evokes awe.
No need to leave now.

-Shelly Yeldin in Princeton, NJ

What is it like to be chained by Circumstance?

Light still streams into a room,
Cleansing, dressing, adorning as usual,
Earrings never neglected.
No external sounds resonating,
Only the prism of Arvo Part's minimalist music
Bathing the senses.
Friends detached from voices become sterile,
Tembreless words encased in a device.
Inducement to dash into the street cauldron nullified.
Invigorating gallery hop in Chelsea now a chimera.
Tormenting thoughts of a lover floating in a fishbowl of
Exile cannot be expunged.
Just drifting in a timeless vacuum confronted by
Circumstance's deadbolt.
Waiting and longing for release from life in stasis.

-Carol Chapman on the East Side

What Is Stronger Than Fear?

The power of Love
Beyond our imaginings
Transcends everything.

-Thalia Cokkinos in Greenwich, CT

Who Is Going to Warn Us?

Who is going to warn us
of things that will harm us
and not just disarm us
with blatant half-truths
or simply snake-charm us
until we can't move.
Wake up
I'll tell you
while you can still feel
The ALL that connects us,
connects to the Real.

-Sophie Barnes in Westport, CT

How is it like to be in quarantine alone?

how many
of us requested
for the world to end
or for the sky to fall?

meanwhile
I am becoming aware
of how *jammed* I am
inside my own mind

(like having high cholesterol)

even drama finding
a new way to transpire
within my own body,

inspiration depleting
from sunlight
to moonlight

(like the real walking dead if
you are wondering at all)

while there are
still some
trying to taste
a normal day
gone extinct
weeks ago

and my family.
watching me sail
in a cardboard box,
riding
the lawless
storm
solo

every day
I am taking a loan
out of my own mind

borrowing dreams,
happy memories,
and even the will
to survive

while it even
suggests to
rationalize
who I am today

and considering
if I am meant to be anything
more in this world
at all

Indisposed by anxiety,
yet, i monitor the news

like a wild bird
hovering
a liger
inside
its cage at night

while we both observe
each other's
diminutive
fuse

-Jenee Rodriguez in Los Angeles, CA (My partner and I cannot be in the same country. I have been in quarantine alone since it started.)

how can the hood keep its mind? (in cinquains)

The girl's anger in Woodhull
—the place with a Haring mural
And a social, forty-minute distance
From the Mount: House of Israel
Where they kvetch but they live

The girl's anger is on Broadway
And Flushing Avenue
—not Flushing or "Broadway"
But where intermission
Subsumes whole acts

And the girl's anger pushes
And the old lady falls
And cacophony coughs
And the spread of the lofts
—Luxury, costly ones like care

So the girl's angry here
There are no other places to go
Though her thoughts are elsewhere
Fairness has long been unfamiliar
Her space is no longer hers

But the girl's anger can be
Imagined as it spreads
—as a sickly wave of today
Borne long before now
Taking hooded bodies from their minds

-Wesley in Queens

What will we do today?

Count cargo ships coming
through the Narrows, then

Watch the tulips bend their heads with the wind
as we walk through Bliss's gates

Crash our dice across the table
as I beat you at your game, and later

Spend a respite hour wound together
reading in our own bed

But first let me
wrap my arms around you
and soak your lapels in tears

It has been so long

-Cameron Lory Faulds in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn

Where Are You?

We of the non-human species,
who reside wild in the city
are wondering where you are?

Yes, you are arrogant and annoying,
but do serve a purpose.

We get to pick at your leftovers-
gathering food, garbage, as well as
materials to line our nests and lairs.

We must confess,
we are a tad bit hungry
and uncharacteristically confused.

Yes, we have taken back
our streets and sidewalks,
quite relieved that we don't have to
constantly dodge flighty feet,
pouncing pooches and wayward wheels!

And at the end of the day,
we'd gather to share tales
of our oppression brought about
by you tall two-legged mammals.

But now, all is still and quiet,
and we say "funny, we thought
we'd be better off without you."

Turns out, much to our chagrin,
we grudgingly miss your errant ways
and truth be told,
we hope you will return to us
very soon.

And just so you know...
We Forgive You!

-Mary Springer in Greenwich Village

How Can I Lift Your Burden?

You can make their meals
Tend to their boo-boos
Answer their meandering queries
Look lovingly at their creations

You can download the schoolwork
And read the teacher's instructions
Then find the time that the 6 year old is:
not hungry
not tired
not thirsty
not too busy with the cat
not playing with his sister
not sick of schoolwork

Then wrangle him in front
Of his laptop and workbooks
Find his favorite blue pen
Be sure to watch out for his daydreams
And claims of "I can't do it"
When he can

Oh, can you also make milks and juices?
And cut apples just so?
Can you stay calm
When they reject your offerings?

Please dress the girl in her favorite color: pink
But shield your ego
When she looks with utter disgust
At anything YOU choose that is pink

Then be sure to kick a soccer ball
Until both you and the boy are sweating
And he needs water RIGHT AWAY
And he needs to sit down right there in the dirt to drink it

While you do all that
I will lay my burden down
Lay myself down
And drift and dream
Of another time

A dim memory
Where we moved about with ease
Hugged our friends
Crowded into small spaces to hear live music

I will try to chase away thoughts
of death and dying
of sneezing and coughing
of wondering who died today
And who lived

I'll stretch my legs
To take a solo walk
On wooded paths with dappled light
The light I love
Sun weaving through tree branches

The rushing brooks and
Flourishing plants will remind me
There is life all around us
It's a green shoot pushing up through dirt
It's the warbled sing-song of birds
It's a striated rock being polished by streaming waters

We are not surrounded by only death and fear of the same
There is beauty and birth
And rebirth

But you are not here and my burden grows
And the more distant I become
From hope and peace
Then the sorrow and agitation
Creep in like unwanted house guests

Sloppy, they leave their ugly debris
here and there
Until it's so crowded that I can't walk
So I sit down right there in the mess
Head lowered
Tears flowing

-Jessica Shatan Heslin in Briarcliff Manor, NY

Can you see me waving?

Sunset, we gather for evening vespers,
a rhythm calls us to our windowsills.

A new notch etched on the clock face of time
between the birth and the death of a day:
the city awakens for the new noon.

A parade marches only through our minds.

It reminds the old of rose-faced young boys
in army green, trailing from village squares;
the young remember walking out for change,
placards raised in a swelling green ocean
where every drop builds a surging wave.

Streets become towering cathedral aisles
where raucous churchgoers revel, standing
on stoops and rooftops, in doorways for pews.

Our smiles beam out into the empty road,
well-wishes thrown as pennies in fountains.

From up there on high, from across the pond
from satellites and the antipodes,
is heard and felt our unlikely cheering;
voices and drums amplifying the thrum.

I am dancing on my doorstep tonight
hearing the sermon of my neighbourhood,
as a part of our persistence, joining
the unanimity of our spirit.

Wherever you are, are you singing too?
Can you hear me? Can you see me waving?

-Madeleine, a New Yorker abroad in Glasgow, Scotland

Will what you don't know hurt you?

"What you don't know won't hurt you."

It's often said, but true?

Maybe it once was,

But not today.

The infant in Wuhan

And another in Chicago.

The boy of 13

Alone in a London hospital

Isolated from family.

A girl, 12, in Belgium.

A San Diego pharm tech, 25.

Another man, just 34,

After a family vacation to Florida.

Countless other people.

Elders too numerous to mention.

Did they know?

Did it hurt?

Do we know?

Does anyone truly?

"What you don't know won't hurt you"

Is a lie.

We don't know —

And it hurts.

-Gentry Phillips in Carrollton, Texas

What Do You Need?

It rarely occurs to me to think and be beyond
those things that need to be done
after survival mode turns to auto pilot
action replacing thought

Thoughts can lead to panic

incited by fears that far outweigh
Reality
or so I tell myself

When I stop – if I stop
I realize that the needs are few and defined

I need to know my kids are safe
in their space with food and what they
Need

I need to be at ease to sleep knowing that the brother who survived
a stroke and aneurysm
and long-term care
wants for nothing

I need to reassure that not every cough
from my daughter
Or every ache and pain mean that
She's going to experience the dread
I see shadowed in her eyes

I need to be strong
from being a key player just a month ago
to being a number, a budget cut, a cost savings, a bottom line change
that inevitably comes as executives decide the fate of those they
call "family" in better times

I need to accept that I can't control
when to stop the hard, hot tears
that blind the news of yet another friend succumbing

I need to finish what I started at 6 am
After walking in circles, forgetting
because
The media distracts me

I need to take it one moment at a time
There are so many of them,
once taken for granted,
that
for now
don't always need to be filled

-Susan Justiniano, founder of [RescuePoetix](#), in Jersey City, NJ

What Will Arise Today?

Outside, the fragrance
of neighbors cooking
is moving and lifting
over fences
and in the wind--
fish, spices, and the mixture
that smells like life.
Raptors gliding high above,
sounds of songbirds
frolicking in the open air,
flowers, even beautiful weeds
that no one cares for,
are opening petals, rising out
of the dirt, overnight.
And hope, the kind that can only
be felt with the heart-
is rising somewhere,
somehow,
and despite the pain and sorrow,
has risen.

-Diana Poulos-Lutz in Mineola, Long Island

How is Your Heart?

I'd say, 'today it is shaky'
with wonder, with disbelief, with profuse longing for the rewind. Take me back...
to excellent opera seats on a walk-in ticket
to holding a lover's hand on a park bench
to the night we laughed through dinner at that Mexican joint near the Gowanus Canal.
This heart beats proper and glad with the energy of my city
(after all, it's why LA couldn't keep me)
How long before the pulse of living returns in all of its breathable, shambolic, noisy glory? They
say 'hold on, it's only time.'

Wait we must, wait we will.

-Christina Poletto in Prospect Lefferts Gardens, Brooklyn

Have You Spoken to Your Mother?

Yes: easy answer. Sometimes phone face to phone face
often ears together over our home lines, and
the girls (I) miss her so much so we limit it...
still; text recipes, still; share plans for the leftover Easter ham,
feel the unmooring, breaking tendency to cry to one another.

My daughter Hope says, *I will swim with her.*
The younger daughter, *Will she eat with us?*

Nana, the faraway prophet of summer. We wait.

-Elizabeth O'Rourke in Mamaroneck, NY

do you miss me too?

I miss you so much.
If i could do it again, I:
would savor
would enjoy the moments
would memorize the important ones
would be there. in every way. in totality.

if I could go back, I:
wouldn't be afraid
would listen to myself
would trust you and trust myself
would ACT

I miss you so much. do you miss me too?

-Emily in Brooklyn Heights

What's going on in that freckled head of yours?

I miss you
I want to hug you and hold your hand
I'd rather talk with you, be with you, sleep next to you
I like you more than him
I wish it were you, not him
You give me butterflies
And the smile that came across my face after seeing you for a fleeting moment lasted me all day and night
The manic look in my eyes is because of you.
These things, and more, are things that i want to say to you
But I'm scared
Not because I don't think you'd reciprocate the feeling, because I'm almost certain you would
But because then it would become real,
And an action would need to be taken
And though I love the possibility and have thought and pondered over the what ifs and what could be's
The road in between here and there is not one that is smooth
But fraught with turmoil, darkness, and it is long
A road that requires inner work and self reflection
With satisfaction not guaranteed or implied
But only desired.
It is a road that must be traveled
One day.
And when that road has been traveled,
Where will you be?

-MT in NJ

Do You Have Some Time To Talk?

If a lax answer
will somehow satisfy
the patchwork of grief
and fascination lining
your stomach, assuage the mesh
of anxiety wrought
by weeks of uncertainty,
than the answer

is "Yes."

Physicists say that there
are two types of time:

The one that we measure on our wrists,
mark with precious squiggles on hanging disks
or digitized screens. The kind we use
to read the moments in a life,
to divvy up
the incomprehensible nothingness
of an unproductive day.

Call it
retrofitted chaos.

The other type
is cosmic, a kind of
wrinkled flesh, made of math,
stretched over
everything. Space-Time
cradling all that matter that,
strangely, does not matter.

One of them has died.
An early victim
of COVID-19.

Now another species mourns,
while -- ironically -- the planet
is given time to breathe.

And what can I do?

Well, I
can listen.

Work the only magic
the universe has given me. Press
my ear to your heavy heart
across lightyears bridged by video feeds
that cannot feed our human need
for connection. The spirit's yearning

for touch.

We the privileged few, anyway.

I can offer up my
own solace to dine on.
It's not much, but
it might feed a family.
A soul.

I can console or offer respite.
Carry the weight
of all that brain. Over-worked and
unemployed. The pain
of what it means to be alive.
To survive
or not.

Please.
Let me hold it
for a while.
I have all the time
in the world.

-[Steven T. Licardi](#) in Jackson Heights

When This is Over, What Then?

When this is over,
I'll grow my nails longer.
I'll get my hair cut
shorter—return to the
pros for polish and root
touch up. Their masks
won't seem so awkward.

When this is over,
we'll make plans to go to
the park, take our dogs.
I will be close to you,
our hands might touch.

I won't need to look
over my shoulder.

When this is over,
I'll redecorate—
use my mask and
gloves to repaint my
kitchen chairs. I'll
store the rest in case
I ever need them.

When this is over,
I'll invite my neighbors.
We'll gather face to face,
clink our wine glasses.
The sound will remind
us of a bell's toll,
as the gates open.

-Nancy Lubarsky in Cranford, NJ

If You Could – What Would You Do?

I would ask you to hear
then give up some ideas you hold dear
hear that all plagues since the bubonic
are not iconic
they all began the same way
a virus escaped one day
from where animals were confined
their freedom undermined
so that humans could kill them for their own need
this accelerated from family barnyards to vast corporate greed
not just a wet market in Wuhan far away
there are 80 wet markets in the five boroughs today
slaughter houses and feedlots where imprisoned animals stay
the crowding, the filth, the unnatural feed – some of us plead
the answer we get is - but we need
our burgers, our cheese, our breakfast sandwich
don't tell us about any blood running in a ditch
another pandemic won't, can't start here in the USA

just because you are a vegan, you can't hold sway
and try to scare me into our meat being taken away
please, please, really think
come to understand the link
if you gave up (or seriously reduced) eating animals at all
consumption would fall
thus production would stall
grazing lands could grow plants
you might even need smaller pants
but I can't live without
I hear your silent shout
of vegan cookbooks, I have seventy three
would you accept one as a gift from me?
it could start you on the way
for us all to have a brighter day

-Roberta Schiff in Rhinebeck, NY

How are you coping with Quarantine?

Like Rapunzel in her tower,
Like a little lonely flower,
All alone in isolation,
Nothing brings me consolation.

We are separated- cut by a knife,
Ripped from our daily life,
All humans I do trust,
Were just ripped from me- big thrust.

Mountains of hand sanitizer,
Nothing to do, help me, oh why sir,
All activities are thrown away,
All my social plans ruined- can't even play.

Thanks a lot, COVID-19,
For putting this attention queen,
This little extraverted teen,
In quarantine.

-Zara Al-Zand Forzley, 14 years old in Mill Valley, CA

Is it possible we deserve this?

Is it possible we deserve this?
Is it possible we should die?
Is it probable Fate gives a grate
When it sees we seldom try?

Maybe this is just what we need,
Maybe this is just what we deserve
Maybe this shows us the truth
Compelled to thrive and yearn

Maybe my loved ones need to get sick
Maybe our Mother takes time to pick
Maybe justice is as thin as a wick
And Fate is playing its destined trick

-Rennick Louis in the Bronx

"So What's New With You These Days?"

These times are surely very strange
With much uncertainty
Too far from home we cannot range
And friends we cannot see

We look like robbers on the street
Our faces in a mask
And since we stay apart six feet
"Who's that?" we have to ask

We stock our homes with food to last
For weeks or months or more
Cans of beans and goods so vast
They're stored across the floor

The packages are so piled up

You'd think it Christmas morn
But when it's time to eat our sup
Where is that can of corn ?

And as I tell of the lives we lead
It's time to bare my soul
So I must confess that, yes indeed,
I've tons of toilet paper roll

-Steve Frakt in Princeton, NJ

What will change for us, now?

Now, where we are
beside a capsized boat,
overturned by the silent blast
of an invisible storm,
tipping points rocking in the waves.
Teeming waters
cascading down our lungs
like an urgent question.
The certainty of air, our best laid plans,
the closeness and community, thrown
into doubt.
Lingering, unsolved problems in our
wake, calling for awakenings like a
siren.
The broken lives, the earth's cries for
help, the unequal ground beneath our
feet, the uncertainty of care, the
bitterness, the crisis of
imagination, the
deficits of our better angels.
Will we answer them?
Rising from below, grateful,
disparate though we are,
let us separate the dislocations
for good.
Now, here, where we are present, will
we face the waves together, a sea of
fleeting moments that recede

and return, standing side by side.

-Andrew Brunsden in Kensington, Brooklyn

What were summers like in the Shenandoah Valley?

At the time, it seemed
so ordinary to go to
the back road to pick
black caps. We got spread out
and were able to eat a lot without
anyone else seeing. And still
we brought back plenty for my
grandmother to make her pie.
She would take her lard pie dough
and roll it out on the kitchen table,
smoothing flour over the top, underneath.
I sat and watched. She was
always old and patient to me.
Her fingers were arthritic.
While she lay out and crimped the pie,
we sprinkled cinnamon and sugar on the triangular scraps and
baked them for ourselves.
If you weren't there, you missed
the magic.

So many black caps
waiting in the damp morning
for our wide buckets

-Leslie Harris in the East Village

Want to go on a date?

Soon enough
I wish to sit across the table
From my date
Far enough not to invade each other's dreams, ambitions, space
But close enough to smell his scent

And not mind droplets of saliva on my face
When he cracks up at my wit
So basically within 6 feet

I hope he picks the restaurant I'll like
Or whichever restaurant survives
And it won't matter who picks up the bill
I will wear my favorite dress that hung in the closet for a while
A pair of heels that's been collecting dust in a shoe pile
I'll let my hair down
I washed it just for this
And a perfume that hasn't touched my neck in weeks

We'll talk about our future
Together or apart
I hope we will go dancing
To a flamenco bar
So I can show him what I've learned at home on Zoom
While waiting patiently
For him to ask me on a date soon

-Viktoriya Gaponski in Astoria, Queens

What are you grateful for?
(Dedicated to Ruth Drescher and Ellen Lane)

My Jewish friends had to leave Germany to be safe
I just have to stay home to be safe
Some people don't even have a home
I have a home I love to have to "stay-at-home" in
Some people have nobody who checks on them
I've saved my "I'm fine" text paragraph to copy and paste.
I have enough food to last the quarantine
some people have never had enough food
And last but not least of my gratitudes
All I have to do to see my doctor is arrange a tele-visit
while so many doctors and nurses are on the frontlines in this fight against COVID19!

-Dolores Rasalas on the Upper East Side

What is the greatest gift to humanity?

Draped in the cold pale blue overalls, masking the identity
which holds no importance in these turbulent times

Where every heart needs solace and every mind needs peace
when days are seeded with fear and anxiety

They come bearing the news of hope and comfort
for haggard faces and the jarred minds

Trying to keep the grief and sorrow at arm's length distance
they are the angels dawned on the face of humanity

When everyone looks place for safe haven
a place to end this temerity

Yes, they are the brave hearts
wearing their life on their sleeves

Braving their own lives. A trade-off, they deem important,
for sick and the elderly

If you ever bow down and hold your hands in prayer
pray for them, incessantly.

A seraphic soul in a mortal body
These angels in blue are indeed a gift to humanity.

-Megha Sood in Jersey City, NJ

What are you doing to keep yourself busy
When you feel like your life is in a tizzy
Do you read, do you cook or strum the banjo
Listen to the music or dance the tango
Wearing out the rug, walking back and forth
I can't figure out which is south or north
I really haven't decided how to keep busy
I guess I'll keep my life in a tizzy

-Rita Shedlin in Pompton Plains, NJ

How Are You Doing?

I came into work and
found a sticky note on my computer -
“Happy rainy Monday – I know how you love the rain- have a good day”

That was not a question
But a reminder that in spite
of all that is going on
there are things to make us smile

There are no questions that I want asked
Just the nod
We are still here
Doing our jobs – helping where we can
Feeling the rain and the sun –
Knowing we are frightened
But pushing it back
Until it is over and it is safe to feel

Do not ask how I am doing
Just know that in these Covid moments
We are more alike than not
We are all struggling
And we all care

But until then, a note
On a computer
Is as good as....
“How are you doing?”

-Naomi Moylen in Denville, NJ

*How can we now ourselves compose?
(Dedicated to my John Jay Composition Students)*

Captives of COVID-19, we Zoom in and out

while confined to our narrowing rooms.
Essayer means to try; your essays will
try your thoughts, tease out meaning.
And yes, you need to proofread and revise
even as you struggle with newly fragmented lives.
Each day's news delivers sentences of death
and politicians' run-ons, splicing hope and stats.
You need to claim, document, cite, analyze;
discover what you know as you write. Try
the world's practice against your own:
justify. Write on. Right on, my students,
be well and compose yourselves.
Know that as I read, comment, and grade,
I miss your smiles, your groans at my jokes,
your voices. Though learning distanced, remote,
know that I continue to hold you close.

-Sr. Fran McManus, RSM, an adjunct instructor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice,
living in Chelsea

What are you going to do with your life? What NOW?

Jarred by the unimaginable exponential consequences of a bat virus mutation across the world

Shaken by cascading disaster scenarios.

Living my mundane day-to-day life

Walking my ocean paths in the mornings

Hiding in an offseason beach town, wanting for nothing but longing for everything

Dreaming of my still to be renovated dream house off the M train in a scary New York City.

Perched on the edge of too many different projects,

Too much housekeeping, bookkeeping, explaining myself

What do I want to do with what's left?

How to dive in, how to quiet the fear, worry, thoughts, upsets, arguments against?

Where to anchor myself with something that really makes a difference?

Opportunity: Swimming in it, drowning in it, or beached at the high tide line with all the dead seaweed and dried foam?

What to do with the one wild and precious life granted me by Mary Oliver?

Whispered prayers to shaken-up, unmoored, dead seaweed piles, and the nakedly exposed emperor's new invisible but stylishly branded track suit

It was never certain, and that is now painfully, achingly obvious.

This, then, is my prayer to the uncertain, naked, unimaginable exponential cascading disaster of new opportunities

Hovering on the edge, the explosion of life encapsulated in the just visible green and red buds on every bush and tree

The explosion that will rebuild our world and myself with new piles of throbbing seaweed and glistening foam.

-Jeff Bonar in Ridgewood Queens (normally), Ogunquit Maine (now)

What do you wish you could do?

Strip away the morning hustle to the skyscrapers
where we pack into too-slow elevators,
feigning the significance of our phone's screens.

Dull the buzz of the busy bees on errands
for the CEOs and VIPs, and forget all the deadlines
that have come and gone without missing them.

Lose the high-heels, curated cultures and wardrobes,
desk-side drive bys, lipsticks and coiffed hair,
and the corporate grind is as sexy as a sticky mouth guard.

As mesmerized as I was by the esteem and endless to-dos,
I am by my bookshelf, towering with shiny, old books,
and the bosses who wrote every single word on every page.

Inspired again by the legends to pick up a pen
and spend all day inside, inside with me,
writing away the manufactured weight of an 8-to-6.

Hustling for my projects and my priorities, word by word.
This editing process is slow, but it'll get me to there,
milestones and final products. The end.

-Kate Achey in Philadelphia, PA

Is this how you've been feeling for the past few years?
Is this what grief is? Unhinged, untethered from anything familiar,
Shipwrecked,
Desolate like a barren desert,
Bottomless?
How did you manage to deliver performance reviews and feed the children,
Attend meetings, clean the bathroom, smile in the elevator?
Did you weep at the sight of the toddler's hand on the man's knee?
Does the regret of not being there at the end subside?
Will this loss always be my first thought upon waking?

-Tara Marlovits in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn

Why Covid19?

To reveal the silver lining in every cloud.
To teach us that generic toilet paper is almost as soft as Charmin.
To help us appreciate fresh air, unmasked by a filter.
To show us that we smile with our eyes as well as our mouths.
To point out the value of sitting still and embracing the quiet.
To remind us that "stranger" does not mean "enemy."
To force us to confront our hunger for a scapegoat.
To reveal the cloud in every silver lining.

-Sara Golfopoulos in Croton-On-Hudson, NY

Have the birds always sounded so beautiful?
Symphonic scales unlike any concert I
can ever attend at 7 on a Monday morning
I feed them from a cupcake tin placed on my fire escape "terrace" in complete awe and gratitude

-Kim Depole in the East Village

Where are we headed?

Are we going forward,
Or just around again?
The rise and fall of
One more civilization,
Or a real turning point?
Released from our
Isolation, will we be
Enlightened, or
Rabidly return to
Getting and spending
Earning and burning
Carbon, consuming, to
Spread ourselves further into
What's left of Nature? Or
Will Nature finally rebel to
Hurl us further down to
Harsh levels of subsistence?
Only time will tell.

-Rebeca Taub in Chelsea

How much cheese do you want?
I want cheese as big as my head.
What color cheese?
All colors I'm not picky.
Even the smelly cheeses?
Yes all sizes, colors and smelly cheeses are the best.

-Dasha Johnson, 9 years old, in Astoria, Queens

what should poets write

everyone says
poets should write
about important things;
the state of our world
the misery of illness
the desperation of life;
not the mundane stuff
like trees, and love
and cats

it is hard to think what
could be more important
than the trees
my father planted
or the food
my mother made
or the love i feel
for my siblings
and their children
or the pleasure of cats

i say, poets should write
(at least sometimes)
about that stuff of life
that makes up our days
not always of things
that cause us pain
or we cannot change
even though that may be
what we experience
we also lie under trees
eat food with others
and stroke our cats
for a moment of joy.

-B. Lynch Black in the Bronx

Who Would You, Today, Have Me Take

The crow, the corvus, the covid-19
Appears in a dream, her feathered wings
Unfold as she sings:
Who would you, today, have me take
And freeze, then burn, and bury
Before I wake I list the names:
Among these first of course comes Trump
Among the ones responsible
Don and Donald, all the Trumps,
and Jared as well
If there's a hell the likes of those
Designed it
Then: Mnuchin, Doctors Oz and Phil
The millions of minions
Who write the bills to chop and kill
And wreck the planet, and those
who employ them
Who'd you have me take?
Joe Biden, too, and Obama, as well
Send those killers down, don't tell
The lie that they've spread peace on Earth
Just poverty, pollution, war, and torture
Bush, let's not forget him
Zuckerberg, Gates, Jamie Dimon,
Bezos, Buffett, Koch, DeVos
The cannibals who serve on courts
Alito, Thomas, Kavanaugh, et cetera
Et al, all those devouring the Earth
And all their faithful servants
Their faithless ones can be spared
The crow stared deeply in my eyes
Okay, she said, as she left, I'll try.

-Elliot Sperber in South Williamsburg

When was the last time you got a belly ache from laughing out loud?
Imagined life ahead of us as a brilliant blue sky - without a doubtful cloud?

I mean, when was the last time you doubled over with unstoppable giggles?

A sound so loud and raucous - It made all your body parts jiggle?

When was the last time you felt pure, unabated joy?

....It's okay if you can't remember - neither can I

I did laugh loudly with my teenage niece, from Boston, who visited me in a dream
She came to me as a cuddly, chubby, innocent baby - as comforting as butter cream ...
It counts.

-Tenaz. H. Dubash in Brooklyn, NY

Hi.

Can I help?

I know you feel alone.

Your mom is gone. And you need her.

Even though you are a mom too.

This is

just.

so.

very.

hard.

You're their mom.

Their teacher.

Their taskmaster.

Their scapegoat.

Especially when their inner demons rear their heads and torment them.

And that part is the worst of all. A hidden burden that you're afraid to share.

So, you wish for help.

Someone to make it better.

To heal their pain.

To make them whole.

To fix what I cannot.

Yes, please.

Help.

-Anonymous in Westport, CT

How May I Help You Today?

Good morning, Miss.

I'd like to divest in the oil suckers, the pill pushers, the sweat shoppers and the water tainters.

Put my funds in stalks of celery

Love of mothers, stay at home mask makers and the selfless out there ready

Chickens and their every morning eggs

Radishes, lettuces, pickled things

hothouse flowers

I'd like to invest in spring time

Fall, summer

Maybe even winter

In tree sweetness tapped in March

In bees and honey and honeycomb and wax

Made into candles and crayons

In children's hands

Pushing, pulling across paper

Learning.

Put my money on that.

-Jonna Carter in Greenpoint, Brooklyn

When's this shit going to be over?

This shit's going to be over when

We all can open our windows

—Our homes finally unmasked—

And pass foaming bottles of beer

Back and forth across the courtyard

With our neighbors

This shit's going to be over when

My Nana can tend

The flower bed outside her apartment

And peer over the hill at the shopping mall

Parking lot full of cars zooming in and out

This shit's going to be over when

The prison doors unlatch

And nurses rush in to heal the

Sick and separate the infected

This shit's going to be over

When we all sit in our scuffed and scratched dining room chairs
And breathe down into our perineum
And whisper “you belong” to the fear that hovers just outside our skin
And feel the sweat on the back of our knees
And whisper “there’s no where else to be, nothing else to do”

-Ben Katz in Brooklyn

Is It Today?

Is it today, I really don’t know.
Seems like yesterday was so long ago.

It’s a week of Thursdays, this quarantine living,
Inside so long, did we miss Thanksgiving?

Fridays have now lost all their jazz,
In fact each week is the same razzmatazz.

Our hands are like those shampoo labels,
Wash Rinse Repeat, then back to cable.

Re-sanitize and don’t touch your face,
Bored in your home, just march in place.

We did all this the past five weeks,
Is it today? Well yes, methinks.

-Patricia R. Eisemann in Jersey City, NJ

The Answer?

A dry land seeking liberty
to wet itself wonders
about the quiet after this storm.

The roads are familiar to it.
The smell of the air isn’t.

The trees no longer liaise.
Their commitments are done.

Does the new rephrasing require us?

An empty bowl falls on the floor -

The sound seems familiar.
It was there in the quiet
before the storm.

-Sonnet Mondal

Where are we going for dinner?

The question
at times frustrating
at times titillating
Brings to mind
Clinking glasses
A cheer from the bar
The sizzle of plates
prepared by someone else

Smiles across the booth
Relief after a long week
At work

-Kristen Stahl in Morris Plains, NJ

Where is it then that we must go?

Some points of consciousness seem less concrete as they march relentlessly by. Though the real meaty dense sections collide with such force, a crashing wave of emotion swamps the fragile logic of the remaining ego. Biological forces, by way of the resiliency of natural processes, soon reveal the waning undulations of adaptive flesh attempting to resist the destructive deluge. In many cases, the mind, followed closely by the physical body, succumb to the deep.

It's best we push onward from here.
Refusing to adjust course will doom
the efforts of many that have come before.
Where is it then that we must go?
For all the paths beyond this place are littered with jagged stone.

Before careful and thoughtful contemplation,
Attempting progress past this point
will lead to your ultimate demise.
How long then must we linger here?
For my gift is bundled tight with twine
and I must be ready to blaze a path.

Careful though as to not preempt
that delicate linearity of our course.
With time, all will come, but only when it will.
How can I manage, my burden so great?
It seems the luster of the subtle gleaming seams
has dulled with efforts of my preparation.

If the proper opportunity comes to light,
Moving away from this place should be done
With haste.

Can I depart with the ones that I love,
Or will my sight be bound by
Certain sacrifices?

Comfort will never come, though neither will despair.
Gradual, gentle leveling, a slow centering sway
Will suffice.

Where once wise, my ego brought esteem.
In short, I thought I had it made.
Such hope!

So now remains the probability of success:

Trials seek to mould the cast,
Yet it's form remains unclear.
Seek yourself the answers now
But know that YOU will never find them.
Levy the light within

and merge with the pervading luminance
of the universal experience.
Only there will peace be found.

-Nicholas Humphreys in Boonton, NJ

How is your mood?

Low -
Still each day I rise
to the occasion

-Jessica Baehr in Oyster Bay, NY

Pantoum For COVID-19

Here's to tenderness, transformation and banana bread.
Here's to one day shaving my legs and wearing a bra.
To kindness, compassion and community
Here's to the vulnerable and the brave.
God knows, there's nothing like a human crisis to bring out the humanity in humanity.

Here's to one day shaving my legs and wearing a bra.
As we reach out and clutch tight at moments and memories,
Those past and those yet to come
After all the chaos and death has past,
we will be left
with one another,
and our memories.
Nothing like a human crisis, to bring out the humanity in humanity.

Faith is a verb.

Here's to you and me and those yet to come.

Reaching out and clutching tight at moments and memories.
Here's to kindness, compassion and community.
I fixate on each minute detail of the narcissistic dog's behavior.
And the whirring of the vacuum cleaner.

Here's to poetry and prayer.

Desperately, clumsily we reach out and clutch hard.

I almost take it for granted now, the sterilizing of avocado pears and the eerie emptiness of Times Square.

Like Spring flowers blossoming in Winter

I'm guessing the idea of a first world has been canceled.

To think there was a time before Covid-19.

Here's to stepping up and holding on.

Here's to daffodils, fireflies and the promise of summer.

I remind myself, that faith, is a verb.

Perhaps one day, I will shave my legs and wear on a bra.

Gone now the illusion of predictability,

Here's to the laughter of my teenage triplets.

Here's to the tenderness of my husband's smile.

Here's to the sparkling eyes of drivers and the devotion of school teachers.

Now dull melancholia,

Now deep gratitude.

Here's to daffodils, fireflies and the promise of summer.

Here's to you and me and all of humanity in this profound moment of connectivity.

Here's to tenderness, to transformation and the miracle of banana bread.

-Rahla Xenopoulos in Dobbs Ferry, Westchester

why did you do it?

that was question I heard

while waking up to the livestream swirl

of my existence

with family and friends and pets

that enter my sphere

as i attempt to walk incognito

through the business

of my day.

a person may be aware

that life is not rhetorical

as they attend to those who want the attention

to be

be fed, hugged and cuddled and comforted
before a deadline
that could become a flatline
at a time of crisis.

-Michael Chait in Patchogue, NY

The question I want someone to ask me is rain.

The question I'd like to be asked
is long horizons.
Ask me a pond full of salamanders.
Ask me a waterfall.
Speaking tires me out.
Let's fall face down in snow
and speak without making sounds.
The internet connection is unstable.
I shout into my screen for an hour.
Let's stand in a forest
at midnight alone. By let's I mean
let's not go together
I don't want a person beside me
not even myself.
The dishwasher is rasping like Darth Vader
and I just put some dough in the oven. Ask me
photons of light streaming through windows,
ask me table, ask me anything but a question
I have to answer in words,
my words are potatoes tonight.

-Lily Akerman in Gowanus, Brooklyn

Would you like a piece of cheese cake?

Maybe someone
could ask me if I would like
a piece of cheesecake
and a movie ticket?

The next question would be
Do you want to be an Eagle
for two hours
and ffflllyyyyyyyyyy
from Coney Island
to the Bronx?

Ask me
if I like the way
the night sky
is decorated
with stars? -- or the way clouds wander?

What is Memory?
Do snails smile?
Can we have a conversation about Being?

I depends on who
is asking the question.

I want a Donkey to ask
"can we go for a walk?"

I want a stranger to ask
"Do you have the Time?"

I waver
on the Nature of The Question
"To Ask" or
"To be Asked"

Let's talk again when I'm 70.

-Silas Borsos in Gowanus, Brooklyn

What Would You Rather...?

Love in the time of the super-infectious Covid
I'd rather be metamorphosing with a poet named Ovid

Life in the time of the virulent virus

I'd rather go back to the reign of King Cyrus

Drinking in the time of the ghastly Corona
I'd rather be in Copenhagen spending my kroner

Eating every square meal in sad isolation
I'd rather Split the bill in a restaurant, Bosnian or Croatian

Sleeping too much through a global pandemic
I'd rather be at Film Forum watching the movie star Lee Remick

Wincing out my window at relentless, bleating sirens
I'd rather be Dizzying with Gillespie or Don Byron

Tuning out news conferences of mendacious propaganda
I'd rather be at the National Zoo stroking the chin of a panda

In a time of lies so pernicious and slick
I'd rather be buying art supplies at Blick

Listening to updates from cogent health czar Fauci
I'd rather be feeling just a little less grouchy

Deleting musical tiles in a time of Zoom hackers
I'd rather be at a reception eating stale cheese and crackers

Tired of rinsing vegetables in a brine of vinegar water
I'd rather be splashing in a tub of Estée Lauder

Crashing IRS website for my stimulus dollar, uh
I'd rather be reading "Love in the Time of Cholera"

Watching the lock-downers venting their fury
I'd rather be floating through cherry blossoms, Sakura Matsuri

Walking masked-faced through the park, with the ducks all a-splatter
I'd rather not be quacking, "Can't you see what's the matter?"

In a time when I scurry to keep six feet from joggers
I'd rather be shielding my iPad from bloggers

Hands tied in a time of zero face touching
I'd rather be in rush hour, subway pole clutching

Life in a time of panic-driven hoarders
I'd rather be a nomad passing through wide open borders

-Naomi Tarantal in Kensington, Brooklyn

What's the Matter?

From six feet away,
Behind the man before me,
I watched her
As she packed the groceries
He had chosen,
Into the bag
He had brought.

A sturdy presence.
Shoulders back,
Essential,
Behind the plexiglass.
Thickly clothed in layers.
Faceless behind her mask.
Hair bound and covered.
Not even her wrists exposed.

My own discomfort rising,
A need to finish up and flee.
And so
I took
One step
Across the six foot chasm.

"Stop!"
A muffled order barked.
Her purple latex glove raised high,
Fingers tight together pointing straight up.
Brown eyes
Behind her glasses
Warned me to obey.
And I did.

Taking a beat between
She then turned to me.
Her eyes softened.
She tilted her head
And slowly
Reached out her arm
And with this graceful port de bras
Beckoned me forward.
Invited me in to join her space.

With our transaction over,
I thanked her.
And she nodded her acceptance.

And as I stepped out
Into the sun and April air,
I could not see.
For tears pooled in my eyes

-Roberta Herche in Washington Heights

Ask

Here. Sigh unheard, sight unseen
time passed this side of screen.

This is your task as I sit still, and
as I still sit opposite you. Ask.

I may say something, any thing
What does it mean
How does it seem
Work with me, Work with me.

I may say something, any thing
Lend no defense
Make it make sense
Work with me, Work with me.

I am facing you freely. My face. No mask.

If you can't hear me
If you aren't near me
Ask, just ask

It's no big thing,
some lame little task,
how to know what's about --
find something out.
Ask.
Just ask.

-Margo Cates in Midtown West

What is our time?

We were birthed to face the world's challenges,
Our hearts, our bodies crafted to thrive through it all.
Our smiles were meant to warm, our lips to spark.
With hands and legs we wrap each other in love.

Forever, no, for good, yes, for now, please.
Too soon, too quick, too pained, why?
Age in place, age in peace, age with grace, certainly.
Time is ownerless, measureless, and we are powerless
in its possession.

Reach out, call out, find your place.
Stand up, pack up, continue the journey.
Happiness, worthiness, hold them close.
Take your time, pick your pace.
Make a life of it.

-Aaron Etra in Turtle Bay, Manhattan

Have you dined with us before?

We have the menu.
Wait, but, is it hard?

What's the trick?
I see there's food, and prices too.
Is there more?
Okay, that's fine, you can explain.
Thank you so much.
Yes, a few more minutes.

-Eleanor Gillers in Chelsea

Where do you want to go?
To the florist--for flowers
To the coffee shop--for a mocha latte
To the salon--for a manicure
To the hair dresser--for a hair cut
To sleep--without sirens
To dream--without nightmares
To the supermarket--without seeing ill-paid workers exposed so I can shop
To the park--to walk without a paper mask
To church--to say prayers for the dead and the dying.

-Jane LaTour in Inwood

Why do you love East Meadow?

Central Park East Meadow,
Not famous like Sheep Meadow,
Simon & Garfunkel didn't sing here,
No Philharmonic concerts,
Nor John Lennon looking down from the Dakota.

Central Park East Meadow,
Where I tramped through snow drifts
with Ingrid in the fifth grade,
Lugging sleds,
Searching out a hill high enough to sled down.

Where my father
Told stories of being a naughty boy,
Circling until we reached a sunny bench

in the shelter of the tennis house.

Where I crossed time and again
with Evelyn, over to
Soup Burg on Madison,
Gossiping over vanilla Cokes.

Near where I sprawled with
Ted and Wendy, Toni and Vicki
on late April afternoons,
Reciting from 11th grade anthologies
verses by Wordsworth,
As daffodils danced
almost two centuries after the poems.

Central Park East Meadow,
I glanced
from the big windows of Klingenstein Pavilion
between labor pains,
Anticipating arrival of my daughter into the May morning.

Near where I crossed by the Guggenheim with Arlene
last Christmas Day, marveling
how instinct led us to the West Side
over paths untrod since childhood.

Central Park East Meadow,
Not famous like Sheep Meadow,
Simon & Garfunkel didn't sing here,
No Philharmonic concerts,
Nor John Lennon looking down from the Dakota.

An unsung corner, an open expanse
near baseball diamonds,
Where families cheer their players,
Where schoolkids toss a football
back and forth, dreaming
to make the A team.

Central Park East Meadow,
Overnight a field hospital erected
upon tender spring grass.
Ambulances, fences, white tents

obscuring forsythia and azalea,
With stretchers and rubber sheeting,
With scanners, monitors, snakes of tubing.

Also coolers with snacks
for exhausted staff
receiving the overflow,
The overflow of people
desiring one thing:
That enough air pass in and out of lungs
To grant them more days upon our verdant Earth.

-Helen Schary Motro, a native New Yorker, who splits her time in New York and Israel

(This is my poem dedicated to my mom who is at a nursing home suffering from Alzheimer's. I haven't been able to visit her in over a month and wonder how she misses them.)

Do you Remember?

Walks on the boardwalk and seeing the many cyclists, roller bladders and beach goers merrily going their way?

The visits every year to the old country to reconnect with everything that was left behind. To reconnect with its people, the land and its spirit?

Family and friend visits who you'd spend long hours with and enjoy their companionship with food and laughter?

Me holding your hand and seeing in every wrinkle and age spot the direct connection to our past, your accomplishments and my heritage.

-Alex Nuñez in Westbury, NY

Are the Lungs the Only Part of the Body Affected by COVID-19?

Picture a plane touching down,
with the silence of deafness,
in several destinations, adept
at homing in on vulnerable areas

only you thought you knew.
Say you suffer from asthma.
The plane alights on lungs,
taxi toward respiratory tract,
trachea and central airways.
You gasp for breath
at a craft so cunning
it absorbs sound
so you don't know it's there.
But to answer your question.
Indigestion and diarrhea
may not just be symptoms
of the fear you pack
in the pit of your stomach,
but confirmation the flight's arrived
in your GI system
and will soon unload baggage
into your blood stream.
Other destinations – heart, liver, kidneys –
may be part of the plane's flight path
and suffer lasting damage
like woodlands flattened
to make a concrete runway
where the speed of infection
hurtles out of control.
To clip its wings,
ensure Covid fades
like the condensation trail
in a plane's wake, soars
at the highest altitude
of priority. A crash landing
on the brain would set it aflame,
sunder the sensory grid,
envelop memories beneath a lava
of lesions. But what if the brain, infected
by a yearning for light, imagines
Itself the moon shining bright
in the blackness, relaunching
the picture of Neil Armstrong,
standing on its lustrous surface,
one small magic moment
in a lethal time for mankind?

-Darielle Rayner in Mount Kisco, NY

What do you need right now?

Sift through
memories
like sifting this flour
for bread I don't need,
but bread
is alchemy
like memories
of those who came before
hands work-rough.
Two eggs cracked on the kitchen floor,
the dough rises anyway.

-Melissa Forbis in Brooklyn

WHERE'S THE LESSON?

It was a dark night
In the year 2020
And cats and dogs it rained

A cabal of coronaviruses
Walked into a bar
And within seconds
Were obliterated

Sadly
All subsequent suds
Slithered slowly down the city sewer
Sans mission
Till the salutary soap
Was spent

-Shahé Navasart Sanentz in Bedminster, NJ

WHAT TO DO?

Turn off the TV,
switch off the phone,
take a walk.

The birds are not cancelled.
Spring is not cancelled.
Coffee's not cancelled.

My neighbor stands smoking
on the sidewalk. She's a teacher
(school's cancelled).

We raise our arms, shrug
like two old men—
whatchagonnadoooo?

Crescent moon, not cancelled,
lingers on the edge
of blue morning sky, curious.

The ferry is running,
seagulls are sunning,
grackles swoop and scold

protecting their nest
in the bathroom vent,
just like last year,

just like next year.

-Marcia B Loughran in Astoria, Queens

No, The Panic Isn't Gone

But as I tamp the dirt over the seeds,
I smooth my expression,
calm and serene.

Hey, kids!

Tomatoes and peppers - no flowers - this year.

Icy thoughts push upward to the sun,
green tendrils winding themselves around my heart.

-K Cole in Westchester

Do You Have Any Masks?

Would you like one with some dots?
Would you like some for your tots?
Is the size for Mom or Dad?
Or should it fit your grandson Brad?
Do you want it with a pouch?
Or some fabric with a flounce?

I've got stripes and I've got flowers,
You can have them within hours.
I will leave them on the bench in front,
So our fingers do not have to meet.
But I'll greet you from my window,
And someday, perhaps, we'll shake hands right on the street!

-Charlotte Kreutz in Jersey City, NJ

This Too Shall Pass

Question: In this unprecedented time,
how can I regain my sense of purpose?

These city sidewalks
used to dance me home.
Sweet music in the motion,
I never felt alone.
The rhythm paused,
silence shouts within.
Then I hear a whisper,
"breath, and dance again."

this too shall pass
I will rejoice
I will be free
this too shall pass
overme

-Ken Ashby in Williamsburg, VA

Bodies in a truck on 12th street
Or
what's another day?

I remember bodies on 12th street
When I was fresh from the desert heat
It seemed that a phoenix was here yet,
all reborn in glory and sweat,
Those bodies ecstatic to be alive while the asphalt steamed

Some days later a truck arrived
With my Phoenix life
But instead of ashes
From broken glass, arise
In piles of emerald sand
Tumbling down the thorax
And dropping through the narrow waist of time

Sparkling like so many anguished tears
Whispering 'sorry' to grandmother Jean
At her lonely, second funeral
In a small cardboard box
Shipped with shattered plates and dreams

Now bodies, not boxes, lay in piles,
in a truck
On 12th street
But then I remember it's not **lay** - it's **lie**
She, my grandmother, used to say-
you **lay** a pencil down
But you **lie** down for a nap
It's proper for oneself to lie

But in the truck on 12th street
People are not lying down
They are laid down, end to end
like a box
of broken Ticonderoga Yellow No. 2.5

I am still allowed on 12th street
If I am alone, and if I am running
As if I could walk
But I cross on 11th street instead

There are blossoms in the trees
And already, some have fluttered to the street
Wilted and brown in the rain smudge and tire smash
And stamped by runner and pigeon feet

Today, a bird so lonely
With one eye on the greying gloom
As if to ask
Were god himself ever coming back?
Limped along, mock-eating a planter-box daffodil
As if the sun had hidden away here on earth
And the torture-pecking might roust him
Then with a sigh, the sun would resign himself
to putting yellow back in the sky

But then, carefully, he stopped
With mangled tendrils in his beak
And one eye rolling slowly, heavenly
As if to say
It's all a lie - but shall I still live?
He thought,
But, what's another day?

-Meghan Halligan in Chelsea

Would You Like Some Money?

Of course I want some, anything.
Send it in a letter, by check,
money order or debit card
I've been calling for weeks!
And while you're at it
send along some cherry blossoms
and a burger from Rippers.
Could you also send
soup dumplings from that place on Mott street?
And we're running low on iced coffee
on cheap red wine, on eggs and whole chickens.
Please include chocolate and a rent freeze.
After you get all these things to me
please go door to door, checking on my neighbors and friends
because they have their own needs
and their own demands.

-Keri Marinda Smith, an out-of-work bartender with an
MFA in poetry from the New School, living in Bed-Stuy

You can FB with your sweetie but how can you talk with her dog Maddy?

I was shaving and
a small bug flew by
and I said Look, I don't
really want to kill you
because you're the only
living thing here other than me,
and I can't talk with Maddy —
well, I can, but he doesn't understand,
so I'll make a deal:
You don't fly in my face and
I won't whack you--OK?
It didn't answer but it stayed clear.
Yesterday, I was shaving and it flew
right in front of my nose and I waved it away.
But I felt my hand hit it.
Not hard, but maybe enough;

It disappeared. Unless that
unmoving speck on the mirror
was what was left of it.
I felt bad.
This morning, I looked in
the mirror and it flew past.
The same bug?
Does it matter?

-Harry Wyatt in Chelsea

*Question: How do you let go of fear in a pandemic?
Living*

Leave it here, she says,
waving her hand out the window,
the only safe air. We met
online just before
this. We are living
together now, eating
and sleeping side by side.
I am more concerned
about death than she is.
She tells me to let go,
do a breathing exercise.
I say it is more than what
my lungs can fix. She takes
my hand, leads me to the sofa.
We sit together, bound
by whatever part
of our hearts
is here.

-Kate Lutzner in Ditmas Park, Brooklyn

Are You ready to Order?

"Yes, good morning," I say to the waitress. "Decaf coffee for me and regular coffee for my Dad with half and half."

"I'll have scrambled eggs loose with home fries and multi-grain toast with whipped butter."

My dad says, "I'll have eggs, sunny side up with home fries and white toast."

The waitress asks, "Anything else?"

I say, "Yes, two small glasses of orange juice."

Breakfast at the Oakland Diner with my Dad, who is 97 years of age, and legally blind, followed by shopping for groceries, a Saturday morning tradition before the COVID-19 pandemic.

I say to him, "The Yankees won last night, so did the Red Sox. Tanaka pitched well. Torres hit two more home runs. Chapman got the save but he still walks too many batters. Once the weather gets warmer, we'll get tickets for some mid-week afternoon ballgames."

My dad says, "Yogi Berra played every game, even when he was injured."

Now, I go grocery shopping for him while donning a respirator and latex gloves, and bring him take out meals from the Oakland Diner to augment the microwaveable dinners he receives from Meals on Wheels. And speak to him from six feet away, again while wearing a respirator and latex gloves, or on the telephone.

The waitress asks, "Would you like another cup of coffee?" as I daydream about having breakfast at the Oakland Diner and attending baseball games at Yankee Stadium with my dad, and the waitress saying, "Are you ready to order?"

-J.M. Marsh in Allendale, NJ

How Is Life in Assisted Living?

Weathering the arid climate of old age
Flammable straws in a haystack
Quarantine shut-in so what? What's that?
Pining for one more bat that should crack
Thirsting for the mercy of watering caregivers
never ever hailed no-how as heroes

-Susan Miele

What Do You Remember?

As I walk along this empty street with the rain tapping gently on the hood of my coat, I became sentimental and I started to think about a different place and time, a different reality, one that was much sweeter and dearer to me.

Once upon a time I felt the rain on my face, and once upon a time I didn't care. Once upon a time there were people all about and once upon a time it was a better world than now.

I remembered when we could touch, whenever we'd meet. Friends shook hands, lovers kissed, oh how I wish we could go back in time, a time that's sorely missed. Cause now I'm walking through the rain, my coat is getting wet. The mask I'm wearing is pulling on my nose. It's hard to breathe under this stupid covering, but nowadays it's what we all must do while death is everywhere—hovering.

Once upon a time is always on my mind. Once upon a time when the world was a different place. And people touched and hugged and lived and loved. And we could embrace life. Oh how I want to embrace life—again.

-Noah Miller in Fresh Meadows, NY

I would love to hear my wife ask me
To stop snoring,
To stop hogging the blankets,
To stop wearing the same sweatpants.

I would love to hear my wife ask me
What's for dinner?
Want me to cook tonight?
Where's the olive oil?

I would love to hear my wife ask me
To go to the store,
To pick up a bottle of wine,
To do the laundry,

I would love to hear my wife ask me,
Want a cup of coffee?
Want me to fix you a sandwich?
Want a glass of wine?

I would love to hear my wife ask me
To take out the garbage,
To pick up my socks,
To change the cat litter.

I would love to hear my wife ask me
Want to take a walk?
Want to get a beer?
Want to go upstairs?

But for now, our lives are
On pause,
Socially distant,
Separated by circumstance.

-Christopher Caruana (After 36 years together, we have been apart since March 9.
Karen is in Queens, NY, and I in Lancaster, PA. And there's no end in sight.)

This mask?
No,
I'm not afraid
of you;
but,
afraid for you.
Why here?
Because we're
here,
on this
beach,
walking our
dogs,
and the wind
blows
from me to
you.

-Chris English in Ocean Grove, NJ

What are you doing today?

Wake up
Have coffee
Get my coat
Put my shoes on in the hall
Put on two masks,
a scarf.
Hit the elevator button
with my glove.
Head for Riverside Park
down the stone steps.
Dodge dog walkers
(they're better these days
about masks)
Give wide leeway to runners,
who Still think they're IT:
infallibly mask-less.
Yes
masks ARE ridiculous
BUT.

Walk and walk and walk and walk.
Enjoy my legs!
Snap pics of blossoms,
angles...
anything...
Tree branches!
Marvel
at life,
growth,
birds, for gad's sake!
They smash by, blithely
oblivious now
to humans.

Get home
Undress
Throw everything in hot dryer.
Shower...ahh...hot..
Apply alcohol—70%—to smudged I-phone.
Check time:
8:30?

What am I going to do
with the rest of the day?

-Barbara Fleck-Paladino on the Upper West Side

Can we talk about us?

I ask about you, you ask about me.
Our voices dancing to the rhythm of call and response.
Behold the pandemic, share podcasts, share laughs.
Hoping this coping will last.

But,
Will we ever talk about us?
Is there an us to discuss?

Years ago there may have been an us.
When affection flowed freely, when touching was legal.
When sharing a drink was a love language, not a death kiss.
To take kissing for granted again. Memories that make us
Yearn for the past to be the future.

Levity, brevity. That's where we are now.
Your name on the caller ID is now the smell on my sheets.
Our voices dancing to the rhythm of call and response.
I ask about you, you ask about me.

But,
Will we ever talk about us?
Is there an us to discuss?
I guess I'll know, if you would just ask,
Can we talk about us?

-Anam Raheem in Summit, NJ

Are you used to the new sights and sounds in the "new world"?
A forehead and eyes on a passerby, maybe a chin. The mask covers the rest of their face, much
to your chagrin
Conversations on the street are loud and abound, shouted from 6 feet apart

As the Amazon driver drops off a package and darts
Signs of no parking and no playing at parks
Honking car parades go by but not after dark
The birds seem to have a sweeter song though as if they know, they have more room to spread
their wings as they call out hello

-Caroline Steiger in Spring Lake Heights, NJ

How Are You Coping?

To find the little pleasures hidden
In the corner of each hour
That reveal themselves as clues
Only at some quiet moment:

Like the sound of sprinklers coming to life -
A 3 a.m. miracle timed to entertain
My insomnia. Or discovering a lane
Lined with cherry blossoms
Like a snow-covered landscape.

And regal magnolias standing pretty
In front yards, beckoning you to find
The origin of beauty within their many-
Layered petals.

And who but can only admire
The optimism of tulips that
Seem to reach higher
After an afternoon shower
For the unbounded sky?

And to dance
To dance alone
At the center of an anonymous room
Like your body
And limbs are speaking
A long-dead language
Revived.

-Wing Yan Sang in Forest Hills, Queens

Who Do You Love and How?

Birdsong calling mates
Sunrise pink through trees
Babies bright in sidewalk wagons,
Strong little hands holding tight
Train's here-I-am whistle, distant rumble
"If you need anything..." neighbor from six feet close
Early morning giggles with husband
"How are you, Mom?" phone calls.
Facetime son's happy silly dog
Parsing words and issues with local son
Circles upon circles of lovingkindness
Sunrise, clear skies.

-Gay Norton Edelman in Red Bank, NJ

What's For Dinner?

What's for dinner?
Absentee roommate
An inescapable presence
In the living room

What's for dinner?
Caring boyfriend
Opening the refrigerator
For the billionth time

What's for dinner?
Diligent father
Logging off his work computer
At home

Pasta with marinara sauce
Independent woman
Embraced by the silent apartment

Where I live alone

-Kate Davids in Yorkville, UES, Manhattan

Where is the first place I would go when New York pause is lifted?

There is no question. There is no doubt, where I would go the minute they let me go out.

It's the place I would go every day for a sip of café and a little to eat in my favorite seat. Where the sun shines through glass and I see people pass with their dogs and scooters and children. From the window in view are trees in bloom and flowers arrayed and people on benches clutching their mugs and their trays.

It's nothing exotic or special or strange. Just a place to see friends and neighbors. To discuss, argue, explain the daily events or just to complain about who did some dastardly thing.

There's Lana and Darrel and Rocky. There's Dee and Nick. Now draped in masks to prevent tiny droplets that fall on my bread. My order is ready before I can say just what I had wanted, they have it down pat, the coffee, the oatmeal and soup in a sack.

It's the place where I meet someone new with an interesting past and an interesting mind to sweep me away on a journey of travel and time.

It's a place where I get an idea or a hint how to solve a dilemma, to spark a new theme to help me along on my personal dream.

What movie did you see? What book did you read? Are you working on something? What help do you need?

Where is Marlo or Wendy or Anne? Is anyone missing? Can I lend a hand? Where is Sheila? Is she ok, is she late? Did she tell someone here she'd be coming in late?

Like a mom with her ducklings, we'd be counting our crew. If someone's not here, we always knew who. Wendy's in Venice, Anne is Maine, Marlo's in London, Sheila's in Spain.

Here's Vals, here's José. They've come into town, they are here for the day. Get a chair and sit down. Do you have a new story? Have you written a book? We want to know more. Can you give us a look?

Remember how we would lament when they closed for a day? Is it Christmas or Thanksgiving we'd cry in dismay. And look at things now. They're closed for a week, now a month. And we

won't see our friends and neighbors for a while. We'll be patient and calm and remain in our homes, till it's safe to resume the life we have known. It will be different, we'll wear masks, and try to figure out how to sit safely together-apart in our little café, our neighborhood's heart.

-Sheila Epstein in Manhattan

Checking In

I'm full
Full of worry
Of longing and questions
Too full
Of plans, pressure
Inspiration
Of procrastination
Often now, I pause sporadically on a dime
"Shh! Be quiet!"
"Listen..."
"...stop thinking, stop dumping podcasts and tv shows in..."
"...listen..."
In the soft
Echoing silence
Holding myself calmly
Floating
I'm waiting for it
to whisper something to me

-Daria A. Shelton in Bed-Stuy

What Do You Do To Contribute?

It was the 1990's, my husband and I were at a downtown Jersey City brownstone cocktail party
When the standard NYC-metro area status question surfaced.
I don't recall who asked it.
I don't recall what I was wearing, but probably black.
I do recall standing in a kitchen, which had an island and an open backdoor to a yard.
Clinking ice cubes and buzzy chatter.
Gourmet cheeses, 7-layer dip and homemade guacamole.
Bob, fourteen years my senior, had a sweet boyish face,

little lips that stayed sealed when he smiled, brown eyes and brown hair.
The solidness of his body attracted me,
his thighs had the density of 100-year-old oak trunks
My husband taught me:
A dessert should be both tart & sweet, hot & cold, crunchy & smooth.
Really? I just thought it had to be yummy!
In 1988 Bob said: At a future date they'll put a chip in your head,
that will allow you to access the history of the world!
Really? My face scrunched. That sounds kooky, I didn't say.
On Thanksgiving 1993 we were married in Hoboken, New Jersey
In a 6000 square foot warehouse with the state's first ISDN line.
We rented a dozen video phones and Fedex'd them to friends.
The best man was 3000 miles away in San Francisco!
Were the lead tease story on ABC News with Tappy Phillips.
For 17 years my husband Bob had built, "Broadway shows that you've heard of."
Original productions of Jesus Christ Superstar, Man of La Mancha,
Chicago, Studio 54, A Chorus Line, the Super Bowl, the Disneyland 1976 Parade ...
I still giggle at his understatement.
He sold Big Apple Scenic before he met me,
"Got the needle out of my arm."
Turned his mind towards technology & food.
In 1989, on a vacation to California, we visited Jaron Lanier
at VPL Research and tried on his EyePhone headset.
I had no idea I had just met a legend,
the guy who coined the phrase Virtual Reality.
He was dreadlock cool. I was smiling. Always smiling.
Especially around my husband's cooking.
Bob could taste a 5-star meal,
ask a few key questions and replicate it
on our 6-burner double oven Garland stove.
Two-inch Balducci veal chops topped with mushrooms and mozzarella,
German rouladen with spaetzle and red cabbage,
grade-A D'Artagnan foie gras with fruit compote and buffalo steaks,
perfectly toasted baguettes, one side topped with chunky homemade applesauce
and the other dripping with melted blue cheese delivered to me in bed.
No wonder I gained so much weight in our thirteen years together!
In 1999 Bob began creating a TV show:
Up & coming NYC chefs cook a meal for regular people who discuss hot topics.
No talking heads -- we the people, he wanted.
But in 2001 colon cancer arrived and
Bob was taken away from me and our two children,
Rhapsody & Bucky. R.I.P sweetie.
Twenty-five plus years later, I still recall that kitchen cocktail party moment

Where someone asked Bob, "What do you do?"
And he casually replied,
"Wrong question, it's what do you do to contribute?"

-Kate Kaiser in Jersey City

Neighbor

Neighbor,
can I join your little party?
Keep your
window open

I promise
not to stay longer than the guests
I promise
not to leave the bathroom a mess

I won't
sing dumb songs
My eyes
your friends will not undress

Spill
onto the sidewalk,
I'll drink
of the air

Neighbor,
Raia,
I'll leave
my window open
You won't
notice that I'm there.

-David Axinn in Park Slope

Are you ok?

Of course. What other question is there?

Not “how are you?” That’s not a question, but a greeting.

“How are you?” “I’m fine, how are you?” Requires no thought, no feeling. Rote.
“Hihowareyoui’mfinehowareyou?”

But, “Are you ok?”

And *mean* it. Want the answer. I will give it to you if you really want it.

I am not ok.

But I should be.

I am a nurse. But I’m not on the front lines. And I have ... almost enough PPE.

I’m sad. Flares of fear.

I’m lonely.

But I shouldn’t be. Fear of intimacy makes me a solitary person anyway. My main activity of going to the movies is usually done alone. My meet up group is online now and that helps; it’s nearly as good.

I’m depressed.

No one lost from covid that is close to me. A co-worker fights. Hence the fear. One patient fights and will lose. But I learned to distance myself decades ago.

I am a nurse.

I should be doing more. But what more can I do? I am working full-time plus a few hours more. My commute is easier with sheltering-in-place. I can’t complain. I shouldn’t complain. I am not on the front lines. I am not an ICU or ER nurse. I am not working on a covid-19 floor.

My sister says since I screen them for symptoms as patients first come in, I *am* on the front lines. I start to swell with...pride? ... gratitude for the recognition? Until I remember I am not ICU, ER, or covid-ward. I am just going to work. My regular work with some changes.

I am frustrated.

Unclear instructions at work. My unit has always been the red-haired stepchild. Forgotten. Unappreciated. I think I’m doing everything right. It turns out I am doing everything wrong.

I feel guilty.

My co-workers are working harder than me. Longer hours. More physical labor. Some with known positives. I *do* help and I do send my staff to help. But I resent it sometimes. Don't they know we and our patients are important, too? More guilt. I shouldn't feel resentful. The others have it harder than me.

I don't know what I feel. I don't know what I *should* feel.

Please.

Don't ask me anything.

Just let me sit in front of you, in your presence, in the presence of another human being and let me cry. You don't have to touch me to comfort me. You can stay six feet away, gowned, gloved and masked.

Just please be there. Silently. And let me weep for.....?

Just let me weep with you.

-Rhonda Bichard, a nurse in NJ

When Would You Like to Come Over?

Now.

I.

I'd like to resolve what's possible
between two people
or three
or four.

How clean are you
here's what I do
do you do the same
or even more?

What can I learn from you?
How do we arrive
at a clear definition
of *safe*?

How can we wait to be told?

II.

It isn't the government dicta I mind
but coming to terms with ourselves.
We have to agree
or somebody's going to die.

It's National Judgment Day.

e pluribus unum

independent
together

I beg you
don't give that away.

III.

You see that I waver
we all do
spinning a thought we can hold.

Who decides what a people should do?
Is it you? is it me?
Who is us?

Tell me, please,

When can we all get together?

-Mary Clurman in Princeton, NJ

What is Breaking Detroit's Heart?

Not the usual suspects:
the stabbings and gunshots,
the quiet OD in some abandoned
house on the northwest side.

Not the typical urban mix
of gut fear, heart fear, brain scared

to death over the lost job,
the mounting bills, empty table.

Not the streets overgrown with fields
where neighborhoods of houses
once stood, where dreams lived and
the children of those dreams once played.

What breaks Detroit's heart is this: a hospital
overflowing with the dead. White body bags
like shrouds stacked in rooms, piled on floors,
sitting in chairs as if waiting for you to notice.

-[Linda Nemec Foster](#) in Michigan

How would you like people to change because of COVID-19?

I want people to start accepting and not rejecting....
to embrace and not hate....
to stop shoving and start loving....
to start caring....to start sharing....
and through giving, learn the real meaning of living.

-Rita Haake in Princeton, NJ

Would you like to dance?

Yes, Let us dance

Let us slip together
into the music

We are young there
and our touch is charged
with a frightened tremble of hope

our hands, our hips
our eyes, our lips,

and the air between us

Reverberate.

Yes. We should dance.

-James Lavin in Denville, NJ

The Answer to the Question Someone might ask

I would rather you wouldn't question
as I have no good answers.
I would rather ask the questions
and hear your stories.
My stories are old
and have been told many times.
Your stories interest me more.

Anyway, I'm so tangled in the present
that the past no longer
seems real.
and the present is...
tedious.

So tell me about your first days
and your first love.
Tell me about your missteps
and your triumphs.
Tell me your secrets
because I'm excellent
at keeping secrets—
or disguising them in a retelling.

Tell me how your life
tastes and smells,
about the colors in the sunset.
Tell me about
the places you've been
and the places you hope to go.
Tell me about the hero's
and the villains,

the happy times
and the sad,
the long rides,
the short sights.

And we'll laugh together
and cry a little,
and you'll hold my hand
by holding my attention
until sleep takes us
and tells its stories.

-Gay Partington Terry in Harlem

What is the point?

To live each day in uncertainty.
To grieve what's lost or changed.
To move forward with caution and confidence.
To live the questions into the future with sorrow and grace.

-Karrie Robinson on the Upper West Side

Where is home?

i have lived
in liminal spaces
for so long,
here and there,
to and fro,
folding away
identities in
separate drawers
with loose change,
slang and old
bus tickets

what does it mean -
to stay home?

home - a rooted now,
light, loud, firm
and home -
porous and dusty,
a palimpsest of then,
of city streets - uncanny
the unpacking of
many cups of tea
old conversations,
an intimate knowledge,
like night vision

but to not return
now, the long now
to pause in light
as we all do
hold my breath -
in between
as time
stretches -

to miss a place to
fold it back
in its drawer
moth balls
my heart
carefully
closed -
home.

-Rebecca Faulkner in Park Slope, Brooklyn

Are the warbles moving north through Garret Mountain?
After months of monochrome, white, grey, black, stone, snow, mist,
are pink and green shooting through twigs with the force of fireworks
spreading across July sky?
Are there now tangles, twists, green mazes, places you could hide,
where before the basalt cliff was naked and cold?
Did you see a bobbing tail, busy busy, up and down, up and down, from
branch to branch, where a month before nothing moved between you and
the clouds unless accosted by winter wind?

When you saw that first palm warbler, did you say to yourself, "Gosh, already?"
And then suddenly after the palms, black-and-whites, and rose-breasted
grosbeaks, indigo buntings, goldfinches, yellow-bellied sapsuckers,
red-breasted nuthatches, hermit thrushes and scarlet tanagers scalding
your eye.
It happens all so fast.
They fly across our mountain, Manhattan their backdrop.
And then they are gone, and we are back in urban Paterson, yearning for them.
Did you see them this year?
I did not. When quarantine is over.

-Danusha Goska in Paterson, NJ

What did Grandma Minna say?

She always said, "It's between you and me and the lamp post"
I imagine the black iron lamp post, globe hanging
An invitation to intimacy
"Spit it out," she would say, "just say it"
Whatever it was, she listened with unwavering acceptance
And what now?
I make coffee, early
While listening to Morning Edition
This everydayness, this stolen moment
Disappears like the cardinal on our fire escape
These words are repeated throughout our friends' Haggadah: "Pay attention"
We missed this year's Seder. I read the Times distractedly
I hear the sirens. I text. I call
I watch the teeming downpour on a gray afternoon
Or a blue sky that reminds me of tennis at the Parade Grounds
Pay attention!
Lives are lost. Lives are changed forever
I'm grateful for afternoon tea with you
I'm safe
I'm sheltered for my health but I fear it's aging me
and I don't like that. I worry that our favorite bistro
won't be there when it's safe to venture forth and
that we'll miss watching the sun setting over Lake Champlain
Grandma Minna told me she visited Vermont once
She lived through the Depression
Escaped an unhappy marriage, moved to the Village

She bought Basque berets at Lamston's on 6th Avenue
Protested the bomb
Told me that the best beer was in Belgium
"Just say it"
All right,
I hope we've learned that we need to be kinder
And better. Grateful to share, to be safe, to love

-Michael Simon in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn

What's it Been Like?

Dear Re-Open Protestors
So glad you asked.
It's been like
a season that was over just after it started
The crack of his blooming bat
Silenced, just like that
15 year old baseball dreams
So suddenly on hold
It's been like
a Senior year on PAUSE
Will it all happen live, from his room?
Graduation, prom - brought to you by Zoom
Every day in the mail, college swag
Thanks American University, for the string bag
A decision that was so full of promise
Now hanging
in the air
Like his brother's baseballs
it's been like
A drum beat of hard news
Uncertainty and fear
Every day we are here
So many unknowns
We stay home
With every fiber of our being
As long as it takes
That's what it's been like

-Robin Sayetta in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn

Have you had your shot today.
Have you taken your shot to remove your virus and say.
I notice the glory of a new day
I notice the sunrise is golden and beautiful
I notice the smiles of people that were. Cubicle.
I see children, laughing and go out to play.
Have you had your shot today?
God bless the people who gave us The Cure.
Help us all remember what we've all been going through.
Perfect strangers, smiling at each other almost wanting to hug and play.
You go online. Early in the morning. Get your shot today.
Thank God for the cure.

-Jason Appelbaum in Midwood

How
can I help?
 A familiar refrain,
 Rarely spoken from the mouths,
 Of the other members of my family.

The
house is eerily quiet,
 As the mess metastasizes,
 From surface to surface,
 Floor to floor,
 Room to room,
 Filling the house,
 Until it's buried underneath a mound,
 Of old food and discarded socks.

As
I walk through the house,
 Desperately trying to contain,
 The debris of life,
 I wonder if I will ever hear that question,
 Or is it something that will be forever relegated to my dreams.

-Hannah Mintz on Long Island, NY

How do you decide Oh Lord; that it is now time for you to Forsake us?

Is it when we are walking in a cold Polish winter on the way to take a shower
And our captors tell us not to worry?
Because everything will be just fine.

Is it in an Industrial Revolution when two out of our eight children die coming home from jobs
that they should never have worked?
As our Industrialists tell us that the epidemic is over and we are not to worry?
Because everything will be just fine?

Or is it now as we watch our middle aged and elderly die while younger citizens rail against
necessary shelter in place orders?
As our Wealthy tell us that this illness is not as serious as our Governors make it out to be:
Because everything will be just fine.

And so how do you decide oh Lord when it is time for you to Forsake us?

When is transaction sacred and Human Life a Distant Second?

-Charlie Leeder in Trenton, NJ

What do you notice now that you didn't before?

The birds.
I've begun to see birds everywhere— hummingbird
larger than my own wingspan, red and yellow of a house finch
bright against the deli's weather-beaten gate, an
American redstart's painted eye watching
me from the shuttered restaurant's cement wall.

I know now to scan the smooth sides of buildings
below windows and above them, to seek out
the gates that guard the silent storefronts of West Harlem.

Who knew corrugated metal

could provide the perfect canvas
for the rendering of a pair of hooded warblers
six feet long.

The birds once disappeared in daytime when
the gates unlocked and doors opened.
I walk to the cafe on Broadway each morning not
for coffee, anymore, but to spend a quiet
minute with the boat-tailed grackle.
Its chest gleams iridescent blue
against a backdrop of bright pink spray paint.

Climate change threatens to extinguish
fifty percent of North American birds and
none will escape its hazards.

This is what the artists are saying
through painted wings on walls and stenciled
outlines of owls on boarded-up windows. Murals
are as much a means of communication
as they are an art form.

The moment at which
us humans begin to reckon with our own collective
mortality,
The birds come into view to remind us that they too,
are entering a pandemic.

-Maria Bell in West Harlem (The bird murals I write of are part of the [Audubon Mural Project.](#))

will you lie to me?

about the length of a day
and the mold in the bathtub
and the dust on the ceiling
and the empty nest outside my window

tell me the rug's full of paisley not pawprints
and the oak's cobblestone bark
feels just like your touch

and the shadow round my mother's eyes
when she says it's fine
is the pink moon dancing
for the weary sun

stick the storm candles
in the shortcake
and sing like my birthday's
the reason we're in tonight

shut the phone off
and tell me grandpa
looked better than ever
all silent and snug
somewhere miles and miles from here

promise me the bags
lining Guayaquil's gutters
hold begonias
not bodies
that potter's fields
are for old clay
and the all-night sirens
are firetrucks
off to pull stubborn cats
from sturdy branches

i feel it in my palm's fresh crack
your knife-edge back
daydreams turned black
so til the morning comes again, please
will you just lie to me?

-Christopher Fiorello in Kansas City, Missouri

WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT?

I want to meet the Love of my life ...
To not be alone.

I want to be with Friends again ...

Drinking and watching The Game.

I want graduations and weddings ...
The sounds of sudden laughter
across a crowded room ...

But what I do I really want?

I want to be with the Love of my life ...
Her eyes filled with me
As mine are with Her.

-Gregory Bruce in Harlem

Will you marry me is what I'd like to hear,
When the corona curtain is lifted at last.
Ready for Act Three,
Not a scene I've played before.
Who will say the line, matters less than hearing it.
And hearing it matters less than responding with a yes.
I've rehearsed with my dog who says yes everyday,
She's taught me tolerance but doesn't get my jokes.
Will you marry me is what I'd like to hear.
It may be the role of a lifetime or
merely a small part of a living play.
But I'm ready now to rehearse and find out.

-Nancy Koan in the East Village

What Used to be inside the unending labyrinth of my mind?

Wonder is the untainted mind of a child seeping back through the asphyxiation of monotonous society

The reason all the dragons are origami we are trying to remember

We don't listen anymore we don't tell

The bridge collapsed to the realms of our fantasy

Do you remember them? Do you?

-Jacob Miller, 13 years old, in Bedford Hills, NY

"Can I kiss your cheek now grandma
Even though my lollipop made sticky lips?"
"Yes baby! And let your hug
Stain my new blouse
With your gooey hands too!"

-Paulette Fein in Brighton Beach

Is there a light at the end of the tunnel?

Light at the end of the tunnel
hoping, though will it shine through
yearning to escape from this bubble
to conquer covid soon

Light at the end of the tunnel
enduring trials and troubles
will pieces fit in this puzzle
will we overcome our struggles

Light at the end of the tunnel
praying our heartache ends soon
sun shines warm rays to renew us
hiding cold darkness for the moon

Light is at the end of the tunnel
bright rainbows will rise again
we shall overcome our struggles
seeing the light at the end

-Dr. Mary C. Rorro in Princeton, New Jersey

Corona be gone
Wash hands, wear masks and stay home
Exercise and pray

-Ethan Matic, 9 years old, in Astoria, Queens

Is This How Science Fiction Feels?

Will we one day show a faded photograph
to our grandchildren of a time
when people used to touch?

Remember getting dressed?
Smalltalk? The workplace?
Social gatherings?
Civilization?

I only have the vocabulary for it now
that social distancing technology
has replaced touch, but my mind
has become an endless Zoom meeting
where nobody's muting their microphones.

But I guess things could be worse:
I just received a twenty minute lecture
from a six-year-old on what it means
to be "akumatized" in the show Miraculous.
To make a long story short,
you don't want to get akumatized.

First I thought I'd use this isolation
to do something substantial, but now I think
it's really about: can I stare at my hand
until it becomes something entirely strange?

And how do I freeze this moment
with both kids asleep on my stomach
so we can feel it again when we are all old?

When I feel sad about the state
of the world, I remember how my student

made an artwork that spelled out, "Disobedience,"
after reading Martin Luther King. I closed the door
and happy-cried in my office.

Reading King's "Letter From a Birmingham Jail"
with my class this week. Imagine being so moved
to say something you wrote it down on newspaper scraps.
What is so pressing that you have to say right now?
Remember how you were waiting
for the right time to say it? Now is that time.

-Caroline Hagood in Brooklyn

What Does Quarantine Mean to Me?

We are stuck at home today
All we do is wash hands and pray
That one day we will return to normal.

We sit in quarantine wondering when it will end
Wanting to see our friends again
But everything is on hold.

We heal with our families
At 7 we clap with the crowd
But there is still something missing.

We are all bubbling up in our homes
Wanting to do something, go somewhere
But there is nowhere to go.

Cars and trucks usually rumble down my street, but now the roads are empty
Families have picnics and games in the park out my window, but now the park is bare
Everything is lonely and everyone is gone.

I never realized how much I missed those sights.

Where there is usually dogs barking and skateboards grinding there is silence
Where there is usually kids squealing and the squeaking of swings there is quiet
The turf is hushed.

I never realized how much I missed those sounds.

Normal will never be the same
We will never act the same
We will never think the same.

We are stuck at home today
With our families together
Standing together,
United.

-Emeka Guindo, 11 years old, in Park Slope

What is it you want November for past Summer burning before your eyes and Spring rewinding
her song?

a pause before Winter sweet with cold air just above freezing
in an unhurried silence you can breathe in
in soft grey light that lets you see every color left in this world for real

a pause for the moment just when you know you should step away for a moment
like from a relentless heatwave in July on the streets of New York
a hospital a jail a supermarket or other hard places like in this world right now

a pause just long enough for me to remember what I really want is
more Summers burning with life more Springs replaying her songs
more November pauses in this world before Winter

-Judith Nell Foster in Glendale, Queens

Let's take the train today to the city
It's late April and the Park is so pretty
Let's stroll along Museum Mile
And hit the Met
Then after a while grab
latte at that cute cafe
Or better yet a glass of Chardonnay
Yes, better yet a glass of Chardonnay.

-Susan Steinberg in Bellerose NY

How does it feel to be non-essential?
To be considered un-reverential?
To be lower down the "must-work" list
Than a postal worker or phlebotomist,
Less useful than an eggroll maker,
A grocery clerk or muffin baker,
Or tiger feeders at the zoo
And cleaners in the ICU?
While those of us with different skills
That cannot cure Corona ills
Remain at home in pure frustration
As others fight the infestation
It's sad to think that all our labors
Are quite inapt to help our neighbors.
So all that we of lesser ranks
Can do is to convey our thanks:
To clap our hands and stomp our feet
And send our love through the empty street.

-Lora Myers in Brooklyn

a vodka martini with a twist,
I think
is my answer to
'can I start you off with something
to drink?'

-Peter Chamberlin on the Lower East Side

What question I would want someone to ask me?
What makes me happy?
A poem
The first signs of Spring
Daffodils
They didn't get the memo

They came out anyway
Even from a distance
It's good they did
Messengers from a good greater than ourselves
Yet within us.

-Sandra Eismann in Maplewood, NJ

May I Take Your Order?

May I take your order?
Refill your glass of water?
Yes please,
And I'll have the enchiladas
Unless you think,
I should try the chimichangas

Whatever you're really craving
She says all befuddled,
Putting down my mojito,
That the bartender never muddled

Oh how I long for the days
Where COVID didn't concern us.
The things I'd do,
For even BAD SERVICE!

I miss complaining under my breath,
And keeping my thoughts at bay,
Then putting on a smile when they ask me,
"Is everything okay?"

I hate COVID-19,
For causing this quarantine.
Eating in a restaurant is now nothing BUT a dream.
But to make things worse,
Make me feel extra cursed!
I live in a studio,
With no dish washing machine.

-Jacob Feinberg in East Harlem

Where do you go

Where do you go when there is no place to go
When shelter In place is all that you know
The memories of vacations
Come into play
As the photos found
Fill the day
Each smiling image
A story to tell
Of sights, food, adventures
Remembered well
So take out those albums,
slides, and shoeboxes overflowing
with vivid reminders
Of places you enjoyed going
And keep on dreaming
Of more places to go
When the world opens up
and there are places to go.

-Iris Levin

Why do you look that way? (A haiku)

I cut my own hair
I'm sorry; I'm so sorry
I cut my own hair.

-Mel Gray in Fresh Meadows, Queens

How much money is it worth
To poison our precious Earth
Pollute the rivers and the sea
Kill the bird and the bee

Let fall another tree
Foul the air and waters
What is left for sons and daughters

-David Pullman on the Upper West Side

Would you like to dance?

On this evening passersby on Eastern Parkway
Look into the museum and see a swirl of color and movement,
Toes and heels and hips moving rhythmically,
Arms lifted overhead and down again.

You might have asked me in another language
Or with another accent.
I understand you through the music.

On 1 or on 2
We spin and move, your hand leading me towards and around you.
Our faces can be so near each other,
Temples close,
That I can't see you,
But I can smell your sweat.
I am completely in my body.
I am Chita Rivera.
I am Celia Cruz.
I am beautiful.

For the people climbing out of the subway and walking home
In ones and twos
The street and sky are dark,
The drumbeat is muffled.
While the inside of our glass walls glows like a jewel.

-Erika Tullberg in Crown Heights

SHALL WE DANCE?

Remember the night we danced five hours.

You asked me if I thought you are too tall
to dance & I laughed. A cerulean blue moon

lit the city that night. Beneath
a blazing skyline, we danced some more.
Tonight, an April steel gray half-moon

sighs above Manhattan. I think
about our January waltz
a hundred years ago or three months

when New York City was—

I miss those days we could dance arm in arm
holding on. Tonight, in my dreams,
we shall dance across our city's rooftops

under a cerulean blue moon
beneath a Manhattan skyline
before a quarantine.

-Judith Antelman in Montclair, NJ

Is Something Wrong?

Nothing is wrong with longing.
Longing to be seen smiling, maskless.
Longing to be seen as a person not
just a passerby to move far away from.
Yes, something is wrong when a kiss
is now a curse.
Something is very, very wrong.

-Stephanie Elliott in Inwood, NY

What Worries You Most About Your Future?

It's unpredictable, or so I am told,
Why must a clear path be laden with jagged stones?

I cannot know what hereafter may hold,
Or what I could make of it, ashes or gold?

I want to make a difference, that's what every child once said,
Will I be able to help or will I fail before it all began?
Failure is what I fear, so I choose to retreat instead
I feel quite hopeless, or is it all in my head?

Will the future be a world where people can ignore,
The hate, the injustice, the advancement of the world?
Or can I be part of these changes, can I help, can I do more,
And be a part of what we're all fighting for?

A purpose, an answer, into the unknown at last
Will I find meaning to it all, has that opportunity passed?
Can I grow from my mistakes, a better future learned from my past,
Or will I forever just be broken inside this juvenescent cast?

Success seems difficult, always within reach
Will I keep tripping over stones out from under my feet?
I worry perseverance will only lead to defeat
Is all of this worth it, will my future be complete?

-Laine Kowalski, a junior at Livingston High School in Livingston, NJ

What will you remember?
Netflix and phone calls
Cat purring on the couch
Wearing a face mask to buy a frozen pizza
Crying while listening to NPR.
Losing so much of my life
But I'm still here.
So I will watch my Netflix
Pet my cat
Cry my tears
And be grateful.
And call my Mom.

-Donna J. Fisher in Pompton Plains, NJ

Is it really over this time?

The disorientating nature of breaking away
Will leave you wondering how many sizes
Allen wrenches exist
A question you never thought about
Until the dishwasher backed up
And you watch helplessly as last night's dinner
Soaks into the drywall
While you mop up the flooded kitchen
With the robe of a former lover
Who left you behind
When the world felt like
It was falling apart

-Melissa Akar in Fishkill, NY

DO YOU THINK THE COMING RAIN

will cleanse the air, the streets,
and make us whole again?

Dress for the date and not for the day
was my grandmother's advice, meaning

you can't make spring come
by stripping to running shorts and tee shirt

to hit the streets when it's forty-five degrees
and nearly May, but off you go

on your jog. The blossomed trees
don't seem to have much choice

but to let their blossoms fall, but you,
you can never not be beautiful

as you trot off toward someone
or something that may kiss you

or kill you

-Bill Zavatsky in Morningside Heights, NY

What does the world need right now?

Beyond a cure
A vaccine
An equitable system
of distributing wealth
and health
And meals
And jobs
And justice,

It seems clear
that what we all need right now,
In these trying times, is

A hugging machine.

Perhaps to be worn
as full body vest
or lifelike pillow chamber
— threaded cloud of wires
to fold us in the embrace
of each other

if only from a distance.
To be held.
To hold.

We will, of course,
need to include a button
that indicates our mutual consent.

Not everyone is a hugger
(and that's ok)
but this is my appeal
to the market:

Let us crowd source a hug machine,
and call it the “Hug-a-boo, From me to you.”

Swipe yes.

Please select
the duration
of your rapture:

Two second pats for fast friends

Twenty seconds or more
for oxytocin release
—relief from from the stress
of feeling separate.

One minute of more
—good for kin of
blood
and bonds on the edge of night.
Or for fathers finding their way
to tell their sons,

“I wish I would have
encouraged you more as a child.”

—Been able to love you
a mountain more
than I was loved by the sky.

I love you too, Dad.
Here’s a two minute hug.

—*swipe*
yes.

I know you did your best.
I know that I am blessed.

Swipe yes
to press the flesh
of a soul you were touched by.

Swipe yes to confess a lie
you have lived by.

Swipe yes to profess a song
you have held tight —

In your your chest
is a wish to unfold...

Select all to
send a hug
to every living soul
on this pale blue stone
—that none of us feel alone,
tonight.

The Hug-a-boo,
From me to you.

Swipe yes.

-Kurt Peloquin in Bushwick, Brooklyn

TEARS, WHERE ARE YOU?

Empty buses keep running.
I see them from my window.
I lost my tears.
My prayers are dry.

My mother tells me to stand
by an open window, and breathe.
Breathe, breathe, she says.
Her voice is clear as if she were alive.
I feel her warm arm around me,
as if she were alive.

Empty buses keep running.
I see them from my window.
I cannot pray for my tears, I say,
I look for them but they elude me.

Breathe, breathe, says my mother,
as she puts her warm arm around me,
they may have gone to the Hudson river
so close to your window.

I will pray for your tears to return, she whispers.
I will hover over the waters,
and pray for them to return.

-Rachel Berghash on the Upper West Side

I look out on my balcony
the birds sing so softly
I take a deep breath
I am now in another world
the sun rays beam on the cushioned chair
i feel the cool breeze (whoosh)

-Charles Dima, 8 years old, in Prospect Heights

Can I sleep over?

I leave the TV
real low all night
haven't changed
the sheets in weeks
can't remember
when I last shaved
probably snore
(definitely drool)
but I can make
a mean French toast
if you bring over
eggs, bread, & butter.

-John Penola in Butler, NJ

Can I Cook You Dinner?

Tonight and many more nights?

With fresh ingredients

straight from a farm

that has everything we need

and more.

And more.

Enough for Everyone.

Everyone who is hungry, worried, sad, overwhelmed, restrained, hopeful, paralyzed, working, unemployed, helping, and more.

Everyone can share love with a homemade meal straight from the heart.

-Lee Anne Aires in North Jersey

What Will it Take?

We learn a lot by imagining

what each other's lives are like,

beyond the parallel tracks

our trains run on we're ace coverings and gloves

worn on the street, like thoughts on language,

like our lives on time. So I know shagbark

hickories call you back the way Brownsville

trolleys ring for stops I reached

for and still do in melancholy moments.

It's raining here in the city,

while you're being snowed in upstate.

Yet a flood of contagion washes

over us both, confined and distanced,

and one wonders: What it will take

to save us from ourselves this time?

-Richard Levine in Windsor Terrace, Brooklyn

Are you still breathing?

This question I ask of you, every day
Even after, our 20 long years of play;
The sun streaks in, she's warm in her spot,
Her tiny paws all worn and in knots.

I see a small movement, a breath;
We've had another day, a day without death.
Piercing jade eyes, open and stare
I've disrupted her sleep again, how could I dare?

I'm sorry, I say, I just need you to know
Things are really hard right now, and I can't let you go.

Under the cover of darkness and a fitful night sleep;
I awake to a sound and rustle of sheets.
I open my eyes to see who is there,
And in the response, a long jaded stare...
Are you still breathing? She says,
I hear in my head;
We share the same question, and go back to bed.

-Amielle in Beacon, NY

where do you want to eat?

on the patio when the sun
sets the table in just the right
lighting for an Instagram worthy
photo where I can order chicken
tikka masala and sop up the
gravy with naan

in the pseudo-restaurant where
the line wraps around the tables
of college students swallowing
their salad bowls with sofritas
while debating ordering more
guacamole for their overly
salted home-made chips

on the front lawn with the blanket

your grandmother crocheted
splayed out under warm tupperware
heating our thighs and cold
beverages coaxing grass to
wrap the condensation with the
tenderness I haven't been able
to offer you since March

anywhere really as long as you
remember the hot sauce

-Brianna Reyes in Paterson, NJ

How do you know when you're not getting enough sleep?

Well:
when you lay down at 12
midnight let's say
and within three hours
the people in your dreams wake you back up
into a night, or a day
so still
so quiet
you can't go back to sleep
no matter how you try it
so you go
online and see something
and buy it, or into it,
or maybe you don't
while way way way away
off somewhere, across the river
in the Bronx let's say,
barely, through the raindrops, is
the faintest sound
of a siren,
that's when I know

-Thomas Giles in Hamilton Heights

How long can a coffee cup last?

I wonder, how long can this coffee cup
last.
I watch Mother -- covered in salmon scrubs --
dribble out of the
driveway and towards the hospital. She's
A token of compassion, a reminder of service and
sacrifice. I know
she hurriedly dashes past the hunchbacked men at the
seafood market and tilts her face down into her
cocooned mask. She's bare to the world, yet
concealed to her patients. I grip my coffee cup tightly as evening's colors
draw themselves -- cottony pastels and raw volcano shreds.
Is it selfish to want her for myself? To ask her to stay home? I
glance out the window, not knowing when she'll
return.

-Aditi Desai, a 12th grader in Livingston, NJ

What Inspired You to Become a Writer?

December 2013.
During winter break, I was cleaning my room
when I came across my writing journals
from elementary school.
When I opened them, the spines crackled
after being closed for so long. I cringed
at my bad writing. Back then,
I resorted to using memories
to create stories. I shook my head
at my lack of creative thinking.
I was eleven years old.

I remember one story I had written:
a few diary entries about a girl
traveling on the Oregon Trail with her family.
I remember finishing the segment
and wanting to expand on her story.
I found an empty notebook,
sharpened a fresh pencil and began to write.

When I first started, my favorite part about writing the story was the freedom I had to make the characters however I wanted, and using events and people around me as inspiration.

I used to get bullied by boys at school, so the main character's love interest was the opposite of them: A smart, caring, funny boy, someone she could befriend before falling in love with him. I gave it to my friends to read, and they liked it. That was when my passion began.

A few months after, there was a class assignment in social studies that involved careers.

Everybody started asking each other, What do you want to be when you grow up? When it was my turn, I hesitated. I pretended to think hard. I questioned whether I should say anything. At last, I took a deep breath.

"I want to be a writer."

Silence.

"You know you're never gonna make it, right?"

"You're probably gonna end up in a shack, writing stuff that never gets published and die broke."

Sharp voices and comments pierced me from all sides.

It's been seven years since, and I'm happy knowing I didn't give in. Instead, I pushed forward.

When I read books, I would remember interesting words, phrases and events, and try to incorporate them in my own way.

I took creative writing at school and learned different styles and genres.

I learned how to explore and express myself through my writing.

One poem got published in a book

from the America Library of Poetry.
Another poem was published in the school paper,
resulting in an apology from a former bully.

If I ever have a career as a writer,
I know I have to work hard.
My goal is to publish something in 10 years:
a book, a collection of poems
or short stories. I want my writing
to be inspiring, funny, relatable, interesting.
I don't need to be a famous author.
I don't need my books to be
a New York Times best seller.
To know there is a book out there
with my name on it,
helping out anyone who reads it,
is enough.

-Grace Song, 17 years old, in Livingston, NJ

When Will I See You?

When will I see you, my friends at CVS?

From the young, Pakistani, Rutgers graduate student who greets me with his friendly nod, head cocked.

I am old enough to be his mother.

And we end up exchanging Netflix stand up comedy recommendations.

It begins when I tell him to check out Mo Amer.

The next time I'm in the store, he finds me in an aisle to tell me how much he enjoyed the show and what I should watch next.

Our Netflix comedy exchanges move forward.

To the woman a little older than me who gives me beauty tips and product suggestions.

We talk about our families, my son's college search.

We laugh about silly things.

She shares stories of her grown children, her hopes and dreams.

To the Hispanic woman who for years I know worked at both Shop Rite and CVS,
Seeing her walk up and down Route 303, her backpack slung over her shoulder,
Her long, brown ponytail hanging to her lower back,

Now silver with the passage of time.
Her little nods and "sure, sure" when I ask about items,
The epitome of the American Dream.

To the white-haired manager, his large glasses framing his face with the appearance of a stern look,
But under the surface is kind and diligent,
Who will always do his best to find what you need,
Complimenting me on my savvy shopping skills.

I miss my essential workers that I haven't seen in over two months.
I hope you are all safe and sound so that when I come back,
You will continue to reward me with your ExtraCare,
Welcoming me with your warm smiles and open hearts.

-Spenta Cama in Tappan, NY

Nurse

I take care and keep others safe
I want to be asked
Are you OK?
Allowed to breakdown!
I am not...
I need to stay...
My heart aches all day!
I look to the skies'
for Hope
In a better tomorrow
for relief of this isolation and sorrow

-Margie Rodriguez, RN in Pelham Bay, the Bronx

Why aren't you ready for school?

I used to hope for a few days off
Before the big test with fingers crossed
Maybe it will snow a blizzard soon
A stress free day so i can get lost

If I only I could read a brand new book
If I could curl up by the fire
To hold a book that isn't for school
Flipping through the pages used to be
my desire

Now I've read all the books
I've stared at the walls
I've baked all the recipes
I've ran down all the halls

Be careful what you wish for
I should have listened
To all those warnings that i found boring
My wish came true, a shooting star must
have glistened

Im stuck at home all alone
The same day constantly repeating
Nothing ever changes
It seems like a steady drum constantly
beating

Why aren't you ready for school
Thats the question I miss
The thing I used to dread
To go would give me shear bliss

What I wouldn't give
To wake up The sound of the alarm clock
To scramble to get ready
To see the bus come around the block

I miss it now going to school
But not just that I miss it all
A handshake with a stranger
To see my friends for real, not just
on a facetime call

I took it all for granted
I miss the simple things that didnt seem
cool

I wish someone asked me the question
Why aren't you ready for school

-Nicole Dostalek, a 10th grader on Long Island

Will You Come to San Francisco When This Is Over?

I will come to San Francisco when this is over

I'll carry my duffel bag to Penn Station, ride the Long Island Railroad
to JFK, and sleep that night in your house on a hill

You'll tell me again how lonely you've been,
How you've pushed yourself to shop and cook and eat

Morning, I'll look through the glass doors at your peach tree
and the traps you built for the rats who eat your seedlings

I'll look at San Francisco General Hospital—
you could have parachuted right into it at the bottom of the hill

but you escaped the need
Ha! Your cheek, a week's whiskers shaved for me, or maybe not,

touches my ear.

-Loren Schwartz in Hell's Kitchen

"Why are you in New York now?"

"It's My Home!"

They say that we're the epicenter,
they say that we're the epicenter,
 the epicenter,
 the epicenter,
they say we're the epicenter, . . . of COVID-19.

Why can't we be - the epicenter,

Can we be - the epicenter,
the epicenter, of something even larger?

We have our many languages and cultures,
we have our many challenges,
our many corporations,
and schools and universities
and architecture and history,
the arts, and museums,
and theatre and Broadway

Can we be the epicenter,
the epicenter,
the epicenter,
of kindness and compassion?
Yes, we can. Yes, we are becoming that - more than ever now.

And can we be . . . the epicenter, the highest peak, the deepest root,
Can we be . . the epicenter, of LOVE?

It's for each of us to say,
for each of us to know,
for each of us to do, . . .
To love, . . . to love, . . . to love, . . . you and me -
our fellow human beings, - whoever they may be,
To love . . . our home - it's all of us - together
And here we go - - - into the future, - together.

-L.E.L. on the Upper West Side

"Can I borrow a pencil?"

A dreaded question
"I'll give it back, don't worry"
Unkeepable promise.
Reluctant give in
Eyeing the now sticky yellow pencil
Then the forgotten pencil, the lost pencil
My unmovable grudge takes its form

Now, remembrance of the pencil thieves

Melancholy missing of everything yellow:
yellow buses yellow pencils
Yellow color wars
Grudges disappear, they are unkeepable promises
Longing for awkward conversations
Talks with strangers that I've known forever
A yellow pencil is our only interaction
Now, I long for those interactions
When school starts
I will give them
Thousands of
Yellow
pencils

-Olivia Yin, age 14, in Westchester, NY

I wish someone would ask me,
if I wanted a break
but instead my teacher says,
this is due on this date.

Oh, how I wish someone would ask me,
if I wanted a break,
but wishes are wishes,
so don't make a mistake.

-Harriet, 8 years old, in New York City

Aren't you lonely—living all by yourself?
I feel the corners of my mouth begin to strike that familiar, well practiced sneer,
Or perhaps it's more a scowl, or maybe a snarl- no, a snarl evokes too much aggression
—bared teeth is never part of this response

I do require emphasis though
my eye roll usually provides that
But this time the sneer never materializes and the eyes remain fixed on some unknown to my
left— a slight squint the very best I can muster

I'm trying to identify the source of this alien sensation.

Like a tug.
My mouth comes to a full stop
Mid sneer it falls still and silent.

But there it is again...that tug, pulling, tensing, somewhere in my gut.
Tug, pull, tug, tug, tug, pull!
As if a petulant, demanding inner child
insisting, unrelenting, demanding I not ignore it any more
Tug! Tug! Tug!
The harried supermarket mom trumps my feigned serenity and silently shrieks,
“What??? What is it already??!?
Whatis....your....problem?!?”

The tugging stops—evaporates—
The internal interview begins.
Lonely?? Me?? Of course not! No way!
After all, I’m the one who walked out.

Once....
Twice...
Three times.
And each time took nothing but what I brought.
I’m the one who reveled in the single serve coffee maker
And the single toothbrush in the glass.

Before, I secretly craved the solace of solitude.
Just a moment’s peace.
Peace...
and my own quiet.
And thats what I finally have...had.
That’s what I had.

The inner litany grabs at shattered fragments of the former soliloquy:
“I’m a busy, modern woman, with three degrees,
I choose...I change my mind.
I go when I want (Or I don’t go.)
Am I lonely?

Out of the murk the thought congeals,
Has solitude become imprisonment?
Has peace transitioned to dread and anxiety?
Has choice been strangled in this raw penitentiary?

Nah.
Not me.
I've got my books,
and radio
and Netflix
and Alexa.
Not me.

I finally have the life I desired.
This is just a bump in the road.

Ugly, twisted, plague.
I could die.
But I can think about that tomorrow.
For now, I move from room to room
Closing lights after
spraying and wiping every surface with a vengeance!

Pajamas,
Layers of lush
covers turned down
800 thread count sheets.
Head landing on too many pillows, and I wait
for the romance of sleep.
Maybe dream.

But first I listen.
I listen...
to hear ...
the
other ...
shoe ...
drop.

-Margaret (Peggy) Sheehy in Pompton Lakes, NJ
